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Post-Marxism After Althusser: A Critique Of The Alternatives

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**POST-MARXISM AFTER ALTHUSSER: A CRITIQUE OF THE
ALTERNATIVES**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CEREN OZSELCUK

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2009

Economics

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by
CEREN OZSELCUK

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DEDICATION

To my grandfather İsmail Hakkı Savaş who taught me how to read and write.

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I want to start by thanking two very unique communities that I am infinitely indebted:

Association for Social and Economic Analysis (AESA) and *Economics Graduate Student*

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ABSTRACT

POST-MARXISM AFTER ALTHUSSER: A CRITIQUE OF THE ALTERNATIVES

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This dissertation provides a particular Marxian class analytical political economy critique of post-Marxism. The dissertation demonstrates the ways in which different positions within post-Marxism continue to essentialize the conceptualizations of class and capitalist economy. What distinguishes this dissertation from other dominant critiques of post-Marxism is the anti-essentialist epistemological and ontological position it adopts. By adopting an anti-essentialist epistemological position the dissertation is able to demonstrate the discontinuities and continuities between post-Marxism and the Marxian tradition. The dissertation does this by reading the heterogeneous and disparate post-Marxian approaches as so many different ways to “resolve” the central tension of the Althusserian mode of production debate of the 1960s and 1970s: The tension between the desire to think *the overdetermination of social reproduction and transformation* and the effort to explain *the stability of class domination*. The

dissertation argues one of the effects of this tension to be the lapse of the Althusserian mode of production problematic into *reproductionism*.

Drawing extensively on the scholarship of Ernesto Laclau and Étienne Balibar, the dissertation substantiates the ways in which the post-Althusserian post-Marxism has developed a critique of the *reproductionist* tendency of this problematic and constructed a theory of the social that allows for conceiving social reproduction to be both provisionally stable and overdetermined. The dissertation argues, however, that such “resolutions” have failed in different ways to dislodge the constitution of class and capitalist reproduction from essentialist narratives, with the effect of restaging the ontological duality of the mode of production problematic (i.e., *overdetermination* vs. *determinism qua reproductionism*) in a new form: The contingency of politics and the necessity of class and capitalist reproduction. After showing the limitations of some of the prominent positions within post-Althusserian post-Marxism, the dissertation concludes with an alternative post-Althusserian Marxian perspective, initially developed by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, that provides an overdetermined understanding of social and economic reproduction from the entry point of class qua surplus.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE UNEVEN THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT OF POST-ALTHUSSERIAN THEORY

1. 1. Theoretical limitations of post-Marxism and of its critics

1. 1. 1. Post-Marxism's critique of Marxism

Today post-Marxism constitutes a prominent approach within critical social theory, particularly when we take into consideration the recent and burgeoning publication of a series of volumes on post-Marxism that survey its history and contributions (Devenney 2004; Goldstein 2005; Sim 1998; 2000; Therborn 2008; Tormey and Townshend 2005). On the one hand, these publications have certainly contributed to the recognition and acceptance of post-Marxism as a theoretical position in its own right. On the other hand, they have also opened the Pandora's box and brought under scrutiny the question of what really distinguishes the core arguments and insights of post-Marxism as well as the nature of post-Marxism's relation to Marxism. One particular response to such inquiries has been the articulation of post-Marxism as a position that not only builds upon the theoretical contributions of Karl Marx and the Marxian tradition, but also aims to go beyond the latter's limitations (Howarth 1998). It is not surprising, then, that the contemporary exegeses and appraisals of post-Marxism generally turn on the issue of whether and how post-Marxism understands and makes sense of the limitations of the Marxian tradition.

A defining argument associated with post-Marxism and often expressed as well by its main interlocutors is that Marxism by and large has failed to explain and respond to the widening of social demands and movements in the 20th century. More specifically, economic determinist and historicist tendencies of the Marxian tradition are argued to have led not only to the demotion of the political sphere, rendered ineffectual as its constitutive autonomy is subsumed to and contained by the necessary and underlying logic of the economy, but also to the straitjacketing of what are clearly very different practices and identities into the sterile and narrow confines of “class politics” and “class identity.” The latter, in turn, has resulted in the marginalization of those struggles whose demands did not seem to align with what their “objective class interests” allegedly dictated. As a consequence, the possibilities for building broader alliances against a whole host of social injustices, including but not exclusive to the issue of class injustice, are hampered and dissipated. This is the premise on which various scholars within post-Marxism base their argument for why the left in general and Marxism in particular have suffered from a crisis of political legitimacy throughout the 20th century.

Let us unpack how post-Marxism defines the economic determinist and historicist tendencies of the Marxian tradition. What is referred to as economic determinism finds its classical expression in the base-superstructure model in which an essential economic dynamic—which often passes as the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production—is assumed to govern the causal interconnections among all social processes as well as the dialectical transformation of the social formation. In this sense, economic determinism provides both the essential

principle for the structural unity of the social and its presumed temporal “law of movement” that governs the transition from one mode of production to another. This law-like dynamic underpins the notion of class struggle as the motor of socio-historical development and creates the conditions for the proletariat to assume the role of the privileged and universal agent of social transformation.¹ Historicism functions, in turn, through attaching to this law of economic necessity a certain teleological unfolding. Historicism guarantees that the rationally ordered progression of the mode of production evolves towards a classless and antagonism-free society.²

Post-Marxism defines itself precisely as an attempt to break with these economic determinist and historicist tendencies of the Marxian tradition. It claims to dispense not only with the conventional approach to class struggle as the necessary political manifestation of an underlying economic dynamic, but also with classical Marxism’s class reductionist approach to social antagonism. Post-Marxism’s argument is that social antagonism and contradiction is not only multiple—that is, going beyond the

¹ The contradiction between forces of production and relations of production is generally defined, following the original preposition by Engels, as the contradiction between the increasing socialization of the forces of production and the private mode of appropriation. This contradiction is traditionally treated as the destiny driving force behind the simplification thesis of the social structure into two distinct classes, a small minority of private appropriators, and the mass of direct producers (the proletariat), who have nothing to lose but their chains, a thesis that anticipates the revolutionary clash of these two classes.

² This does not mean that every economic determinist position is also historicist and vice versa. Furthermore, there are also different interpretations of historicism. For perceptive discussions of historicism within the Marxian tradition, refer to Louis Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970), Stephen Cullenberg (1996), and Stephen Cullenberg and Anjan Chakrabarti (2003). Chapter 3 studies closely Étienne Balibar’s (and to an extent Althusser’s) specific understanding and critique of historicism.

domain of class struggle and involving new objects of struggle from welfare to ecology, from consumption to women's rights, and so on—but, more importantly, it is interminable. In other words, post-Marxism refutes the very idea of the finality of social antagonism, the belief that there would be an eventual elimination of social antagonism in the so-called classless society. On the contrary, antagonism for post-Marxism refers to the constitutive limit of every social formation. It names the central impossibility of establishing a self-enclosed and harmoniously unified society, an impossibility, which at the same time provides the locus for social change as it unsettles all attempts at institutionalizing the social for once and all.

We can thus summarize the theoretical consequences of the post-Marxian critique in a series of influential theses: The constitutive dynamics and effects of social processes are irreducible to some essential determination by the “economic base;” the “superstructural” (i.e., political and cultural) instances play a constitutive, and not merely supplementary and/or illusory, role in the maintenance of economic and social processes; social antagonism is not only reducible to class struggle, but it is also interminable; there is no necessary and rational logic that secures the unity and the dialectical progression of the social dynamics; finally and consequentially the constitution and reproduction of the social is contingent, thus, the social is changeable.

1. 1. 2. The turn to the political in post-Marxian theory: Two dominant approaches

In recent decades, these post-Marxian formulations have emerged as one of the most significant resources in the reorientation of contemporary social theory. One notable

dimension of this reorientation is the way in which critical social theory have come to be characterized by an overarching concern for politics and the political.³ The political, it seems, is no longer restrained to those social issues and domains traditionally conceived as the proper realm of politics, such as the processes of constitution and execution of (state) power, authority, and law, but seeps into the fabric of all dimensions of social existence. One might partly attribute this broadening of the sphere of the political to the effects of various theoretical and social forces which have highlighted the pervasive, decentralized, and micro-founded nature of power processes. These forces have convincingly exposed those institutions and practices previously imagined and positioned outside the reach of power processes (e.g., the “private” realm of the family, or the “objective” universe of the scientific establishment) to the constitutive effects of the processes of authority and subjection.⁴

³ Even when we limit ourselves to a selection of publications in the last 20 years by scholars that this dissertation broadly associates with post-Marxism, we witness a resurgent interest in the conceptualization of the political: *Politics and Class Analysis* and *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* by Barry Hindess (1987; 1996); *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* edited by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (1991); *Return of the Political* and *On the Political* by Chantal Mouffe (1993; 2005); *The Making of Political Identities* edited by Ernesto Laclau (1994); *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* and *On the Shores of Politics* by Jacques Rancière (1999; 2007); *Lacan and the Political* by Yannis Stavrakakis (1999); *Politics and the Other Scene* by Étienne Balibar (2002); *Metapolitics* by Alain Badiou (2005); *Post-foundational Political Thought* by Oliver Marchart (2007), and so on.

⁴ Here, the works of Althusser (1971) and Foucault (1980) are informative in the way they demonstrate the decentralization of power away from the state, or, better said, the decentralized workings of state power within the so-called “civil” institutions such as the educational institutions, the family, the scientific communities, and so on. In this context, one can also refer to social movements like women’s movements and green movements that have respectively rendered visible power processes operating at

However, distinct from this expansion of the play and range of power processes to new social sites and institutions, the relevance of the political within critical theory has also extended in a second and a more abstract way. The political is increasingly evoked in conjunction with questions on the nature of social ontology, subjectivity, and knowledge, connoting both the contested and conflicted as well as the open, unfixable, and changeable nature of social processes. As will be elaborated below, it is in this latter sense that post-Marxism turns to the political, treating it as the locus of contingency and as “the lack” of an ontological closure.

This dissertation tries to substantiate the thesis that this heightened emphasis on the conception of the political (as contingency) is, in part, a symptom of the ways in which post-Marxism treats the capitalist economy and class in essentialist ways or leaves them under-theorized.⁵ As post-Marxism deconstructs the economic determinist and class-reductionist tendencies of the Marxian tradition without reconstructing the concepts of economic relations and class, it appears to compensate the necessity of the economic (i.e., the necessity of capitalist reproduction) and class with the contingency

the heart of family relations and “natural” processes, domains that were previously naturalized and sealed off from the constitutive effects of power.

⁵ This is not to deny the long-standing tradition in political philosophy which associates the political with “real” social change. This tradition draws on the works of diverse thinkers such as Niccolo Machiavelli, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, and Claude Lefort to name some. One of the motivations here is to carve out a space to think about the emergence of the undecidable and the new, emancipating such conceptions not only from the domesticating grip of the foundational approaches in social theory such as behaviorism, positivism, sociology, and so on, but also from the mundane and ordinary world of conventional politics (Marchart 2007). While the recent turn to the political can certainly be considered as a continuation of this lineage of thought, this dissertation particularly situates this development in relation to the critical reactions to the economic determinist tendency of the Marxian tradition.

of the political as the only possible locus of social transformation. This, however, creates stalemates for post-Marxian positions when it comes to substantiate and give content to their self-advertised concern for reactivating the possibilities of anti-capitalist change. In the absence of a perspective that regards economic and class processes as overdetermined and differentiable, post-Marxian approaches find it difficult to think outside capitalism. Hence, they evoke “anti-capitalism” either as a vaguely defined project, or they tacitly continue to privilege certain subjects and subjective dispositions with the alleged potential to lead off a radical break with capitalism.

It would be proper though to finesse this conception of the political (as the ontology of contingency), since there appears to be two different discussions of the political within post-Marxism, which, for the lack of a better phrase, I will distinguish as the “negative” and the “positive” approaches. Within the radical democratic vein of post-Marxism, for instance, as espoused in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the political is used in the “negative” sense. Here, it refers to the incomplete and self-differing nature of every democratic demand. In other words, political names a post-foundational ontology that at one and the same time prevents any social demand from closure and from becoming identical with itself *and* provides the condition of possibility for the re-articulation and broadening of the particular demands beyond their narrow focus and meaning. On the other hand, within the “militant” and psychoanalytically oriented tendencies of post-Marxism, as in the works of Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, the contingency which the political refers to takes on a more “positive” content. In this

approach, the political names the possibility and the location of a radical rupture with the hegemonic orders (e.g., contemporary liberalism and capitalism) and the inauguration of a new social configuration. In this context, the political is also used as an adjective to designate those exceptional discourses and identities that embody such a potential of a radical departure.

1. 1. 2. 1. The “negative” approach to the political

The negative approach to the political and the ontology of contingency is perhaps best crystallized within the scholarship of Ernesto Laclau. In his earlier and seminal contribution with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau (1985) traces in Marxian tradition those critical moments of encounter with contingency that disrupt the discursive closures governed by the dominance of economic determinism. He then recovers such moments as the manifestation of an anti-essentialist ontology suppressed by the deterministic tendency.

This new ontology that Laclau elaborates and substantiates in his later works and refers to as the *political*, or alternatively as the logic of hegemony, forms the basis to understand the constitutive limit of any *hegemonic politics*, another important term which Laclau deploys in order to conceptualize the temporary and partial stabilization and coalescing of a series of heterogeneous demands around the unity of a universalizing social claim or a collective identity.⁶ It is important to emphasize that

⁶ Laclau calls such demands whose meanings get broadened (detached and emptied out from the narrow and particular content) as “empty signifiers” (Laclau 1996). A

this provisional unity and stability of the social rests on the ontological premise that the particular demand and identity can never realize itself as a fully-constituted entity, since it is constitutively contradictory and overdetermined. Yet, this failure at self-realization should not be considered as a shortcoming, but rather as the condition of possibility for re-constitution and change. That a particular demand fails to realize a full and complete identity renders it open to continual renewal and transformation. Following this reasoning, the political, regarded as the constitutive limit of the precarious fixation and stabilization of the social, stands for the condition of possibility for the renewal and transformation of collective identities and hegemonic formations. Moreover, the conception of the political within the “negative” approach goes beyond its identification with a decentered ontology as it also informs the idea of radical democracy as an ethico-political principle.⁷ This ethical principle refers to a commitment of producing the knowledge of and bringing to social awareness the type of democratic institutions and discourses which institutionalize contingency by creating a space for political antagonisms to take place (the institution of the electoral processes being one of them). In this way the particular and temporal constitutions of the social are rendered questionable and open. Such a theoretical commitment is

typical example Laclau gives for an empty signifier is the demand for Solidarity (*Solidarnosc*) in the Poland of 1980s (2005; 2007). Solidarity as a particular demand was able to broaden its meaning through its articulation with other different and heterogeneous social demands, and, hence, was able to serve as the hegemonic signifier in which disparate oppositional discourses and movements to the Soviet regime got condensed and mobilized in Poland.

⁷ More explicitly than Laclau himself, his collaborator Chantal Mouffe (2005), and his former students, Yannis Stavrakakis (1999; 2007), and Jason Glynos (2000), tackle the question of the ethical implications of the radical democracy project.

offered as an ethical horizon for left projects and movements that attempt to reorganize the social.

In particular, the ethics of radical democracy is argued to allow political identities and movements to remain open to social experimentation and change through a recognition of their partial and incomplete identity as well as to safeguard themselves from the reoccupation of totalizing and absolutist utopian projects that deny and paper over the irreducibility of social contradiction and antagonism. More specifically, the ethics of radical democracy, with its emphasis on rendering contingency palpable, is argued to alert left movements and discourses against the dangers of both the socialist and liberal-democratic utopian visions (Stavrakakis 2003). Such ethics involves being as much wary of the socialist utopian vision of revolution that is supposed to deliver the ultimate common good of the classless society as it is of the liberal-democratic utopia that insists on the ideal that individual freedoms can ultimately reconcile and coincide with maximizing the social good and welfare for all.

1. 1. 2. 2. The “positive” approach to the political

Nonetheless, the definition of *politics* as the partial and temporary sedimentation of the social qua hegemonic constellations, and the *political* as the ontology of, as well as an ethico-political principle articulated around a negative understanding of contingency is not the only insight coming forth from post-Marxian political theory. Another current co-exists in a somewhat contentious relationship with this first position discussed above. This second current contends the reduction of the political to a “negative” concept of contingency. It claims that such an understanding

homogenizes the different qualities and types of change, and thus, fails to explain, if not completely obfuscate, the difference between ordinary notions of change and the more radical and revolutionary forms of social transformation.

The calls for a “positive,” a thicker, definition of the political are most visibly put forth in the works of such scholars as Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek, whose projects could at least partly be conceived as one of reactivating the idea of *revolution*. Reconsidering the idea of revolution and what it entails seems for these scholars all the more pressing given that the contemporary ideological climate, in its fetishization of (electoral) democracy, identity politics, and neoliberal market capitalism, has barred from social imagination any real and consequential alternatives to liberal democracy and capitalism. Change, in this conjuncture, is reduced to the ideology of individual choice among what amounts to be insipid alternatives—be they the electoral candidates of the political market place or the commodities inundating the economic market place—and emptied out from any radical dimension. In fact, for these scholars, most present-day pleas and movements for social change are complicit with reproducing liberal democracy and capitalism insofar as they stand for averting “real” change from taking place. It is in this context that these scholars want to reserve the concept of the political to think about theorizing the required conditions for “radical” change.

From the perspective of this second post-Marxian vein, then, the affirmative turn to the ontology of contingency is simply not enough to orient social struggles towards “anti-capitalist” or any other type of radical vision. Limiting the ground for ethical

and political action to contingency alone leaves unanswered the question of what qualifies contemporary anti-capitalist resistances and demands for change as revolutionary; it defers the task of identifying those discourses and subjects that carry the potential for anti-capitalist transformation to a vague, if not a misconceived, or worse still, a co-opted (by dominant ideological conjuncture), potential of radical democratic change. What is to be done then? If it is not contingency alone then what is the content and condition of existence for anti-capitalist transformation?

To discern a possible answer to this question formulated by this second vein of post-Marxism, one might turn to Slavoj Žižek's works.⁸ Time and again, Žižek argues that the rallying around and gesturing towards ontological contingency as the precondition and potential locus for radical social change misses the very source of radical change: The identification with the position that is heterogeneous to, excluded from, and unrepresented within the existing order.⁹ For Žižek, within post-Marxian theory as well as within "new social movements," a position that is often excluded from discussion, that remains inarticulate and invisible is that of "class" and "class struggle," "an entity 'named' but rarely theorized" (2000, 96). Why is there such an

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, as one of the prominent philosophers and thinkers of our time, intersects Marxian political economy with Hegelian dialectics and Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to lay bare the complex mechanisms of identification through which subjects invest in and perpetuate dominant ideological constellations as well as to explore "exceptional" discourses and sites with a potential to incite radical social transformation.

⁹ One might argue that the contingency and change is linked here with a certain notion of necessity insofar as a particular form of change, embodied in specific discourses, identities, and subjects, is privileged over others in terms of being truly heterogeneous to the system and to the status quo, thus, of carrying the potential to instigate anti-capitalist transformation.

evasion of class analysis? In scattered remarks on post-Marxism (1999; 2004) and more consistently in his various polemics with Laclau (2000; 2006a; 2006b), Žizek argues that the suspension of class analysis and any mention of class struggle within post-Marxism is due to an evasion of the ontology that is specific to Marxian political economy, i.e., *overdetermination*:

Marx claimed that in the series production-distribution-exchange-consumption, the term ‘production’ is doubly inscribed: it is simultaneously one of the terms in the series and the structuring principle of the entire series. In production as one of the terms of the series, production (as the structuring principle) ‘encounters itself in its oppositional determinations,’ as Marx put it, using the precise Hegelian term. And the same goes for the postmodern political series class-gender-race...: in class as one of terms in the series of particular struggles, class *qua* structuring principle of the social totality ‘encounters itself in its oppositional determination.’ (2000, 96)

According to Žizek, to the extent that post-Marxism neglects the Marxian ontology of overdetermination, it also oversees the ways in which class remains to be the absent, inarticulate, yet the fundamental structuring force of a multitude of social struggles. This dissertation agrees with Žizek’s claim that post-Marxism in general and radical democracy in particular fails to rethink the ontology of Marxian political economy and class in relation to overdetermination. However, the dissertation disagrees with Žizek’s criticisms and his understanding of “class struggle” and “overdetermination” insofar as Žizek fails to extricate these concepts from the hold of the classical Marxian framework that reproduces the production-centered economic determinism and class essentialism. Furthermore, when Žizek invokes the necessity of bringing back and engaging in “class struggle” against capitalism, his narrative of capitalism often falls prey to a monolithic and self-regulating conception of capitalist reproduction as structured by inexorable laws, summarized, for instance, via the psychoanalytical

concept of the drive (for capital accumulation). In fact, one might argue that while Žizek and Laclau disagree on the meaning and constitutive dynamics of “radical politics,” they form a silent pact in leaving Marxian analysis of class and capitalist reproduction mired in essentialism.

That is why one should perhaps not overemphasize the divergences between these two notable currents of post-Marxism, namely, what the dissertation labels as the “negative” and “positive” approaches to contingency, since they share more common ground than immediately meets the eye. First, within both frameworks, the categories of class and class struggle remain under-theorized, the void of which is then readily filled by the conventional and essentialist understandings of class and class struggle. Second, both approaches continue to anthropomorphize capitalism and treat it as a self-constituted entity whose reproduction and dynamics are both unleashed and limited by some pre-given and unbending laws (of accumulation, commodification, and so on). These shortcomings make it as difficult for the “positive approach” as it is for the “negative approach” to substantiate the economic and class dimension of what is referred to as anti-capitalist or radical politics.

Lastly, while these two currents of post-Marxian political theory contest over the specific meaning and conditions of what constitutes the political, at the same time, they both adopt and share an anti-essentialist approach with respect to the issue of social ontology, and closely link this ontology to the concept of the political itself. In other words, they both invoke the concept of *the political* in reference to contingency, irreducible antagonism, ontological openness, the possibility of fleeing from the

closures of the dominant social formations, and constituting a new social order. While the first current poses anti-capitalist transformation in “negative” terms, as an indeterminate possibility within radical democratic politics, and rendered both thinkable and performable through the conceptual armor of ontological contingency, the second current, through injecting more specificity, positivity, and conditionality into the definition of contingency, aims to differentiate radical contingency from politically domesticated forms of contingency and substantiate further the nature of potential sites for anti-capitalist transformation. Yet, as I briefly tried to exemplify in reference to Žižek’s position, this second current does not fare any better in terms of specifying the economic and class content of what such an anti-capitalist transformation might entail.

1. 1. 3. The (non)place of Marxian political economy in post-Marxism

This dissertation shares with both veins of post-Marxian theory the commitment to an anti-essentialist approach to ontology. However, it takes issue with the specific deployment of the concept of political within the ranks of post-Marxian theory which moves in the direction of treating the political, whether in its ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ definitions, as the privileged category to think about the contingent constitution and transformation of the social. The dissertation argues that this overemphasis on the political as the proper site of social constitution and anti-capitalist change could be thought as a symptom within post-Marxian analyses. This symptom refers both to the naturalization of the economic as a site structured by some necessary logic inherent to capitalism, and to the persistent treatment within this literature of the Marxian

concepts of class and class struggle either in essentialist or in vague and under-theorized terms.¹⁰

Indeed, the post-Marxian criticisms of the determinist tendencies of Marxism hardly extend beyond the rethinking of the political to a rethinking of the ontology unique to Marxian political economy from a non-essentialist framework. On the contrary, the anti-essentialist deconstructions of Marx's writings and Marxian tradition within this literature often imply the disappearance of any systematic discourse on an anti-essentialist approach to Marxian political economy: On the one hand, once the determinist logic that binds Marxian economic categories such as abstract-labor, value, surplus labor, class struggle, exploitation, communism, and so on are shown to be untenable and dissolved, many of these concepts and Marxian class analysis at large, which makes use of these concepts, are regarded suspiciously as essentialist and often abandoned. On the other hand, those within post-Marxism who are committed to the analyses of social phenomenon using such categories as class struggle and

¹⁰ There is a caveat to denoting the analyses of class and capitalism by_ post-Marxism as one of “under-theorization.” Terms such as “under-theorization” (or leaving an assertion un-theorized) might give the impression that we have a standard by which we know what a “proper” or “adequate” theorization of concepts would entail. Anti-essentialist epistemological stance of this dissertation rejects such a common meta-standard with which to discriminate among and judge theories. Here under-theorization refers to the importation of Marxian economic concepts into the field of post-Marxism as carriers of essentialist logics—without the necessary work of reconstructing them as categories that are compatible with the anti-essentialist ontology, that is, as categories that constitute and, in turn, are constituted by social processes. In this sense, the claim “under-theorization of the economic or class” is not made from a meta-position about a necessary standard of theorization that is to be applied to such concepts in general. Rather it is a specific critique that is internal to the field of post-Marxism. “Under-theorization” refers to the asymmetric and uneven treatment of the respective ontologies of the political and economic within the post-Marxian field.

capitalism have difficult time reconstructing these terms within a non-essentialist framework. Instead, they either revert back to embedding these concepts within narratives that are economic determinist or leave them as undefined.

Chapters 3 and 4 will analyze more closely the essentialist and under-theorized ways in which the concepts of class and capitalism are mobilized within post-Marxian literature. At this point, let us just briefly hint at and summarize the different ways in which these concepts circulate within post-Marxism. A tripartite construction emerges. Take the category of class: It is treated as (1) an essentialist political identity/struggle to be superseded with the pluralist and constitutively incomplete non-class identities/struggles (Ernesto Laclau and Alain Badiou); (2) a fundamental and an ineradicable antagonism, rarely defined in economic dimension (Étienne Balibar and Slavoj Žižek); or (3) an empty political position, which, although constituted by its outside, remains meaningless (Ernesto Laclau). A tripartite usage of capitalism corresponds to these respective uses of class. Capitalism is conceived as (1) a dislocatory force that generates the plurality of non-class identities/struggles through destabilizing the old orders (Ernesto Laclau); (2) a systemic and self-perpetuating economic contradiction (e.g., capital accumulation) that governs and/or limits social change (Étienne Balibar and Slavoj Žižek); or, (3) an unspecified economic/class relation which, even though is argued to have a constitutive outside, carries no conceptual specificity (Ernesto Laclau).

It is in fact paradoxical that in its deconstruction of the economic determinist and historicist tendencies of the Marxian tradition as well as in its rendition of the social as

contingently constituted, post-Marxism continues to fall short of a parallel theoretical reconstruction of the economic space from an alternative Marxian—or even a non-Marxian—non-essentialist perspective.

This shortcoming attains a more problematic status when post-Marxism (in particular, the second vein as elaborated above) fails to articulate the content of what it means by anti-capitalism and radical social change in its economic aspect. This dissertation aspires to explore both the reasons for and the implications of this asymmetry in terms of how post-Marxism theoretically treats the political and the economic.¹¹

1. 1. 4. The theoretical limits of the critics of post-Marxism

In order to delineate the particular critique of post-Marxism that is unique to this dissertation, however, it is important to differentiate it, as well as its epistemological and ontological premises, from those assumed by other critiques of post-Marxism that exist in the literature. Certainly, for many critics of post-Marxism, there is really no paradox about the latter's under-theorization of the dynamics of the economy, especially the capitalist economy, and the role of class relations within such dynamics. Such critics equate materialism, i.e., the “Marxian science” (in fact, *The Science*, for that matter) with the study of the changing forms of the essential and structural determinations of the social by the economic and class dynamics. From the point of

¹¹ Jonathan Diskin and Blair Sandler (1993) discuss the reasons for and implications of this asymmetrical treatment of the economic and the political as it figures within the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Inspired by their argument, this dissertation engages with similar questions within post-Marxism at large.

view of these critics, post-Marxism's anti-essentialist approach to ontology is conceived to be a naive idealism, which mistakenly posits that social change could be brought about by discourse¹² alone, and/or a misguided relativism which, through attributing to all causal determinations the same weight and importance, not only perverts scientific practice, but also leaves the political struggle against capitalism without any real and "objective" foundation.

For these critics, then, it is only natural that post-Marxism, through a de-centering of the fundamental and necessary role of the economic and class determination in explaining the social processes, identities, and struggles, as well as in giving direction to political action, simultaneously repudiates the quintessential materialist position, thus, any need for Marxian class analytics. Take Henry Veltmeyer, for instance, a Marxist sociologist, who can be cited among the many staunch critics of post-Marxism, more specifically, of the particular mode this approach operates in Laclau's work. He persistently argues that post-structuralism and for that matter post-Marxism

constitutes an abandonment of Marxism, a rejection of the principles of historical materialism on which it is based. In this context we argue that post-Marxism is but the latest of a long series of attacks on the possibility of social science in both its Marxist and non-Marxist forms. It is, in effect, the rejection of the principles and the method that define social science as such. As for these principles, there are three at stake: objectivism (the objective reality of material conditions grasped as "social facts"); structuralism (the existence of structures that underlie social

¹² Discourse is a term, which is often and incorrectly deployed by these critics as synonymous to *voluntarism*, i.e., the determination of things by the cause of individual will and actions alone. Other, more sophisticated, critiques of discourse-reductionism point to how the latter, through solely concentrating on the materiality of language, neglects other forms of materialities that shape social life and change.

relations and that are visible only in their effects and grasped in thought); the rationality of large scale processes of change. The basis of such attacks, it is argued, is an idealist epistemology (subjectivism, contextuality, and nihilism) that underlies post-Marxism as it does postmodernism. (2000, 500)

This dissertation disputes this prevalent mode of critique of post-Marxism as epitomized in Veltmeyer's account. To start with, the dissertation disagrees with the thesis of the critics that post-Marxism simply abandons and repudiates any genuine rethinking of and relation to Marxian theory and tradition. From this dissertation's perspective, a *realist* approach to epistemology and ontology guides the critics' reading of Marx and the Marxian tradition, which, in turn, taints their assessment of the relation between Marxian tradition and post-Marxism.¹³ In their reading of Marx and the Marxian tradition, the critics of post-Marxism equate what they understand by the "scientific" and "materialist" way of posing and answering questions *with* the

¹³ Here, I am referring to those realist critics of post-Marxism that take up essentialism in both their epistemological and ontological orientations. However, it should be noted that the wedding of an essentialist epistemology with an essentialist ontology does not characterize all realist approaches. In fact, among the sustained critiques of post-Marxism coalesced under the banner of *critical realism* (Boron 2000; Creaven 2000; Jessop 2001) one comes across a plurality of approaches in which an anti-essentialist epistemology could accompany an essentialist ontology.

The adjective, *critical*, is used here to differentiate critical realism from more blatantly realist approaches within Marxism. Critical realism prides itself for its ability to theorize the contingency in the social along with structural necessity of economic dynamics underpinning such contingency, thus, allegedly averting the pitfalls of both the hard-core economism of classical Marxism as well as the "idealism" of post-structuralism and post-Marxism. For an early and still pertinent assessment of the methodologically unsustainable ontological bifurcation within critical realism between the logic of contingency and the logic of (structural) necessity, see George DeMartino (1992). As DeMartino aptly shows, the internal inconsistency of critical realism becomes clear once one scratches the surface of its arguments and recognizes the ontological consonance between this particular critique of post-Marxism and those articulated from a position of classical Marxism, as can be found in the works of Eagleton (1996), Geras (1987), Mouzelis (1992), and Wood (1992).

practice of uncovering the changing forms of economic determinism that deeply structure social phenomena. This rationalist epistemology within which realism is embedded regards the production of knowledge as an “objective” process, a practice through which concepts are logically derived from one another such that the unfolding of this logical deduction expresses and captures at the same time the presumed structural causality underlying observable social phenomenon. The development of thought is thus denied its autonomy and overdetermined history and constitution, since it is merely assumed to mirror the so-called essential development of social phenomenon.

It is this essentialist epistemology that compels the critics to remove the internal contradictions and difference from Marxian tradition between deterministic and non-deterministic theoretical tendencies, and to remain blind to the intricate and complex ways in which post-Marxism demonstrates continuities and discontinuities with the Marxian tradition. As realist critics reduce the Marxian tradition to its economic determinist current, they cannot appreciate the contributions of post-Marxism to the anti-essentialist vein within Marxism and its positive role in rethinking the notion of materialism and ontology from a non-economistic perspective. For realist critics, then, there is a complete disjuncture between post-Marxism and Marxism; the former simply disowns and deconstructs the paradigmatic core of Marxism, centered on uncovering the fundamental economic and class forces underlying social phenomenon. Overseeing the internal tensions within the Marxian tradition (as well as within post-Marxism), it is only natural that realist critics of post-Marxism fail to

acknowledge and obliterate the complexly determined continuities and discontinuities between post-Marxism and the Marxian tradition.

From the anti-realist epistemological orientation of this dissertation, then, realist critics fail to pose, let alone answer, the question of the paradox of the under- or un-theorization of the economy within post-Marxism. As I have tried to argue, for them, there is simply no such paradox. The dissertation develops an alternative and historically informed framework that asserts and takes this paradox seriously, and addresses its reasons and consequences. In opposition to the realist epistemological position of the critics of post-Marxism, the dissertation expressly assumes an anti-essentialist stance towards the process of theory production (Althusser and Balibar 1970; Resnick and Wolff 1987). It begins with the premise that the development of Marxian tradition, including the works of Marx, is a contradictory theoretical process, overdetermined by theoretical and extra-theoretical conditions, and constituted in internal diversity and through tensions and oversights. In this context, the dissertation follows in the footsteps of the Althusserian method of “symptomatic reading.” Assuming an anti-essentialist—or in Althusser’s words, anti-empiricist—stance to knowledge production, symptomatic reading restores back to theoretical approaches, such as Marxian and post-Marxian approaches, their constitutive contradictions. It does not take on such contradictions with an eye to reconciling them with a putative essence. Nor does it approach them as the signs of the logically arrived dead-end of a problematic. Rather, it considers them as a departing point, as the theoretical raw material to build onto and to develop and “teas[e] out positively, affirmatively, *another problematic,...*” (Balibar 2004, 159).

While economic determinism might be one tendency of Marx's works and Marxian tradition, it characterizes neither the sole tendency nor the unique ontological insight that is to be gleaned from Marx's theorizations. In fact, following Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff's post-Althusserian reading of Marx (1987), the dissertation holds the view that overdetermination is the unique ontology to be found within the works of Marx. In this sense, the dissertation parts ways not only with the essentialist epistemology, but also with the deterministic ontology, which the realist critics of post-Marxism attribute to Marx and Marxism. Instead, the dissertation shares the political motivation of post-Marxism behind the elaboration of an anti-essentialist ontology for understanding the constitution and transformation of the social. It understands this motivation as one of explicating the conditions for enacting social change, especially non-capitalist social change in its cultural, political, but also, *economic*, dimensions. Starting from this shared motivation, however, the dissertation tries to account for the reasons why post-Marxism, while evoking the notions of anti-capitalist politics, class, and, class struggle—whether in a positive manner that recognizes the continuing importance of using such categories for understanding and enacting radical social change, or, in a critical manner that argues for their shortcomings and/or irrelevance—leaves such concepts un- and/or under-theorized.

Differing from the position assumed by realist critics, the dissertation argues that the inability of post-Marxism to reconstruct an understanding of the economy as a complex and internally differentiated formation, overdetermined by different class processes as well as by non-class economic, political, and cultural processes, is due not to post-Marxism's adoption of the ontology of contingency, but, on the contrary, to

post-Marxism's failure to pursue this ontology when it comes to theorizing the economic, and in particular, class processes. In other words, it is due to the unacknowledged and implicit persistence of the various essentialist ways in which class (and class struggle) and capitalism are treated and understood within post-Marxism. Strangely enough, one might even argue that post-Marxism and its critics are not that far apart from one another in the way they perpetuate essentialist narratives about class and capitalism.

1. 2. Resituating post-Marxism within the field of post-Althusserian social theory

Since this dissertation provides a new reading of the relationship between post-Marxism and Marxism, which significantly differs from other critical approaches to post-Marxism in its nuanced treatment of the continuities and discontinuities between these two theoretical formations, it is apt to start by explaining in more detail how the dissertation makes sense of this relation as well as the post-Marxian theoretical field. Besides, to the extent that post-Marxism does not propose itself as a unified doctrine or as a self-declared school of thought in the sense of having an integrated research program or a common institutional affiliation, and to the extent that post-Marxism harbors a multiplicity of positions, any engagement with post-Marxism is simultaneously an attempt to define and construct a certain theoretical cohesion out of otherwise different positions.¹⁴ This dissertation is no exception.

¹⁴ The polarized assessments of post-Marxism in the literature, either appreciating it for salvaging the Marxian theory, or condemning it for betraying and repudiating

In this dissertation, I propose to read the post-Marxian field in its internal diversity, as a series of attempts to rethink Marxian theory in the aftermath of Louis Althusser's pioneering reading of Marx's works, especially of *Capital*, in a way that aims to address the tensions of Althusser's thought and of the mode of production problematic inspired by Althusser. Because the dissertation gives central place to Althusser's influence in order to demarcate this particular understanding of the post-Marxian field, it resituates post-Marxism within the broader field of post-Althusserian theory. Such a re-contextualization of post-Marxism within the post-Althusserian field also circumvents the risk of collapsing the different relations to Marx and to the Marxian tradition that exist within post-Marxism. For instance, while some post-Marxists, such as the late Paul Hirst, Barry Hindess, and Ernesto Laclau conceive Marxism as a theoretical apparatus, the internal inconsistencies of which compel us to transcend it, others, such as Stuart Hall and Étienne Balibar encircle the contradictions of Marx's writings as a basis for developing further Marxist theory and politics. This dissertation preserves such differences among the different positions of post-Marxism through relocating such positions within the theoretical space that it defines as post-Althusserian theory.¹⁵

what is of import to Marx's contributions, attest to the fact that post-Marxism does not conform to a centered, self-evident, and transparent body of thought. As further evidence for the heterogeneity of post-Marxism, this dissertation already mentioned two different veins of post-Marxian theory. For yet another analysis that specifically focuses on the analytical Marxian vein of post-Marxism, especially on the position of Jon Elster and John Roemer, refer to Richard D. Wolff and Stephen Cullenberg (1986).

¹⁵ Both Goldstein (2005) and Zizek (1999) emphasize the pioneering work of Althusser as one of the most significant sources that has fostered the intellectual development of

The adjective “post-Althusserian” refers not only to Althusser’s immediate collaborators such as Étienne Balibar who has continued to work within the broadly defined Althusserian tradition. It also involves others who continue to explore characteristically Althusserian themes and concepts, even when they fail to acknowledge, or, at times, openly deny, the continuing influence of Althusser in their work: in sociology Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst and Harold Wolpe; in cultural studies Stuart Hall; in political theory, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe; in philosophy, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou; in economic theory, Stephen Resnick, Richard Wolff and J.K. Gibson-Graham; in economic methodology, Jack Amariglio and David Ruccio. Some of the central Althusserian themes and concepts these scholars work on include social complexity and articulation; overdetermination of theory and in theory (of social processes, contradictions and identifications); ideological reproduction of the social; the constitution of subjectivity; Marx’s object of class and class struggle; the philosophy of Marx; the concept of aleatory materialism; and the idea and subject of revolution.

Beyond these conceptual and thematic family resemblances, however, the dissertation proposes a narrower and more specific intellectual affinity for post-Althusserian thinkers. It does this through constructing a particular unity of post-Althusserian thinkers in pointing to their co-implication within a shared *problematic*, a shared set of questions, which has imprinted their works and continue to bear its effects in different ways. More specifically, in this dissertation, I trace the genealogy of a *particular* post-

post-Marxism. Their accounts, however, do not provide as systematic and specific of a discussion on the relation between post-Marxism and Althusser as undertaken in this dissertation.

Althusserian field all the way back to the *mode of production controversy* that marks the quintessential Althusserian moment in the history of Marxian thought. In this way, I show the discontinuities and continuities of post-Marxism with the Althusserian mode of production debate, thus, construct a particular intellectual legacy for post-Marxism.

In particular, I associate the formation of a post-Althusserian field, and the multifarious positions that it embodies, with the attempts to “resolve” and go beyond the central tension of the mode of production controversy. The dissertation approaches this tension, which most clearly manifests itself in the adoption of two antithetical positions on ontology (overdetermination and determinism), as the effect of an uneasy coexistence of two different but related aspirations within the controversy: (1) The objective to theorize the mode of production as a complex and internally differentiated totality whose reproduction and transformation is *overdetermined* by its specific conditions of existence; (2) The objective to theorize the ways in which the reproduction of this complex totality is stabilized and cohered around a dominant class antagonism that can be clearly identified. Put differently, the tension could be rephrased as the tension between the contingency of social overdetermination and the necessity of the class (social) reproduction.

If the first objective provided a panacea to the tendency of essentialism and opened the constitution of class (antagonism) to complexity, difference, and unceasing change, the second brought a halt to this deconstructive opening and reintroduced dominance, stability, and closure in its attempt to present the reproduction of social totalities as stable class totalities. In this context, one can perhaps rephrase the

tension in the form of a question: If the social totality is internally differentiated and overdetermined, how could it at the same time be argued that this totality coheres around some “class” totality? How could one do away with the necessity and the systematicity of social reproduction and still characterize the social totality as a surviving unity, stabilized around dominant (predominantly *read* capitalist) class relations and antagonism? It was this difficulty of simultaneously explaining the reproduction of class dominance, on the one hand, and overdetermination and transformation of social totality, on the other, which steered the mode of production problematic into *reproductionism*, a determinist position that approaches the reproduction of the social as a pre-given necessity.

The dissertation aims to demonstrate the ways in which post-Marxism is constituted by the different positions that have tried to address and “resolve” this central tension of the mode of production problematic between *overdetermination* (and difference) and *stability* (and unity). In particular, the dissertation shows how, in their attempts to dispense with the tendency of *reproductionism* of the mode of production problematic, various positions within post-Marxism have ended up suppressing the pivotal ambition of this controversy: To provide a disaggregated and internally differentiated conception of the economy that would allow for understanding the constitution of particular economies and/or social formations as the *contingent* and *complex articulations* of *different class processes*, of which capitalism is but one. To put differently, post-Marxism has thrown out the baby with the bath water and given up representing the economy as a de-centered structure, comprised of different and historically changeable modes of class (Norton 2001).

The dissertation exhibits the different ways of this theoretical eliding through an at-length discussion of the respective trajectories of scholarship of Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau. The choice of these scholars is not arbitrary. Both Balibar and Laclau were central figures of the Althusserian mode of production controversy; and, in its aftermath, each formulated their own version of the critique of the determinism of the debate, delineating in so doing the theoretical contours of post-Marxism. Nonetheless, they do represent different positions within post-Marxism. While for Balibar, post-Marxism is a theoretical formation that has emerged as Marxism pushed against its conceptually and historically overdetermined limits, for Laclau, post-Marxism is a theoretical field, which transcends the “logical inconsistencies” of Marxism, hence, necessarily forms a theoretical field beyond it.

Through discussing the evolution of these two particular theorists, the dissertation keeps attentive to the internal differences within post-Marxism while pointing to a shared concern and weakness in this problematic. The dissertation acknowledges that both Balibar and Laclau have developed a thorough critique of the reproductionist tendency (qua deterministic ontology) of this controversy and tried to construct a theory of the social, which allows to conceive the processes of social reproduction as non-systemic, overdetermined, contingently constituted, thus, changeable. In particular, the dissertation argues that Balibar and Laclau, by developing the concepts of the *conjuncture* and *hegemonic articulation* respectively, have attempted to theorize a

social formation which can be stable and hegemonic, and yet still complexly and contingently constituted.¹⁶

The dissertation further argues that in rendering social reproduction contingent, both scholars have nonetheless failed, albeit in different ways, to dislodge the constitution of capitalism and class from essentialist narratives. Rather, in their work, the ontological duality of the mode of production problematic (overdetermination vs. class reproductionism) is displaced and restaged in a new form: The necessary logic of capitalism and the contingency of the political (or better put, contingency *as* the political). As will be shown, in the case of Balibar, the idea that class struggle is irrepressible—an ineffaceable state that Balibar at times finds difficult to explain and justify without stepping into the ideological field of humanism—is offered as the political motor for change *within* the constraints of the dynamics of capitalism (1996). In the case of Laclau, as it is briefly sketched above, the political becomes synonymous with the ontology of contingency and locus of social change.

The ontological status of the constitution of capitalist economy as well as the concept of class is thus left un-reconstructed from an anti-essentialist perspective. This, in effect, renders these categories susceptible to be laden with essentialist meanings, averting the conceptualization of *economic difference* from capitalism and reconfiguration

¹⁶ Balibar's concept of *conjuncture* is similar to Laclau's concept of *hegemony* in that both concepts take the constitution of social unity and stability as provisional and overdetermined. Nonetheless, from the perspective of this dissertation, Balibar's use of *conjuncture* has a better grasp of social complexity as it refers to the overdetermination of the political, ideological, and economic social forces in a particular period, while *hegemony* is couched exclusively in terms of a political formation.

of class. In consequence, the political gets elevated to be the moment through which the dynamics of change and contingency could be introduced to render open and incomplete the processes of social reproduction. As the categories of the capitalist economy and class remain unreconstructed, the political comes to signify the only constitutive and transformative moment of the social. What emerges as an ontological bifurcation, with reference to the different logics ascribed to the political and the economic either in implicit or explicit ways, raises problems for the way in which post-Marxism evokes and discusses the “anti-capitalist” movements and demands. The question of why a movement or demand might be called “anti-capitalist” is often left unaddressed. The dissertation claims that to the extent that the economic and class are deployed as undifferentiated categories, structured by deterministic logics, it is difficult for post-Marxism to conceptualize economic/class difference and change. Unable to give a well-defined class content to “anti-capitalist” change and movements, post-Marxism will continue to deploy this term in reference to some vague notion of “radical” transformation.¹⁷

The dissertation argues that a certain specific post-Althusserian class analytical framework developed by Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff (1987) offers a resolution to the tension of mode of production problematic in a way that breaks with the

¹⁷ It can in fact be seen symptomatic that contemporary political theory designates radical departures from capitalism always in negative or reactive terms, as anti-capitalism, rather than in more positive and autonomous terms. I would argue that the problems surrounding the definition of capitalism within post-Marxism make it difficult to come up with a well-defined demarcation between capitalism and its others. Hence, we observe the dominant usage of anti-capitalism, rather than, say, non-capitalism or communism, in reference to class difference.

essentialism and under-theorization that typically goes along with the conceptualization of class and capitalism. In fact, it would have been impossible to develop the particular critique of post-Marxism this dissertation proposes without the perspective provided by this particular class analytic framework. While Resnick and Wolff (1979) contributed to the Althusserian mode of production controversy, they followed a path different from their fellow contenders and set out to rethink and reconstruct the central categories and the discourse of Marxian political economy from an anti-essentialist perspective. There are two central components of this rethinking.

First, this perspective theorizes all social processes (economic, political, and cultural) as *overdetermined*: That is, as constituted in and through the complex and combined effects of all other processes. In other words, unlike post-Marxian theory, overdetermination, or similarly, the ontology of contingency, is not reserved for and equated to the ontology of the political per se, but posited as a generalized ontology. It applies to all and every dimension of the social, including the ever-changing constitution of the economic and class processes. Overdetermination undoes the conventional and essentialist understanding of the reproduction of capitalism as structured and driven by a singular and teleological motive: capital accumulation. It renders the expansion of capitalist value as well as the reproduction of the capitalist class processes on an expanded scale contingent upon a whole set of conditions of existence, which may not only contradict with one another, but, themselves need to

be continually maintained and reproduced for the capitalist class process to continue.¹⁸

Second, this perspective formalizes the concept of *class* as *an economic process* that is comprised of three distinct moments: (1) The moment of the production of surplus-labor; (2) the moment of the appropriation of surplus-labor, when the presence and the form of exploitation are figured; and (3) the distributive moment, when the appropriated surplus-labor is dispersed to a variety of social destinations, which provide (contingent) conditions of existence for the particular form of class process. When class is defined as an economic process, rather than a totalizing political identity or a fundamental social struggle, it imparts no centralizing mechanism of identification and antagonism or ordains no given and necessary sets of interest to determinate forms of struggles or demands. Similarly, class as an economic process assigns to those who participate in such processes no necessary predicates of class belonging and attributes in terms of property, power, consciousness, income levels, occupation, localities and so on. However, neither is class a purely empty category, lacking any specific meaning. On the contrary, there is a relation to class processes whenever there is an effect on the extent and/or the form in which surplus-labor is produced, appropriated, and distributed.

¹⁸ Note that *expansion of value*, that is, the creation of surplus value is conceptually different from the *expanded reproduction* of capitalist class process qua productive capital accumulation. Productive capital accumulation is a particular economic process that takes place when a portion of surplus value is distributed for the purchase of additional constant and variable capital.

If overdetermination recovers contingency in the reproduction of the circuit of capital and thus opens a space of possibility for anti-capitalist change, then the concept of class as an economic process qua surplus, in the forms that it could take as exploitative (e.g., capitalist, feudal, slave), self-exploitative (e.g., independent/ancient), or non-exploitative (e.g., communism), provides a language to conceptualize and envision economic difference from capitalism as well as to explore articulations and contradictions between capitalist and non-capitalist class processes. Furthermore, the concept, *condition of existence*, enables the theorization of a constitutive outside that both supports and undermines capitalist reproduction. The same concept can easily be mobilized to conceptualize the constitutive outside and the various conditions of existence that might, for instance, support and undermine different types of communist class processes (Resnick and Wolff 2002; Gibson-Graham 2006).

This specific post-Althusserian class analysis, then, makes it possible to give content to and explore the “intentional economies of “anti-capitalism,” i.e., those projects and movements committed to economic transformation in ways that aim to create conditions of existence for the proliferation of non-capitalist and non-exploitative class processes (Gibson-Graham 2006). Contrary to the “resolutions” offered by the post-Althusserian post-Marxian positions to the tension of the mode of production problematic, this particular post-Althusserian class-analytical theory is able to conceptualize the contingent reproduction of both the social and the economy while offering a language to theorize the different forms of class processes in their overdetermined and changeable existence.

1. 3. Outline of the rest of the chapters

After situating the Althusserian mode of production problematic within a historical context, the following chapter elaborates the different motivations that overdetermined the central tension of this problematic (between the objectives of explaining the *overdetermination* and the *stability* of the mode of production) and its contradictions (especially the lapse of the problematic into *reproductionism*). A particular emphasis in this chapter is on the significance of the work of Louis Althusser for the development of the mode of production problematic. Reading closely Althusser's work, in its irreducible heterogeneity and contradictions, the chapter highlights the importance of rethinking the concepts of mode of production, reproduction, and overdetermination for conceptualizing the contingent constitution of class and capitalism. On the other hand, the chapter also points to the remnants of *reproductionism* (i.e., "last instance economic determinism") in Althusser's works, a tendency which also affected the later trajectory of the mode of production problematic. Finally, the chapter provides a new lens to understand the post-Althusserian field and its two distinct currents (i.e., post-Althusserian post-Marxism and post-Althusserian Marxian theory) in relation to the two possible and distinct readings that could apply to Althusser's work (especially of his use of overdetermination) and the mode of production problematic.

Chapter 3 and 4 respectively take up the theoretical trajectory of Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau, the two main contributors to the mode of production problematic. These chapters trace the distinct and historically shifting responses of these scholars to

the tension and contradictions of the mode of production controversy. In particular, the chapters demonstrate the ways in which Balibar and Laclau have addressed the reproductionist tendency of this controversy and constructed a theory of the social that allows for conceiving social reproduction to be both provisionally stable and overdetermined, via their respective concepts of the *conjuncture* and *hegemonic articulation*. The chapters argue and demonstrate that in rendering social reproduction contingent, both scholars have nonetheless failed, in different ways, to dislodge the constitution of class and capitalist reproduction from essentialist narratives. Rather, in their work, the ontological duality of the mode of production problematic (i.e., overdetermination vs. determinism qua reproductionism) is displaced and restaged in a new form: The contingency of politics and the necessity of the capitalist economy.

After discussing the limitations of the approaches within post-Althusserian post-Marxism in the context of Balibar and Laclau's work in terms of how they fail to disentangle the constitution of the reproduction of capitalist class processes and more broadly class processes from essentializing narratives, Chapter 5 presents an alternative post-Althusserian Marxian perspective developed by Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff. The chapter demonstrates the ways in which this approach, by adopting the ontology of overdetermination and the entry point of class qua surplus, is able to think social reproduction and class, including the reproduction of capitalist class processes, in their complexly determined, changeable, and precarious existence. In particular, the chapter demonstrates how the concepts of *class process qua surplus*, *overdetermination*, and *condition of existence* could enable an analysis to understand the

contingent constitution of capitalist class processes and the transformations from capitalist to non-capitalist class processes without falling into reproductionism.

CHAPTER 2

THE TENSION OF THE ALTHUSSERIAN MODE OF PRODUCTION PROBLEMATIC

2. 1. Introduction

Situating post-Marxism within a post-Althusserian theoretical field is certainly not a new endeavor. For those approaches frequently associated with post-Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Balibar 1995; Hall 1996a; Zizek 1999) as well as other critical exegeses of post-Marxism's philosophical premises (Parker 1985; Zizek 1989; Gibson-Graham 1996a; 1996b; Goldstein 2005), one of the key points of reference has been the pioneering work and persisting influence of Louis Althusser. What is distinct and unique about this dissertation's thesis, however, is the particular way it elaborates the continuities and discontinuities of post-Marxism with Althusserian Marxism, through a novel interpretation of the heterogeneous post-Marxian approaches as different ways to "resolve" the central tension of the Althusserian mode of production problematic of the 1960s and 1970s.

Such an understanding of the relationship between post-Marxism and Althusserian Marxism allows us to contextualize, both historically and theoretically, the two problematic tendencies within post-Marxism that continue to draw criticisms from its sympathetic readers as well as its hostile critics. These are (1) the unacknowledged persistence to attribute a necessary essence to, or leave un-theorized, the conceptualizations of economic (capitalist) reproduction and class, and (2) the strong

interest in the political as the exclusive realm of contingency, social change and radical transformation. In fact, these dispositions are closely related. As the former tendency to essentialize and under-theorize the (capitalist) economy and class continues to shape the contending approaches within post-Marxism, it becomes difficult for post-Marxism to envision the potential and the content of “anti-capitalist” transformations in economic and class dimensions. Instead, such a potential is entrusted solely to the contingent ontology of the political.

The aim of this chapter is to flesh out and expand on what the dissertation means by the central tension of the mode of production problematic in order to lay out the groundwork for the respective discussions in Chapters 3 and 4. These chapters will situate the emergence of post-Marxian theory in relation to those attempts at superseding the tension of the mode of production framework, as they are specifically articulated within the works of Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau, the two important participants in the mode of production problematic.

In particular, this chapter argues and substantiates the thesis that the tension of the mode of production debate came about as a result of the uneasy co-existence between two different concerns within the debate: On the one hand, there was the effort to conceptualize the *overdetermination* of the reproduction and transformation of mode of production, and, on the other hand, there was the concern to establish and explain the *stability*, unity, and the cohesiveness of the reproduction of mode of production. It was this latter concern that, at times, slipped into what this dissertation terms as *reproductionism*. By *reproductionism*, the dissertation understands a deterministic and

functionalist view, which posits the reproduction of the social in terms of a systemic and pre-established necessity such that the realization and continuation of the conditions of such reproduction are also automatically secured.

It is true that many scholars have previously pointed to the contradictory attempts within the Althusserian mode of production problematic, and, especially, within Althusser's writings, to hold onto determinism, while simultaneously rejecting it. While such contradictions have led some to abandon Althusserian Marxism, others have offered more constructive criticisms that adhered to the task of holding onto and reviving its "operable" parts. Yet, even for these scholars, this commitment has meant moving away from what they argue to be Althusser's more "structuralist" position in the mode of production problematic—already in the works in "On the Materialist Dialectic" and culminating in *Reading Capital*—towards refocusing and expanding on his more overtly "overdeterminist" position, which is claimed to characterize his writings on politics and ideology—such as "Overdetermination and Contradiction" in *For Marx* and "Ideological State Apparatuses."¹⁹

Certainly, there are ways in which Althusser's writings and the mode of production problematic he inspired lend themselves to a "structuralist" and "rationalist" reading.

¹⁹ Andrew Parker (1985), Stuart Hall (1985; 1996b), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), and Alain Badiou (2005), for instance, are among those scholars who extend such an argument. Though Hall (1985) also recognizes that this theoretical reorientation has entailed some very negative consequences in post-Althusserian theory. While Étienne Balibar also puts forth a similar thesis that highlights two different veins (i.e., structural vs. conjunctural) in Althusser's writings, his project is rather different. His aim is to intersect these two currents and rethink each from the lens of the other. We will take up Balibar's position in Chapter 3.

Moreover, the fact that Althusser (1976) at different points in his life and in his self-criticisms admitted the existence of a certain rationalist tendency (what he referred as *theoreticism*) in his writings bolsters this particular reading.²⁰ Nonetheless, this specific reading, which is certainly not the only one that can be pursued in relation to the Althusserian mode of production problematic, has produced a rather detrimental consequence: While the economic determinist and reproductionist tendency is ascribed to the Althusserian analysis of mode of production, and, from there, to the Althusserian analysis of capitalism and class, the overdeterminist tendency is assigned to the Althusserian analysis of ideology and politics.

²⁰ In his *Essays in Self-criticism*, Althusser explains the context and the intent of this tendency in the following way:

I wanted to defend Marxism against the real dangers of *bourgeois* ideology: it was necessary to stress its revolutionary new character, it was therefore necessary to “prove” that there is an antagonism between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, that Marxism could not have developed in Marx or in the labor movement except given a radical and unremitting *break* with bourgeois ideology, an unceasing struggle against the assaults of this ideology. This thesis was correct. It still is correct. But instead of explaining this *historical* fact in all its dimensions—social, political, ideological and theoretical—I reduced it to a simple theoretical fact: to the epistemological “*break*” which can be observed in Marx’s works from 1845 onwards. As a consequence I was led to give a *rationalist* explanation of the “break”, contrasting *truth* and *error* in the form of the speculative distinction between *science* and *ideology*, in the singular and in general. The contrast between Marxism and bourgeois ideology thus became a simple case of this distinction. Reduction+interpretation: from this rationalist-speculative drama, the class struggle was practically absent. All the effects of my theoreticism derive from this rationalist-speculative interpretation. (1976, 105-106)

It seems that Althusser is here criticizing his previous position for its lack of an overdeterminist analysis of Marx’s break. He argues that rather than explaining the various conditions of existence of this break, his analysis led to a reductive view of the break as a matter of choice, made on the terrain of rationalism, between error (bourgeois ideology) and truth (Marxian science).

The argument developed in this chapter is different. The chapter locates and returns to the contradiction between overdetermination and determinism (qua *reproductionism*) that lies at the very heart of the Althusserian mode of production problematic. In revisiting this problematic in its heterogeneity and contradictions, the chapter is able to not only recognize but also reinstate the significance of the mode of production framework in the way that it made possible the conceptualization of the (capitalist) economy and class as overdetermined and as open to economic difference. Starting with such a recognition, the chapter then offers a particular story of why this problematic, despite its avowed ambition to conceptualize the *overdetermination of and difference among specific* social relations of production, lapsed on occasions into determinism (reproductionism)—via concepts such as the “determination in the last instance by the economy” and “structure in dominance.”

Overdetermination of and difference within the constitution of the (capitalist) economy and class processes is what many within the post-Althusserian field omit and/or neglect. Their oversight, this chapter suggests, is connected to the particular way in which they have recast and left behind the mode of production problematic in general and Althusser’s analysis in *Reading Capital* in particular as irredeemably “structuralist,” economic determinist, rationalist, hence, as passé. The reading offered by this chapter, however, acknowledges the irreducibility of the tensions, contradictions, and heterogeneity of the Althusserian mode of production framework.²¹ In this way, the

²¹ In this sense, the chapter is, in part, inspired by Harold Wolpe’s (1980a) exposition of the period and body of work associated with the Althusserian mode of production analysis. Wolpe’s analysis is important and unique in that he brings out and does not

chapter is able to expose the contingency of certain closures that have over time been brought upon the interpretation of the contradictions of the mode of production debate with the effect that the problematic and/or its main concepts remain caught up within an essentialist framework.

The chapter is structured as follows: *Section 2.2* situates the overdetermined formation of the mode of production problematic within a historical context. *Section 2.3* studies the main concepts and questions raised by the mode of production debate and elaborates the different motivations that overdetermined the central tension of the problematic and its contradictions. *Section 2.4* briefly maps out the different responses that have addressed the tension of the mode of production problematic and discusses in some detail Althusser's response, focusing on his reconstruction of the concept of mode of production in his later works. The chapter concludes by providing a new lens to trace and conceive the development of the post-Althusserian field and its two distinct currents in relation to the two possible and different readings that could be made of Althusser's work (especially of his use of overdetermination) and the mode of production problematic.

eclipse the internal differences, points of disagreement, and contradictions among the different positions of the problematic, while simultaneously pointing to the ways in which the problematic could productively develop its overdeterminist vein on conceptualizing social totality.

2. 2. The historical context and the significance of the mode of production problematic

This section provides an analysis of the historical context that supported and surrounded the formation of the mode of production problematic. On the one hand, the section argues that the culmination of the mode of production problematic of the 1960s and 1970s was overdetermined by a set of new theoretical formations, a major one being Althusser's critique of traditional philosophy and its various essentialisms that beset Marxian theory. On the other hand, the discussion highlights the ways in which the rethinking of the Marxian mode of production framework was incited and called for by a number of distinct and pressing political concerns that traditional Marxism not only failed to address, but to an extent brought into being in the first place.

2. 2. 1. Althusser's critique of traditional philosophy: Rethinking the mode of production

A major theoretical influence on the reorientation of the mode of production framework is the contributions of Althusser towards the rethinking of traditional philosophy, and, especially, his efforts to formulate a uniquely Marxian understanding of epistemology and ontology. The contradictions and crises of the Soviet experiment, and the shortcomings of the then forthcoming responses from within Marxism led to a crisis within the Marxian tradition. This, in turn, prompted both Althusser and his associates and adherents to critically reexamine and rethink Marxian philosophy in order to liberate Marxian theory and political economics from

the various essentialisms in the spheres of both epistemology and ontology (Resnick and Wolff 1987; 1993; 1996; Callari and Ruccio 1996).

Part of the difficulty to digest and integrate Althusser's contributions stems from the laborious task required to delineate the multiple fronts within and outside of the Marxian tradition against which Althusser waged rebuttals in an attempt to dissociate the philosophy of Marx from the various essentialist philosophical positions. As Althusser was recovering the epistemology and ontology unique to Marx, he was at the same time distancing Marx from, while revealing, the unquestioned and implicit alliances between the essentialisms of seemingly different veins of Marxian and non-Marxian philosophical undertakings. Since some of these essentialist positions were only implicitly held and assumed, and not explicit or self-acknowledged, Althusser's effort was nothing short of a radical and a constitutive intervention to bring into existence a difference, a divide, in fact, a new front of struggle that persists within the field of philosophy even today. Althusser often referred to this struggle as "the class struggle in theory," designating the struggle between (dialectical) materialism and idealism (1971, 18-19). The dissertation understands this struggle, as it figures within the field of social ontology, to mark the struggle between overdetermination and determinism.

For Althusser (Althusser and Balibar 1970), determinisms within Marxism involved not only the *economism* of the Second International, which reduced the dynamics of the processes of politics and ideology mechanistically to the destiny determining

contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production²²; not only the *humanism* of early Marx and the socialists of the time, who, in the proletarian consciousness, found the recovery of the alienated origin and unifying core of human nature, i.e., the laboring subject; but also, the *historicism* (what other scholars call *structuralism*) of those Marxists, who, while, like Althusser, were critical of the Second International type of Marxism, at the same time, erected their own version of essentialism in positing a necessary relationship and movement between different modes of historical consciousness and modes of production. In this sense, according to Althusser, Marxian historicists remained embroiled within a Hegelian ontology.²³

Simultaneously, outside the Marxian tradition proper, Althusser's critique targeted the *empiricism* and *humanism* of the classical political economy as well as of the modern economic theory.²⁴ First, according to Althusser, classical political economy was invested in empiricism, an essentialist epistemological approach, which assumes that independently existing and observable phenomena were capable of revealing the

²² For a penetrating critique of the discourse of the Second International, influenced by Althusser's work, see Jonathan Diskin (1990; 1996).

²³ In Hegelian ontology, the place and the function of each element or part of the social totality, as well as its law of motion, is given to it by the totality and its preexisting inner principle that causes, orders, and gives expression to each element.

²⁴ It is important to note here that Althusser used empiricism in a wider sense of the term, including the meanings of both empiricism and rationalism as they are commonly and narrowly understood. In its broader meaning as deployed by Althusser empiricism includes all epistemologies that oppose a pre-constituted subject to an independently existing and pre-constituted object, which consists of the respective parts of the inessential and the essence that governs, captures the truth of, unifies, and gives expression to the different aspects of the object. Knowledge then is the abstraction by the subject of this essence of the object (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 313).

essential causal relations that structure the “reality.” Althusser’s contention was that because of their empiricism, classical economists were unable to theorize the concept of surplus value, since they confused the latter with so many of its “observable” forms (such as wages, rents, profits) (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 181). In contradistinction, Marx, in breaking with the empiricist epistemology, was able to draw a conceptual distinction between the capitalist surplus value and the forms that its many-fold distributions could take. This enabled Marx to reconceptualize capitalist social relations and antagonisms in relation to surplus value production, appropriation, and distribution, and at the same stroke to do away with the conception of social relations envisioned by classical economists in terms of a harmonious division of labor in which each empirically given class contributed its share to the total value produced.

Second, Althusser critiqued classical political economy for being mired within a humanist anthropology, in which all economic actions and processes were approached from an essentialist perspective that traced their cause back to a given human nature of pre-given needs. It is assumed in this anthropology that the specific condition of existence for the (re)production and transformation of all the different economic relations and practices such as production, consumption, distribution, and exchange were homogenized and reduced to serve the same end, namely, the intentional and purposeful actions of humans to satisfy their needs:

...Classical Economics can only think economic facts as belonging to the homogenous space of their positivity and measurability on condition that it accepts a *‘naïve’ anthropology* which founds all the acts involved in the production, distribution, reception and consumption of economic objects on the economic subjects and their needs...In the concept of the sphere of needs, economic facts are thought as based in their economic essence on human subjects who are prey

to 'need': on the *homo oeconomicus*, who is a (visible, observable) given, too. The homogenous positivist field of measurable economic facts depends on a world of subjects whose activity as productive subjects in the division of labor has as its aim and effect the production of objects of consumption, destined to satisfy these same subjects of needs. The subjects, as subjects of needs, support the activity of the subjects as producers of use-values, exchangers of commodities and consumers of use-values. The field of economic phenomena is thus, in origin as in aim, founded on the ensemble of human subjects whose needs define them as economic subjects. (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 162)

It was humanism that prevented classical political economy from envisioning a totality that is constituted in and through the complex and contradictory interactions among the various instances, levels, and conditions of existence, none of which can be reduced to one another or to a common essence underlying them all.²⁵ Marx's writings, on the contrary, expressed a distinctly different ontology. Following Marx, and reformulating his analyses in *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Althusser argued that a key concept, which captured and embodied this anti-essentialist Marxian ontology, was *mode of production*, the concept of a "complexly articulated," an overdetermined unity of the social relations of production with their conditions of existence:

To think the concept of production is to think the concept of the unity of its conditions: the mode of production. To think the mode of production is to think not only the material conditions but also the social conditions of production. (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 180)

The complex unity of mode of production referred to the articulation of the particular social relations of production with particular moments of the economy (read

²⁵ For an incisive elaboration of Althusser's critique of humanism, especially, as this critique is reworked and applied to late neoclassical approaches, refer to Yahya M. Madra (2007).

“material” in the above paragraph)²⁶, i.e., consumption, circulation, and distribution, and with other particular “social” instances,²⁷ which we can interpret to refer to the political and ideological instances as its so many specific conditions of existence. This formulation of the concept of the mode of production as the “unity of its conditions” put the emphasis back on the concept of *reproduction*.

Indeed, *reproduction* became one of the central concepts within the mode of production problematic to dispel the myth of a self-perpetuating social totality and the various ontological essentialisms of economic determinism, humanism, and historicism that

²⁶ While “material” seems to refer in this paragraph to the economy, Althusser indeed recognizes and theorizes different forms of materialities, such as the materiality of production, materiality of theory, materiality of ideology, and materiality of a paving stone or a rifle: “Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practice does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving stone or a rifle” (1971, 166).

The idea that there are different materialities is closely related to the concept of overdetermination. Overdetermination debunks the notions of origin and telos. On the one hand, overdetermination disrobes the idea of self-identity and renders the *constitution* of any process as complexly and contradictorily determined by its conditions of existence. On the other hand, it divests the dynamics of this constitution from any logic of necessity, relieving the *effects* of social processes from the command of any pre-mediated cause. Hence, overdetermination allows for the conception of different materialities, if what we mean by the latter are the differential and complex configurations and effects of social processes.

²⁷ It is hard to pin down what Althusser exactly means by social relations of production. Bringing together various discussions, one can claim that this concept refers to a particular relation between “‘forms’ of exploitation”—which, in turn, can be regarded to refer to the different forms of surplus labor production and appropriation (Resnick and Wolff [1987] reformulate class precisely in this way and make it the entry point of the particular Marxian economics they develop)—and means of production. Yet, sometimes, Althusser includes particular forms of division of labor in this definition. Moreover, he wavers between using *social* relations of production and relations of production, the former, with its emphasis on the social, insists on the equal importance of *all* conditions of existence for the reproduction of the relations of production.

such a conception of social totality called into its service. These various essentialisms posited an origin, respectively, a pre-given economic law, a human nature, a ‘Subject’ of history, which was presumed to order and regulate the determinations among the different elements of the social whole, as well as implicating a telos that dictated its successive transformations. The emphasis on reproduction, on the contrary, implied a decentering of the constitution and maintenance of the social relations of production and a recasting of the latter as overdetermined by its constitutive outside, by its specific conditions of existence.²⁸ Given the central role that the concept of reproduction plays within the mode of production problematic’s critique of various determinisms, it is indeed quite perplexing to see the problematic frequently veer off to the position of *reproductionism*. The following section will take up this question and inquire into the possible motivations that overdetermined this paradox.

To conclude, for Althusser, Marx’s real break from classical political economy—as well as from various other Marxian approaches that failed to see Marx’s discoveries due to their own essentialist visions—was from the empiricism and determinism (i.e., economism, historicism and humanism). Althusser’s task, then, was to render visible and make explicit the anti-essentialist approach to the questions of epistemology and

²⁸ Gibson-Graham argues how the concept of reproduction, especially as it is discussed in Althusser’s famous article, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), took on an added significance for socialist feminism, providing a theoretical tool to explicitly theorize the “autonomous” economic and cultural dynamics of the household, understood not only in terms of being subsumed to, but rather, constitutive of the capitalist relations of production (1996a, 220-221). Gibson-Graham’s subtle reading of the significance of the Althusserian concept of reproduction is different from other critical accounts that diminish Althusser’s emphasis of reproduction to one of *reproductionism*. See Barrett (1993) for an articulation of this latter position.

ontology that was implicitly formulated in Marx's writings. He saw such a task to be crucial to understand the contradictions and failures of the Soviet experience and to not to repeat them.

2. 2. 2. Rethinking revolutionary strategies in the “third world”

Another factor that demanded a rethinking of Marxian philosophy and theory was the manifest bankruptcy of the revolutionary strategies in the so-called “third world.” Grounded on the deterministic vision of historical development (towards the pre-given end of classless society), such strategies were formulated from the perspective of facilitating this process of historical necessity. This deterministic vision assumed that both the pre-capitalist class structures as well as the capitalist mode itself would ultimately be destroyed by capitalism's inner contradictions. That such a development did not happen posed an urgent problem, especially in geographies such as Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Middle East, in which revolutionaries and those on the left witnessed the reproduction of pre-capitalist class structures alongside capitalism, rather than their dissolution along the lines of what the Marxist doxa had anticipated.

Such political concerns called for fresh theoretical formulations, which would be able to address the complexity of the constitution of social reproduction and transformation, to unearth the autonomous dynamics of different modes of production (e.g., feudal, slave, independent/ancient, and capitalist) and to aid organizing strategies for broader class alliances geared towards facilitating social transformations beyond capitalist and other forms of class exploitation. That such

new theorizations would, in turn, affect and reshape political strategies in important ways comes forth forcefully in Aidan Foster-Carter's account (1978). In order to counteract the exasperation of the empirically-oriented Marxists with the serious theorization that was taking place within the mode of production debate and to distinguish the mode of production problematic from the position of those Marxists (such as Andre Gunder Frank), who, in erecting capitalism as the Subject that could encroach upon and subsume to itself all social sites and temporalities, were unable to conceive class difference, Foster-Carter gives the following justification in defense of the mode of production controversy:

Suffice it to note that Frank's main theoretical adversaries, in *Capitalism and Underdevelopment*, were men such as Max Nolf and other advisers to the then Chilean presidential candidate, Salvador Allende; and that 'abstract' debates on the presence or otherwise of 'feudalism' in Chile, had a direct bearing on class alliances (e.g. the existence or otherwise of a 'national bourgeoisie'), which in turn profoundly influenced the policies of the *Unidad Popular* government. The fate of Chile surely shows that, like bad medicine, bad theory can kill. (Foster-Carter 1978, 52)

Fuelled by the political and historical urgencies of the time, occupation with the consequences of theoretical production, an activity generally demurred by many on the left as a sign of idealism and being out of touch with reality, regained due respect. At the same time, the forthcoming theorizations that aimed to distinguish different class relations and to conceptualize their complex relationships were not completely new. Not only Althusser, but scholars such as Harold Wolpe (1980a), Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff (1987), Bruce Norton (2001), among others, have convincingly argued that Marx's writings were invested by the effort to conceptualize and elaborate the complex, non-binary, and multivariate forms of class. Yet, this effort, at times,

was overshadowed by a different passion “to position capitalist mode of production as historically evanescent, a system whose internal contradictions necessarily develop so as to hasten its own end...” (Norton 2001, 24). It is this passion to assure that capitalism’s end is nigh, which has increasingly gained more prominence after Marx’s death. This, in turn, has led to a refocusing of the project of Marxism on the matter of discerning and elaborating the inherent contradictions of capitalism at the cost of questions of difference, complexity, and praxis within Marxian class analysis. Against the background of this historical erasure, the significance of the Althusser-inspired mode of production debate for attempting to recover within Marxian tradition the effort to conceive the ever changing, overdetermined, and different forms of class becomes much more evident.

2. 3. Mode of production problematic

Mode of production has certainly been the object of inquiry of many Marxists since Marx and Engels used it to conceptualize the historically specific and historically changing processes and conditions of class. In fact, the history of Marxism could be read as the history of the various questions and debates posed by the concept of the mode of production.²⁹ As it is already stated, however, when the dissertation refers to

²⁹ For a succinct discussion of the concepts of mode of production and social formation in the history of Marxism, see McIntyre and Resnick (1999). Also, see Erik Olsen (2005) for another insightful class-analytic reading of the mode of production framework, criticizing this framework for its essentialist (Hegelian) ontology, and analyzing the conceptual reversals and internal struggles that have shaped the framework from the works of Marx and Engels to Official Marxism, and, from there, to the Althusserian Marxism.

the concept of mode of production, it limits its focus to the mode of production problematic and the debate generated around this concept in close association with the Althusserian Marxism of 1960s and 1970s.

Within this problematic, the concept of mode of production referred to a “complexly articulated” social totality. Still, the specification of the *elements* and of the *relationality* among the elements of this totality was subject to diverse and contested interpretations, rendering mode of production far from a transparent and clearly demarcated concept. This is why the dissertation uses notions such as *problematic* and *debate* to signify the unsettled and polemical aspect of this theoretical formation.³⁰

Some of the significant questions and issues that were raised and debated pertained to the very definition of the relations of production; the determination of the elements of the mode of production; the relationship between mode of production and the social formation; the relationship between relations of production and

Perhaps, somewhat different from Olsen, this dissertation aims to sustain the tension between the overdeterminist and determinist ontological tendencies within the Althusserian mode of production literature, rather than delivering a final verdict on the problematic. The dissertation argues that such closure portrays the debate as ultimately or irredeemably essentialist, and suppresses the anti-essentialist moments. The dissertation further suggests that this closure is at least in part imposed retroactively, in the aftermath of the debate which followed from the self-criticisms of some of the contenders that later informed the evolution of their post-Marxian frameworks.

³⁰ Jason Read also approaches the mode of production as a *problematic*. By this, Read means that one treats the mode of production as a theoretical “apparatus for posing questions” rather than a “simple definition” (2003, 5). Read’s definition could slightly be amended by drawing on another aspect of the concept problematic to which Althusser himself also drew attention: That a problematic is constituted as much by its contradictions, tensions, and oversights as its explicitly posed statements and questions (Althusser and Balibar 1970).

consciousness/ideology and politics; the relationship between different modes of production, specifically, between the capitalist mode and pre-capitalist modes; the relationship between theoretical practice and political practice; the relationship between the reproduction of the mode of production and the transition of the mode of production, and so on.

2. 3. 1. The tension between overdetermination and stability

2. 3. 1. 1. Elements and “articulation” of the mode of production

Taking the conception of an internally differentiated and complexly determined totality as its point of departure, the problematic revolved around two main issues: Determining the particular elements that constituted the totality and understanding the nature of the “articulation” among these elements. Though, as I try to elaborate below, these two issues were not really quite separate from each other.

Regarding the issue of defining the elements of a mode, the main divide was between the “extended” and the “restricted” conception of the mode of production (Wolpe 1980a). For those who subscribed to a “restricted” definition (Laclau 1977a; Hindess and Hirst 1975; Poulantzas 1973), mode of production referred to the specific combination of the relations of production and the forces of production. In this schema, concepts such as “economic system” (Laclau 1977a) and “social formation” (Laclau 1977b; Poulantzas 1973) referred to the broader units of analysis, respectively standing for the articulated social unity of the mode of production with its other economic, political, and ideological instances and the unity of the distinct modes of production, generally, of a dominant mode with other subordinate modes.

Yet, for others (Althusser [Althusser and Balibar 1970]; Bettelheim 1972; Balibar [Althusser and Balibar 1970]), the concept took on an “extended” meaning. In the extended definition, the mode of production comprised not only the specific combination of the relations of production and the forces of production, but also the determinate and specific relations of the latter with economic moments such as consumption, distribution, and circulation, as well as with other social instances of the political and the ideological. “Social formation” as a concept was reserved, then, for analyzing the unity of a number of “extended” modes of production or alternatively of a single “extended” mode. At this point, it should be noted that the contestations over the issue of defining the elements of the mode of production were not simply a matter of intellectual rigor. As will be argued shortly, the struggles over definition were rather the symptom of the difficulty to conceive the stability and the reproduction of the social relations of production without binding such stability to a necessary causation.

The second issue concerned the logic of combination, that is, the “complex articulation” of the elements that constituted the unity and the reproduction of the mode of production. Once the social totality was relieved from the hold of deterministic conceptions, and reconceived as complexly determined, the question became one of explaining the “determinate” ways in which the reproduction of this totality was unified and stabilized as well as the “determinate” ways in which the transitional conjunctures took hold. Thus “articulation” became a key concept to make sense of both the *determinateness* and *specificity*, the distinguishing character and uniqueness of a mode of production (in the extended view)—or a social formation (in

the restricted view)—as well as the *principle* with which the *stability* of reproduction and *unity* of the differential elements are secured.

Different mechanisms of articulation were suggested and debated as the different principles that reproduced the relationships within a mode as well as between the capitalist and pre-capitalist modes. These principles could be constituted at different levels of the social totality (i.e., economic, political, ideological) and their specific effectivity was argued to be complexly mediated by the specific structure of the mode of production. For instance, in some of his writings Althusser argued that the principle of articulation specific to the capitalist mode of production was constituted within the realm of the economy: yet its effects, mediated through the complex structure of the capitalist mode, were manifested through the dynamics of the political instance. Other principles of articulation discussed within the problematic were the state (Poulantzas 1973), commodity exchange (Rey 1973), interests of the fundamental class (Laclau 1977), market for labor power (Wolpe 1980b), law of capital accumulation (Balibar [Althusser and Balibar 1970]), kinship relations (Meillassoux 1980), and so on.

2. 3. 1. 2. Unpacking the concept: “Complex articulation”

It is important to study more closely the concept, “complex articulation,” and unpack the different and conflicting motivations that are condensed in this concept, in part, because such contradictory motivations are more often than not sealed off and construed as the self-evident signs of the determinism intrinsic to the mode of production problematic. While doing this, it also becomes possible to concurrently

document the various motivations of the mode of production controversy that overdetermine its central tension: The tension between the desire to conceptualize the *overdetermination of* as well as the *difference among* different modes of production, on the one hand, and the need to account for and explain the *stability* and *unity* of the reproduction of social totality as a class totality, on the other.

To start with, in rethinking the mode of production as a complexly articulated totality, the participants of this project did not intend to substitute the deterministic (Hegelian) social totality with an alternative conception that posited the social whole as an assemblage of different elements, relating arbitrarily and externally with one another, with no specific relations of determination. That this was not the intention was most visible in the insistent use within the problematic of such concepts as “determinate,” “articulated,” and “structure in dominance” in order to ascribe a definite and a precise character to this complex relationality. Such a motivation comes across quite clearly, for instance, in the following passage from Althusser:

Nevertheless, the fact that the Hegelian type of necessity and the Hegelian essence of development should be rejected does not mean at all that we are in the *theoretical void of subjectivity, of ‘pluralism’ or of contingency*. Quite the contrary, only on condition that we free ourselves from these Hegelian presuppositions can we really be sure of escaping this void. Indeed, it is because the process is complex and possesses a *structure in dominance* that its development, and all the typical aspects of this development, can really *be explained*. (1977, 215; emphasis mine)

While relentlessly critiquing the determinism of Hegelian totality, Althusser and others refrained from reducing the relational constitution of the social to the play of “subjectivity,” “pluralism,” and “contingency.” It is important that we consider here Althusser’s critical statements about “subjectivity” and “contingency” in the broader

context of his work before reducing them to an attempt to bring back determinism and necessary causation in social theory. For instance, there is a way in which one might approach Althusser's remarks as a caution against the error of leaving the ontology of Being un-theorized once the Hegelian determinism, or any other form of determinism, for that matter, is dispensed with. Althusser knew all too well that such theoretical voids were easily filled with other forms of essentialisms. Of particular danger here was the theoretical move of readily replacing the Hegelian ontology—what Stephen Cullenberg (1996) designates as the *determinism of the structure*—with the determinism of the elements, an ontological orientation which assumes that social is nothing but an aggregation of atomistic elements, each, with their own pre-given dispositions, existing prior to or independent of the social totality.³¹ Such an approach, by merely replacing the determinism of the whole with the determinism of the parts, would, in effect, leave ontological essentialism in place.

One can discern a similar concern within the repeated emphasis in the debate on the concept “determinate.” Far from signaling a lapse into determinism, determinate is deployed to avoid the double dangers of Hegelian and Cartesian determinisms and, seen in this way, is very much akin to the concept of overdetermination: Every mode of production is determinate in the sense that the constitutive effects of each element of the social totality play themselves out in and through the complex interactions with the effects of other particular elements. “Determinateness,” interpreted this way, does

³¹ Cullenberg (1996) brings into fuller theorization this ontological orientation, which Althusser mentions at different points in *Reading Capital* as the “mechanistic system, Cartesian in origin,” (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 186) as the Cartesian totality.

not suggest a system of relationships anchored and structured by a governing essence, but rather refers to the delimited effectivity of each and every element, if what is meant by delimited is that social totality or its elements are not Subjects in the sense that they control and dictate their own effects and secure their own conditions of existence, but rather that they are overdetermined by their specific constitutive outside. One can, then, interpret “determinate cause” as designating the delimited-because-overdetermined cause, thus, the impossibility of a self-constituted (in Althusser’s words “subjective” and “pluralistic”) cause.

“Complex articulation” (as well as “determinateness”) carried yet a second motivation within the mode of production schema. It signified the *specificity* and *difference* of every mode of production. If social totality was overdetermined, this did not mean that every mode of production was complexly determined in the same way. That is, *specific* modes of production called for *specific* relations of production overdetermined by their *specific* conditions of existence. And the contenders of the mode of production debate thought that one of the ways that the Marxian approach to “science” distinguished itself from other understandings of “science” was its ability to “explain,” that is, to produce conceptually and analyze this *specificity* of the overdetermination of the particular mode of production. “Complex articulation,” then, alluded not only to a reorientation of the social ontology from determinism (both in its Hegelian as well as Cartesian veins) to *overdetermination*, but also to the need to account for class *difference* and *specificity*.

Thirdly, “complex articulation” brought up and embodied the motivation to explain the *stability* and integrity of the unity of the mode of production. Articulation, in this particular sense, was evoked to understand the mechanisms that gave shape, hold, and durability to the complexity of the mode of production. This motivation, however, posed a problem, since mode of production thinkers often had difficulty in reconciling the notions of contingency, unceasing change, and contradiction, which the *overdetermination* of the social totality connoted, with the *stability* of the reproduction of social totality. In other words, they were at pains to think reproduction and stability in terms of an overdetermined process, which would be prone to crises, contradictions, instabilities, and unraveling.³² As one way to manage this tension, they reverted to attributing a certain *necessity* to social reproduction (as exemplified, for instance, by the concept “structure in dominance”). Hence, “complex articulation,” in addition to bringing up the notions of *overdetermination*, *specificity* and *stability*, also came to refer to *necessity*. The different principles of articulation discussed within the debate, in some sense, served for instituting such a necessity, a pre-constituted logic that secured the systemic stability of social reproduction.

³² There were certainly exceptions to this tendency. Wolpe, for instance, argued that it was quite possible to envision a social formation that was comprised of a number of “extended” modes, coexisting in overdetermined and contradictory relations with one another, none of which conveyed any dominance to secure reproduction of the social. In fact, he argued that contributions to the debate by Banaji (1977), Rey (1973), and Duprè and Rey (1980) be approached precisely along these lines (1980a, 37). Similarly, Resnick and Wolff (1979), in their analysis of the theory of transitional conjunctures, attributed no necessity to the reproduction of class relations.

2. 3. 1. 3. Explaining stability: Retort to capital-centricism and rationalism

Why this unwarranted slide, this resort to *necessity*? Certainly, one can cite specific reasons for each particular theorist. Here, I would point to some broadly defined impulses. At a very rudimentary level, we can surmise that the mode of production thinkers, as much as they were invested in the idea of revolution and the overcoming of the capitalist relations of production, at the same time, were adamant in distinguishing and distancing such ideas and projects from the economism of the Second International, and from its mechanistic understanding of social transformation, which subsumed the dynamics of capitalism's downfall to its inner contradictions, thereby pronouncing social transformation as necessary and inevitable. In contradistinction, mode of production scholars, through the concept of reproduction, highlighted the manifold conditions of existence that supported and maintained the capitalist mode of production, and radically repositioned the undoing of capitalist exploitation as the laborious and the multi-faceted practice of undoing its so many conditions of existence. It is likely that in their critique of the deterministic view of the "end of capitalism," the mode of production participants swayed too far to the other side to insist on the systemic stability of reproduction, which, then, took the form of *reproductionism*.

Such a lapse becomes easier to understand when considered in conjunction with the concern of the mode of production theorists that without a firm grounding of the reproduction of the mode of production, the minimal sense of consistency and coherence of the social would dissolve, if not filled in by the "relativism" of the

Cartesian ontology. Dismayed at the possibility that their conceptualization of the social and its classed character would disintegrate, mode of production theorists evoked and demanded a necessary ground to secure the reproduction of the mode of production. Often, such necessary ground took the form of capital-centricism³³, a particular form of reproductionism, which deduces the reproduction of the social from the pre-given dynamics of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.³⁴

A second alarming concern motivating the reproductionist tendencies of the debate was that without the anchoring of the stability of the reproduction of the mode of production in a final and a single determination, the very possibility of explaining the mode of production would dissolve, if not readily filled in by empiricism. In other words, there was a rationalist tendency to presume that the possibility of “scientific knowledge” could be seriously threatened if the object in question, i.e., social totality,

³³ Gibson-Graham theorizes this as “capitalocentricism,” a deterministic approach that views and hierarchically orders all economic (and non-economic) processes in relation (e.g., as subservient, the same, and/or complementary to) to a presumed capitalist totality that is conceived as a coherent and self-regulating whole (1996b, 6).

³⁴ This form of reproductionism is crystallized in the concept, “the law of value,” the rationally governed and equilibrium inducing distribution of the abstract social labor time in society. Jack Amariglio and Antonio Callari explain succinctly the reproductionist understanding of the social conveyed by “the law of value”:

a “law of value”...is immanent in the very definition of “society”; that is, a society is defined in terms of an organization that must solve the problem of allocating labor in such a way as to secure the existence and reproduction of that society. (1989, 37)

This form of reproductionism can also be connected with the “law of accumulation,” insofar the latter was posed as a necessary condition of existence for the operation of the “law of value” in expanded reproduction.

was devoid of rigorously delimited boundaries.³⁵ In this sense, the privileging of a singular social instance of the social totality above all others, which would govern and regulate the effects of all other elements, allowed for a solid and secure basis, an essence, to “know and explain” the object in question. That is, determinism in ontology enabled the mode of production theorists to hold onto a rationalist conception of scientific knowledge. In their desire to break with empiricism, the mode of production theorists, thus, exhibited a tendency to slip into rationalism.³⁶

To conclude the discussion thus far, the mode of production problematic, as embodied in the concept of “complex articulation,” staged a certain tension. On the one hand, there was the concern to account for the overdetermination of the reproduction and transformation of social totality in its specific differences (i.e., economic and class difference). “Complex articulation,” in this sense, referred both to the *overdetermination*, as well as to the *specificity* of relations *within* and *among different* modes of production. On the other hand, there was the concern to attribute a certain

³⁵ Note that in this particular use, delimited is suggestive of determinism rather than overdetermination as it was previously argued.

³⁶ This rationalist tendency of scientific explanation obviously sits uneasily with the debate’s other discussions of a uniquely Marxian approach to science. For instance, Althusser, in his previously quoted critique of Hegelian ontology, implicates that determinism in ontology denies any role for “explanation.” What he means is that in deterministic approaches to social totality all attempts at explanation would be perfunctory in so far as such explanation is dictated a priori by the requirement to justify and mirror the dynamics of a pre-given cause.

In contradistinction, Marxian approach to science was associated with the critique and disruption of deterministic explanations that pose an origin and a telos and with the production of analyses that acknowledge the overdetermined constitution of social phenomenon, including the process of knowledge production, itself.

stability and *unity* to this overdetermined and internally differentiated social whole. A particular way to manage this tension within the debate was to invoke different principles of necessity (e.g., the law of capital accumulation, the regulative and constitutive role of the state, the fundamental interests of the dominant class, and so on) that would govern and guarantee the systemic reproduction of the social totality. This development, however, generated contradictions between the tendencies of overdetermination and reproductionism within the mode of production problematic.

2. 3. 1. 4. Oscillations between “restricted” and “extended” conceptions of the mode of production

In fact, one can observe the contradiction between overdetermination and reproductionism playing itself out in the oscillating positions with respect to the issue of defining the elements of the mode of production. As previously mentioned, there was a dichotomy within the problematic between the “restricted” and “extended” definitions of the mode of production. This neat divide, however, was constantly disrupted by oscillations from positions that mobilized the former to those that assumed the latter and vice versa.

Let us look at this issue more closely. Theorists such as Laclau and Poulantzas initially assumed the “restricted” definition of mode of production in order to isolate the principle of reproduction within the broader “economic system” and “social formation.” This way, they thought the principle or the logic, which cohered social reproduction, would no longer be part of the dynamics of the different modes of production. Their motivation was to reconcile two ends: That is, on the one hand, to liberate the complex, constitutive, and autonomous effects of the pre-capitalist modes

from any deterministic logic attached to capitalist reproduction, and, on the other hand, to hold on to a principle that would assure the systemic reproduction of the dominant social order.

Soon, however, they realized that by not attaching any “law of motion” to the different modes of production themselves, but rather to the “economic system” and/or “social formation,” economic determinism was not actually dispensed with, but instead merely displaced from the elements of the social totality (i.e., from the different modes of production) to the social totality itself (i.e., to the economic system or social formation). Besides, since it was no longer possible to connect the principle of articulation to the dynamics of the different modes, such an operative logic of coherence was now to be introduced into the system externally, from the ‘outside’ of the coexisting modes of production. This, however, raised the issue of the “arbitrariness” of the principle of articulation, which, for some, meant nothing less than surreptitiously reintroducing empiricism into the theorization of the reproduction of social whole. Hence, the “restricted” notion of the mode of production fell into disrepute.

At this point, we can begin to understand the reason why those who initially assumed the “restricted position,” such as Laclau, had to tacitly “extend” the meaning of the mode of production by including in its definition the dynamics that were to secure not only the reproduction of the mode, but also the economic system. However, in doing so, the differential and constitutive dynamics of the pre-capitalist modes were once again folded into the law endogenous to the capitalist mode. Called back was the

tendency to understand pre-capitalist modes of production as well as the political and ideological levels of the economic system/social formation in terms of their appropriation by, services for, and impediments to the capitalist mode of production and the economic level. Paradoxically, this was a tendency that the mode of production debate was originally in great pains to relinquish. With the creeping in of the capital-centric tendency, the theoretical legitimacy of insisting on the autonomy of the pre-capitalist modes of production, with their distinct effects, conditions of existences and dynamics, became disputable. Indeed, certain contenders, such as Hindess and Hirst (1975)—in their early work—and Banaji (1977), soon challenged the very idea that there could in fact be more than one mode in an economic system/social formation.

If the *extension* of the “restricted” definition of the mode of production was one response to the difficulty of conceiving the contingent reproduction of a complex unity without falling into empiricism, *decomposing* further the “restricted” definition of mode of production was another. Emblematic of such response was the later position of Hindess and Hirst (1977). In a critique of their previous position, they argued that the “restricted” concept of mode of production was untenable because already inherent to it was a pre-given law of motion. In response, their strategy was to break down the concept of mode of production into its various elements in an attempt to remove any final trace of economic reproductionism. To this end, they rejected the concepts of mode of production and articulation as essentialist categories in themselves, imposing a deterministic understanding of social totality governed by a necessary logic of reproduction. They replaced these concepts respectively with the

alternative and seemingly thinner concept of relations of production and their conditions of existence. Social formation was accordingly redefined:

The social formation is not a totality governed by an organizing principle, determination in the last instance, structural causality, or whatever. It should be conceived as consisting of a definite set of relations of production together with economic, political and cultural forms in which their conditions of existence are secured. But there is no necessity for those conditions of existence to be secured and no necessary structure of the social formation in which those relations and forms must be combined. (Cutler *et. al.*1977, 222)

Hindess and Hirst, alongside Althusser, Wolpe (1980a), and Resnick and Wolff (1979), among others, were trying to envision a non-systemic notion of social reproduction and stability that accorded with the concept of overdetermination. Yet, unable to fully break with a rationalist epistemology, Hindess and Hirst were distracted from pursuing their self-critique to the wanting and radical conclusion that social reproduction is overdetermined. Guided by the rationalist tendency to conceptually capture what they assumed to be the complex essence of reality, they set to the task of purifying the Althusserian concepts through replacing them with new ones, and, in so doing, purge any remainder of (economic) determinism and necessary logic. Later on, however, thinking that they were unable to rid even their seemingly “cleansed” categories from the “contamination” of determinism, Hindess and Hirst found the fault in the conceptual apparatus of the mode of production problematic itself. Failing to recognize that it was their own rationalism, which kept erecting determinism even when they rejected it, they eventually abandoned the mode of production problematic all together, along with the concepts of epistemology, class, and social totality, as an epistemologically and ontologically essentialist enterprise (for

two penetrating critiques of the theoretical trajectory of Hindess and Hirst, see Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 100-104 and Resnick and Wolff 1987, 101-108).³⁷

2. 4. The “resolutions” of the mode of production debate

Given the contradiction between the overdeterminist and reproductionist veins of the mode of production problematic, its major theorists such as Althusser, Balibar, Hindess and Hirst, and Laclau have made repeated attempts, which sometimes took the explicit form of self-criticisms, to reformulate their positions in order to come to terms with a conception of social reproduction that is overdetermined. In their search to eliminate the reproductionist bent from the conception of a complexly articulated social totality, these scholars have assumed different trajectories. As already mentioned, for Hindess and Hirst, such a task was taken as an epistemic impossibility, and, in effect, implied the abandoning of the mode of production problematic early on. The following chapters, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, provide particular accounts of how Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau respectively attempted to resolve the tension between the *overdetermination* of social reproduction and transformation and *stability* of social reproduction through a series of reconsiderations and reformulations of their previous positions.

³⁷ This does not mean that essentialist epistemologies necessarily go along with deterministic ontologies. For a subtle anti-essentialist view, which argues for no necessary connection between essentialism *in* epistemology/*of* social theory and essentialism *in* ontology/*in* social theory, see Amariglio (1984) and Resnick and Wolff (1987).

Before concluding and moving on to the following chapter, however, let me briefly discuss the ways in which Althusser himself grappled with the deterministic tendency of the mode of production controversy. I argue that in Althusser's writings in *Reading Capital* and *For Marx* the tension between the different ontological orientations of overdetermination and reproductionism gave way to a double understanding of overdetermination. Overdetermination in these writings referred, on the one hand, to the general ontology of the constitution of the social approached from the entry point of class relations, an ontological orientation that sometimes lapsed into the determinism of the "last instance by the economy." On the other hand, overdetermination also referred to the particular ontology of the political and the dynamics of social transformation as complexly determined by various social contradictions (of which class contradiction is one).

In his later works, however, Althusser (2006) cast aside the deterministic tendency of the mode of production problematic à la "last instance determinism" and brought into full relief the overdetermined constitution of the mode of production through such concepts as *the encounter*, *the conjuncture*, and *the aleatory*. One can indeed suggest that in these writings Althusser produced his version of the "post-Althusserian" critique of the *reproductionist* tendency of the mode of production debate. At the same stroke, he rendered superfluous the disjuncture between the two senses of overdetermination (i.e, the first one referring to the complexly determined social ontology corrupted by "the last instance economic determinism" and the second one referring to the contingent modalities of political transformation).

2. 4. 1. Althusser's "resolution"

2. 4. 1. 1. From "the determinism in the last instance by the economy..."

For Althusser, a major drawback of the slippage into a necessitarian understanding of social reproduction, which conceives the latter to be secured and cohered by the "laws" of the economy, was the challenge to envision the possibility of social transformation. In *Reading Capital* and in *For Marx*, Althusser tried to handle this difficulty through the conceptual maneuver of wedding the notion of the "relative autonomy" of the political with the idea of the "last instance determinism by the economy." In this way, while Althusser was able to attribute to the *political* the strategic role and place in which the social transformation of the mode of production took shape, he could simultaneously preserve the primacy and necessity of the *economic* both in directing social reproduction *and* in mediating social transformation through delegating this role to the instance of the political:

How is it possible, theoretically, to sustain the validity of this basic Marxist preposition: '*the class struggle is the motor of history*'; that is, sustain theoretically the thesis that it is by *political* struggle that it is possible to '*dissolve the existing unity*', when we know very well that it is not politics but the economy that is determinant in the last instance? . . . How could we explain our necessity to go through the distinct and the specific level of *political* struggle if the latter, although distinct, and because it is distinct, were the simple phenomenon and not the real *condensation*, the nodal strategic point, in which *is reflected the complex whole* (economic, political and ideological)? (1977, 215)

Althusser did not stop here and went on to try to conceptualize the different modes of social change that the political processes would bring about. To that end, Althusser mobilized a slightly different understanding of overdetermination, approaching it as a complex causality that combines the respective mechanisms of condensation and displacement—a notion of overdetermination more akin to the way Sigmund Freud

(1960) used it in his analyses of dreams. Althusser envisioned three types of political struggle and transformation whose unfolding would follow different paths depending on which of the processes of condensation and displacement dominated the overdetermination of social contradictions in political struggles. He defined (1) “non-antagonism” as the political state in which the overdetermination of contradictions existed “in the dominant form of displacement,” averting social change; (2) “antagonism” as the political state in which the overdetermination of contradictions existed “in the dominant form of condensation,” carrying the potential for social change; and (3) “revolutionary explosion” as the political state in which the overdetermination of contradictions existed in an “unstable global condensation” that radically restructured the social totality on a qualitatively new basis (1977, 215-216).

What is of import from the perspective of this dissertation is to highlight the two different senses of overdetermination that become discernable within Althusser’s writings. On the one hand, overdetermination described the ontology of the social relations of production as they were complexly determined by their conditions of existence. On the other hand, overdetermination came to refer to the ontology of political processes as they were complexly determined by a multiplicity of contradictions. Put differently, in its first sense, overdetermination described a general Marxian ontology for understanding how class processes (i.e., relations of production) were determined in complex and contradictory ways by their various

conditions of existence.³⁸ In its second sense, overdetermination was mobilized to make sense of the ontology of the political and political change in which various contradictions and struggles (of which class struggle is one) were either condensed or displaced, affecting qualitatively different modes of social change.

It is important to make note of this disjunction between the general (social) and particular (political) use of overdetermination that are scattered in Althusser's writings, since the effects of this split are, in part, carried into the field of post-Althusserian post-Marxism. Asserting that the first use of overdetermination as well as the mode of production framework in which it is bounded are tainted by the "last instance determinism of the economy," post-Marxism and other sympathetic critics of Althusserian Marxism have largely adopted the political sense of overdetermination in their attempts to reclaim it. This has contributed to the detrimental outcome mentioned in the beginning of the chapter: Whereas the "economic" and "class" are labeled and associated with a regulative and deterministic role in terms of directing either the reproduction, or the transformation of the social totality, the political is intimately linked with the sphere of (class) struggle, social transformation, and sphere of change.³⁹

³⁸ This is an understanding of overdetermination that is discussed in *Reading Capital*, in the context of Althusser's rethinking of the concept of mode of production.

³⁹ A recent example of such a reading can be gleaned from Alain Badiou's writings. The intricacies of Badiou's thought are beyond the purview of this dissertation. Previously a student of Althusser, Badiou has now established himself among the influential contemporary philosophers of the post-Althusserian field, rethinking such Althusserian concepts as "aleatory materialism" and "process without a subject."

2. 4. 1. 2. ...to mode of production as an “encounter.”

In 1982, as part of a book manuscript that never gets published due to his death, Althusser (2006) revises a text, initially entitled, “On the Mode of Production.” In this text, Althusser revisits the arguments that he, together with Balibar, has developed in *Reading Capital*. The text in itself is not an explicit self-criticism of the reproductionist tendency of the mode of production problematic. However, in an effort to bring into clearer perspective what Althusser (and Balibar) were trying to do with the concept of the mode of production, the text practically goes beyond and does away with the idea

Unfortunately, however, Badiou, in reading Althusser, fails to find the “aleatory” and overdetermination within the field of economy:

Evental overdeterminations, catastrophes, revolutions, novelties, becoming-principle of the non-principal contradiction. Here lies the real stuff of partisanship, the militant’s opportunity, the moment of choice. *Overdetermination puts the possible on the agenda, whereas the economic place (objectivity) is that of well-ordered stability, and the statist place (ideological subjectivity) makes individuals ‘function.’ Overdetermination is in truth the political place.* And it must indeed be said that overdetermination belongs to the subjective realm (choice, partisanship, militancy), even though it knows of no subject-effect (such effects are statist), nor does it verify, or construct, any object (such objects only exist in the field of science). (2005, 65; emphasis mine)

What is (re)produced in Badiou’s reading of Althusser is an uneven treatment of the economic and the political (in terms of the different ontology assigned to each register), an unwarranted tendency the dissertation more generally attributes to post-Marxism: The economy is objectified as a stable, “well-ordered,” structured realm with clearly identifiable dynamics and laws (knowable through the procedures of scientific inquiry), and is sealed off from the determinations of a constitutive outside. Overdetermination does not characterize this domain. Rather, according to this view, it is the political that is the true realm of revolutionary change and overdetermination.

of the “last instance determinism,” or any other deterministic tendency that might have been harbored by the mode of production problematic.

In this text, Althusser reiterates that, following Marx, he and Balibar have deployed mode of production in order to conceive a complex social totality, as a concept, which embodied Marx’s ontological break from economic determinism and a teleological understanding of history. Althusser pushes this point further through a powerful argument, which demonstrates that the emergence of the capitalist mode of production bears no relation to historical or economic necessity, but rather, is instituted through the overdetermined effects of the various historical processes, processes that are themselves overdetermined. Although the quote is long, it is worth reproducing here to convey Althusser’s understanding of this novel ontology that culminates in the concept of the mode of production:

what is a mode of production? We provided an answer to this question, following Marx: *it is a particular ‘combination’ of elements*. These elements are an accumulation of money (by the ‘owners of money’), an accumulation of the technical means of production (tools, machines, an experience of production on the part of the workers), an accumulation of the raw materials of production (nature) and an accumulation of producers (proletarians divested of all means of production). The elements do not exist in history *so that* a mode of production may exist, they exist in history *in a ‘floating state’* prior to their ‘accumulation’ and ‘combination’, each being the product of its own history, and none being the teleological product of the others or their history...in the theory of *primitive accumulation*...we witness the emergence of a historical phenomenon whose result we know—the expropriation of the means of production from an entire rural population in Great Britain—but whose causes bear no relation to the result and its effects. Was the aim to create extensive domains for the hunt? Or endless fields for sheep-raising? We do not know *just what* the main reason for this process of violent dispossession was (it was most likely the sheep), and, especially, the main reason for the violence of it; moreover, it doesn’t much matter. The fact is that this process took place, culminating in a *result* that was promptly *diverted* from its possible, presumed end by ‘owners of money’ looking for impoverished manpower. *This mark is the mark of*

the non-teleology of the process and of the incorporation of its result into a process that both made it possible and was wholly foreign to it. (2006, 198-199)

In the passage, Althusser positions the capitalist mode of production as the unintended and overdetermined effect of the “aleatory” and contingent “encounter” of the various historical processes, a thesis which Althusser claims that Marx already and cogently elaborated in *Capital*, particularly in the section on *primitive accumulation*.⁴⁰

In a different text on the same theme of the “encounter,” written during the same period of 1980s, Althusser acknowledges that once an encounter takes place, the effects of it can disintegrate or they can “take hold,” the latter term intimating the potential that the formation, which is triggered by the encounter and whose conditions of emergence are overdetermined, assumes a certain stability and endurance in the aftermath of the encounter. It is true that the notion of “taking hold” could easily evoke and call back relations of *necessity*. Althusser, however, is very careful to warn us against such a temptation: The temptation to, first, read into the idea of “taking hold” certain relations of necessity, and second, from there to go about studying these presumed relations of necessity, i.e., “the laws which drive from this taking-hold of forms, and repeat these forms, to all intents and purposes, indefinitely” (2006, 195). He mentions that many, indeed, do fall into this trap even when they

⁴⁰ Althusser uses the terms “encounter,” “conjuncture,” and “overdetermination” always in close association in this text. I am taking encounter and conjuncture to mean more or less the same thing. We can perhaps elaborate the difference between the Althusserian concept of the encounter and overdetermination in the following manner: Encounter is constituted by a particular set among the infinite social and historical processes, each of which is constituted in overdetermination by other social processes. In this sense, encounter is analogous to the concept of “relationship” as conceptualized by Resnick and Wolff (1987).

grant the encounter and acknowledge the contingency of the initial formation. In contradistinction to such a tendency, Althusser argues that “taking hold,” or whatever notions of stability and reproduction one might talk about with respect to any formation, is always already shaped by an “abyss,” a “radical indeterminacy,” which Althusser argues to be “very hard to grasp (for it does violence to our sense of ‘what is seemly’).” Yet, even when things seem to be the “most stable” and durable, they are prone to dissolution and unraveling:

...laws can change—not that they can be valid for a time but not eternally...but that they change at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them, and can change without reason, that is without an intelligible end. This is where their *surprise* lies. (2006, 195-196)

Althusser, then, takes this idea of radical instability, embodied by the concepts of the aleatory and overdetermination, and locates it at the heart of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. His argument, therefore, is not only that capitalist mode of production might have never happened and “taken hold,” that its emergence is overdetermined by the various historical conditions of existence, but also that its reproduction is overdetermined. To substantiate this point, Althusser emphasizes how “primitive accumulation” does not merely refer to a one-time encounter of the various conditions of existence, which overdetermined the emergence of the capitalist mode of production, but rather to an ongoing process—and not only in the so-called “Third World,” but even in France (2006, 199). That primitive accumulation is a steadily recurring process, in turn, demonstrates that for the survival and maintenance of the capitalist mode of production, its conditions of existence (the maintenance of the processes that make new “money capital,” and credit accessible and available, the

securing of processes that enable new sources of labor power as well as those that reproduce the old labor power, and so on) need to be continuously reproduced. There is nothing that guarantees such reproduction, though; hence, there is also no automatic and pre-figured mechanism or necessity that secures the stability and reproduction of the capitalist mode. If anything, stability and reproduction of the mode of production need to be radically rethought as overdetermined, hence, as incomplete and contradictory. The concept of primitive accumulation as a permanent process, then, according to Althusser:

puts the aleatory at the heart of the survival and reinforcement of the capitalist 'mode of production,' and also, let us add, at the heart of the so-called socialist 'mode of production' itself. (2006, 199)

The implications of Althusser's revisiting of the mode of production analysis are important to underline: Treating primitive accumulation not as a one-time historical event, but as a conceptual framework and a metaphor that stands for an overdetermined understanding of the reproduction of any mode of production (not only of capitalist, but also, of the socialist) Althusser demonstrates that there is no necessity and determinism endemic to any class process, capitalist or not; that there is no logic which precedes the class process to secure its conditions of existence in order to secure its reproduction.⁴¹ The constitutions of class and economy are overdetermined.

⁴¹ The novel and still relevant implications of Althusser's analysis of primitive accumulation for rethinking the ontology of capitalism crystallize when compared to a more contemporary analysis of primitive accumulation offered by the Marxist geographer David Harvey. Harvey (2003) also puts forth the perceptive thesis that primitive accumulation is not a past event, but an ongoing process. Furthermore, he

It was one of the theses of this chapter, and more broadly of this dissertation, that the particular reading of the Althusserian mode of production framework as being ultimately deterministic, in part, accounts for the ways in which many within the post-Althusserian post-Marxian field have fled from the overdetermined analyses of capitalism and class, rendering the concepts of capitalist reproduction and class untheorized, if not essentialist, and, instead, turned to the analysis of ideology and the political as the “true” realms of overdetermination and social transformation. There is no denying that the contradictory deployments of overdetermination in Althusser’s writings and within the mode of production problematic provide an impetus for this move. At the same time, as Althusser’s later writings make clear, such a reading, which necessarily imputes determinism and reproductionism to the concept of mode of production, and overdetermination and contingency to the concept of the political, is strictly unwarranted.

2. 4. 2. Conclusion: Configuring a post-Althusserian field in relation to the Althusserian mode of production problematic

Althusser’s writings open the door to two distinct ways, two different projects, of approaching and reworking the contradiction of the mode of production problematic between the tendencies of overdetermination and determinism. A first approach regards all social processes, including the reproduction of class processes, be it

suggests that it is the dominant form for the contemporary neoliberal order to expand, maintain, and reconfigure itself. Yet, while Harvey explains the ongoing process of primitive accumulation in terms of the drive of capitalism to propagate itself, and thus remains within a narrative of capitalist totality that coheres and is self-reproducing, Althusser, in contrast, uses the very same concept to rid any reproductionist tendency from the reproduction of capitalist mode of production and to render both its emergence as well as its survival aleatory.

capitalist or else, as overdetermined. This is the approach that mode of production theorists such as Hindess and Hirst wrestled with, only to discard it later on, Wolpe posed as a possible conceptual framework to be elaborated in future research, Althusser brought into relief in his later writings, and Resnick and Wolff developed as a consistent and systematic class analytical framework.

There is, however, a second approach. This approach takes up overdetermination as a concept for understanding the constitution of political change and transformation and, implicitly or explicitly, assigns a deterministic and essentialist tendency to capitalist reproduction and class. This is the approach that prevails within the post-Althusserian post-Marxian field, especially in the works of such scholars as Laclau, Mouffe, Rancière, Žižek and Badiou. But even readers of Althusser and the Althusserian mode of production problematic such as Balibar, who share the position of this dissertation in acknowledging the irreducible contradictions and heterogeneity as well as the continuing relevance of the mode of production problematic, fail to unmoor completely the reproduction of capitalist or any other class process from a logic of necessity.

The following two chapters will focus on this second current of the post-Althusserian field: Chapters 3 and 4 will respectively elaborate the different ways in which Balibar and Laclau have developed their particular critiques of the mode of production controversy and constructed theories of the social, which, while allowing for the conceptualization of social reproduction as contingently constituted and overdetermined, at the same time, fail to dislodge the constitution of capitalist

reproduction and class from essentialist narratives. Rather, in their work, the contradiction of the mode of production problematic is restaged in a new form, albeit in different ways: The necessity of the capitalist economy versus the contingency of the political.

CHAPTER 3

THE TENSION BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND CONJUNCTURE: ÉTIENNE BALIBAR'S RETHINKING OF THE MODE OF PRODUCTION PROBLEMATIC

3. 1. Introduction

In an article entitled “Althusser’s Object,” Étienne Balibar discerns within post-Althusserian social theory a dichotomy between what he refers as the *conjunctural* and *structural* approaches. He follows the thread of this divide back to an unresolved tension in the works of Louis Althusser between his analysis of historical conjunctures and that of modes of production:

In one case, the determinism of the “meaning of history” is criticized in the name of the singularity of conjunctures, in the name of “the concrete analysis of concrete situations”: the Leninist, and even more, the Machiavellian side of Althusser’s analysis (which is dominant in “Contradiction and Overdetermination”). In the other case, critique aims above all at the idea of the simple and expressive “totality” (emphasized by Lukács and his disciples) in the name of the complexity of the structure, of its unequal development and its variations: the truly structuralist side to Althusser, invested in the analysis of “modes of production” (which “On the Materialist Dialectic” tries to formalize). There are thus Althusserians of the Conjuncture and Althusserians of the Structure (this is still true today, even if some have changed sides). (1994, 166)

It would not be wrong to claim that Balibar’s personal trajectory has not really been one that would fit neatly into either pole of this divide. Indeed, a noticeable effort informing and shaping Balibar’s theoretical pursuits, almost ever since his collaboration with Althusser in *Reading Capital*, has been to address the rift between what he marks as the “Althusserian structural analysis” and “Althusserian

conjunctural analysis” and weave them together, not so much to collapse their distinction as to re-conceptualize one through the lens of the other.

To this end, starting with his self-criticism in 1973, Balibar has persistently reclaimed and resuscitated the concept of mode of production as a *structure* and placed it in dialogue with the concept of the *conjuncture* (Balibar 1988; 1994; 1995; 1996; 1998; 2004). While, in this conceptual crossbreeding, Balibar has deployed the concept of *conjuncture* in order to explain the complexity of historical developments and concrete situations as they are constituted at the unstable yet determinate intersection of economic, cultural, and political conditions, he has used the concept of *structure* (qua mode of production) in order to relate this complex constitution to a Marxian analysis of social relations of production.

This chapter understands Balibar’s rethinking of the mode of production in light of the concept of the *conjuncture* as his attempt to “resolve” the tension of the mode of production problematic and to dissociate the conceptualization of social reproduction from the tendency of *reproductionism*. On the one hand, the “conjunctural analysis of structures” makes it possible for Balibar to theorize the provisional stability of the social field in its overdetermined existence, placing the presumed coherence of conjunctures on the edge of unexpected dislocations and transformations. On the other hand, through holding onto the concept of *mode of production qua structure*, Balibar is able to highlight the different economic and class determinations that overdetermine any conjuncture and, in so doing, remain committed to a Marxian political economic analysis of social events.

Certainly, one might claim that such an approach sets Balibar apart from other post-Marxian post-Althusserian positions. To start with, different from those who associate post-Marxism with the surpassing of Marxism, Balibar conceives of post-Marxism as a theoretical development internal to the Althusserian-Marxian tradition, an offspring of the processes in which the latter has been critically rethought and pushed against its conceptual limits through the variegated encounters and collisions with historical experience.⁴²

What inspires Balibar's nuanced understanding of the relationship between Marxism and post-Marxism as well as his persistent rethinking and development of the Althusserian mode of production analysis is his overdetermined approach to theoretical formations. It is this approach that enables Balibar to perceive theoretical formations not as some self-enclosed, rationally or historically ordained frameworks, but as changeable discourses, the unrealized possibilities of which are both materialized and multiplied as they are continuously put in relation with their internal tensions as well as with the ever changing present. Moreover, in his conjunctural analyses of social events Balibar's commitment to demonstrate the overdetermination

⁴² A lucid expression of this view is expressed in the article "The Infinite Contradiction" where Balibar describes post-Marxism not in terms of the commonly assumed "meta-Marxist" position that unequivocally announces Marxism to be "out-of-date," but rather as a theoretical formation that is not only inconceivable "without the totality of intellectual experience and issues raised by Marxism, but it deliberately plays *Marxism against itself* as much as against its adversaries" (2004, 160-161). In this context, Laclau's recent evocation of Balibar's self-criticism of his position in *Reading Capital* as evidence of a final blow to the Althusserian mode of production problematic is misplaced (2006, 22). Laclau's comment fails to do justice not only to Balibar's anti-positivist stance with respect to the process of theoretical production, but also to his continuing commitment towards the reworking of the conceptual apparatus of the mode of production analysis.

of the economic and ideological, of class and non-class distances him, at least at the level of his motivations, from other post-Althusserian post-Marxian positions that continue to treat the economic and class as a transcendent ground of necessity and to privilege the political as the ontology of contingency.⁴³

While recognizing the value of Balibar's distinguished position within the post-Althusserian post-Marxian field, this chapter nonetheless argues that Balibar's wedding of *structural* (mode of production) analysis with *conjunctural* analysis falls short of his objective to theorize the reproduction of capitalist or any other class process as truly overdetermined. Instead, his analysis continues to carry traces of capital-centricism and class essentialism, leanings that he has carried over in altered forms dating back to his first engagement with the mode of production controversy of the 1960s and 1970s. To substantiate this thesis, the chapter provides a close reading of Balibar's evolving positions, starting with his contributions to the mode of production debate in *Reading Capital*, then, moving to his self-critique of his previous position in 1973, and, from there, focusing on his more recent writings on nationalism and citizenship from a European perspective.

In this genealogical reading of Balibar's works, *first*, the chapter studies the ways in which Balibar straddled the tension of the mode of production controversy between the effort to explain the overdetermination of the reproduction and transformation of the mode of production and the concern to account for the endurance, stability and

⁴³ Jason Read (2004) also makes a similar point and underscores Balibar's distinct position within post-Marxism.

dominance of social relations of production. The chapter argues that the handling of this tension gave way to a certain contradiction in Balibar's writings, a problem that Balibar himself also recognized and tried to address in his ensuing self-criticism in 1973: While Balibar aimed to theorize the transitional conjunctures as overdetermined, his analysis was overshadowed at times by the tendency of determinism (qua reproductionism).

More specifically, Balibar's contradictory deployments of the term *structure* in *Reading Capital*—on the one hand, as a metaphor for complex relationality that vitiated the deterministic presentations of historical change, and on the other hand, as a “determinate totality” in which the law of capital accumulation provided the necessary principle for securing the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production—led in turn to Balibar's contradictory explanations of transitional conjunctures. Put succinctly, in the context of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Balibar posited the constitutive dynamics of transition to be overdetermined by the surrounding context; in the context of the transitions from capitalism, such an overdetermined exposition sat uneasily with the deterministic impulse imposed by the self-reproducing tendency of the capitalist mode of production. In Balibar's exposition, while feudalism seemed to have a constitutive outside, capitalism did not.

Second, the chapter demonstrates the ways in which Balibar, following with his self-critique and through a rethinking of the *structure* of the mode of production in conjunction with the concept of the *conjuncture*, has tried to disengage from this

reproductionist tendency and come up with a conception of the social whose provisional “determinateness” and stability remain precarious as they are always already threatened by unceasing contradictions and conflicts. Nonetheless, the chapter shows how Balibar’s rethinking of social reproduction as *conjunctural* meets its limits when it rubs against a certain capital-centric tendency and when a class essentialist position seeps into his writings.

Although to a certain extent Balibar’s framework is able to accommodate the theorization of *different modes of capitalist exploitation*, he fails to conceptualize *modes* that are *different from capitalism*. Hence, compared to his previous work in *Reading Capital*, Balibar’s recent writings shrink the conceptual space for envisaging class difference and transformations from capitalism. This is in part because Balibar retains an essentialist, although modified, understanding of *structure* (qua capitalist mode of production) as a *limitation* that sits in contradiction with Balibar’s other understanding of economic structure qua incomplete and differential determinations. The former notion of *structure* endows capitalism with a systemic power that constrains social change. Hence, not only the economy is reduced to the capitalist mode of production, but also the capitalist mode itself is reduced from its previously conceived differentiated structure to a *limiting force*. Foreclosed thereby is the theorization of the mutual and complex determinations between the “capitalist mode” and other class and non-class processes.

Furthermore, Balibar fails to dislodge the concept class struggle from a necessary (political) antagonism stemming from exploitation. More explicitly, Balibar

understands class struggle in terms of an ineradicable resistance against the “alienating” effects of exploitation. He situates it as the irrepressible source of change that not only incites the *conjunctural* shifts within the bounds of capitalist formations, but also keeps out the distant promise of communist transformations beyond capitalist mode of production.

Indeed these two shortcomings (capital-centricism and class essentialism) support and sustain each other. As Balibar continues to define class struggle in an essentialist manner, as a fundamental and necessary antagonism engendered by alienation—rather than an overdetermined struggle in relation to different economic processes of class qua surplus (Resnick and Wolff 1987)—he fails to truly theorize the *overdetermination* and *contingency* of the reproduction of capitalist mode of production as well as *difference from* capitalism(s). That is why at times Balibar’s conjunctural analyses of capitalism(s) inadvertently slips into a deterministic schema in which he establishes the dislocations of capitalism(s) in reference to the ontologically privileged interventions of class struggle. In Balibar’s work, then, we find a peculiar version of the questionable tendencies of post-Althusserian post-Marxian problematic to ascribe necessity to capitalist reproduction (*qua limit*) and contingency and overdetermination to the political (*qua class struggle*).

3. 2. Balibar's project in Reading Capital

3. 2. 1. Uncoupling the philosophy of history from historicism (evolutionism) and empiricism

Balibar's seminal contribution to the mode of production debate was his article "Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism" in *Reading Capital* (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 199-308). Like many of the other contributors of the mode of production problematic, Balibar approached Marx's concept of mode of production as a "complexly articulated social whole." What distinguished Balibar's contribution from others was his specific focus on the question of historical change and on the issue of the transition from one mode of production to another. According to Balibar, Marx's concept of mode of production offered a novel and materialist understanding of historical change, radically parting ways both with what he respectively called the "evolutionist" and "empiricist-linear" representations of history that had borne detrimental influences on the Marxian tradition. Balibar's project was to tease out and amplify the ramifications of the concept of mode of production for conceiving of a new and non-deterministic theory of historical change, one that involved theorizing from the perspective of the social relations of production. This was a project that entailed for Balibar nothing short of a reformulation of "historical materialism."

3. 2. 1. 1. Mode of production as a structure

One dominant ontological orientation to history from which Balibar was trying to dissociate a non-deterministic Marxian understanding of historical change was what Balibar referred to as the "evolutionist" perspective. It would be appropriate, however, to situate Balibar's critique of the evolutionist perspective as a particular

variant of his more general critique of historicism, since in *Reading Capital* a considerable objective of Balibar (as well as Althusser)⁴⁴ was to broach and disclose the philosophical premises of historicism in order to differentiate and separate out a unique place for the philosophy of Marx.

Balibar regarded historicism—as it was mobilized within the Marxian tradition—to be embodying both an ontology of Hegelian expressive totality and a rationalist epistemological position. To recollect the discussion in Chapter 2, Hegelian ontology presumes that the place and the function of each element of the social totality, as well as the law of motion that governs the diachronic relations between the elements, are given by some essence, a preexisting inner principle. It is this principle of necessity that not only orders and gives expression to the effect of each element of the social totality, but also directs the unfolding of the relational dynamics between elements towards a pre-established goal. In this sense, Hegelian ontology posits both an origin and a *telos*.

⁴⁴ Like Balibar, Althusser also took issue with fellow Marxists such as Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti, Jean Paul Sartre, and Antonio Gramsci for holding historicist positions. According to Althusser these scholars misconstrued Marx's critique of classical political economy as disputing the inability of classical economists to historicize their concepts. Hence, they diminished and reduced Marx's contribution to a demonstration of the transient conditions of emergence of the *very same* concepts that classical political economy wrongly eternalized, since they failed to see that such concepts were the specific theoretical products of capitalist mode of production. In contradistinction to this interpretation, Althusser maintained that not only Marx did not associate concepts necessarily with certain temporalities and historical periods, but also his contribution went beyond showing the historical specificity of concepts: Marx produced *new* concepts (such as surplus value and overdetermination) that made possible a new understanding of history.

Historicism, for Balibar, assumed a Hegelian ontology insofar as it postulated an essence that governed and imposed a necessary relation of belonging and correspondence among a particular historical period, a particular mode of production, and a particular consciousness. Historicism assumed a Hegelian ontology also because it grounded the diachronic movement and transformation of this synchronic structure on an essential cause that rationally ordered the progression from one mode of production to another towards a pre-determined end. This implicated that the emergence of a new mode of production was deducible from the dynamics of the preceding mode, an evolutionist perspective which assimilated the overdetermination of social transformation to a pre-conceived and self-producing law of motion.

At the same time, according to Balibar, historicism implied that the task of Marxian science was the production of concepts that apprehend and capture the essential relations between each specific mode of production and its corresponding form of consciousness that was embodied uniformly within the diversity of institutions, practices, and experiences of the particular epoch, including the specific sciences that were alleged to reflect the knowledge of this particular epoch. And this was the rationalist epistemology that Balibar associated with the historicist tendency.

In opposition to this tendency, Balibar, in his essay in *Reading Capital*, pursued the thesis that the key concepts which Marx used, such as *mode of production*, *fetishism*, *surplus labor*, *ground rent*, and so on, were not inevitably tied to the capitalist epoch: Marx did not arrive at these concepts exclusively through a study of the essential dynamics of

the capitalist relations of production. Nor did these concepts reveal to Marx the “true” consciousness intrinsic to such relations. In Balibar’s expression, “...Marx’s concepts are not intended to reflect, reproduce, and *mimic* history, but to produce the knowledge of it...” (225). In support of his thesis Balibar persuasively argued that Marx deployed these concepts not only in reference to capitalism but across a number of different modes of production in order to produce a new understanding of historical change viewed from the lens of changing class relations, or, in his words, of changing social relations of production.

To give one example, Balibar argued that Marx discussed *fetishism* both in the context of the capitalist mode of production as well as the Asiatic mode of production. Marx’s discussion of fetishism in the capitalist mode of production was certainly different in its historically specific determinations from his discussion of fetishism in the Asiatic mode of production. Yet, both embodied the different concretizations of the same formal concept of fetishism in that they both referred to the similar process of mystification in which the complex determinations and effects of the mode of production were reduced to and made to appear as if they were the effect of a single determination, a “single instance” that was presumed to govern the reproduction and the unity of the mode of production—e.g., capital and Asiatic despot were the respective figures/causes that were presumed to be naturally endowed by a productive power of generating the surplus labor in and of themselves (216-220).

According to Balibar, a key concept that Marx produced, which in turn enabled to bring about the new knowledge of history, was mode of production as a *structure*, a

conceptual apparatus that allowed for theorizing the complex relations between a set of “invariant elements” and their historically changing conditions of existence.⁴⁵

By varying the combination of these elements [elements of a mode of production] according to two connexions which are part of the structure of every mode of production, we can therefore reconstitute the various modes of production, i.e., we can set out the ‘presuppositions’ for the theoretical knowledge of them, which are quite simply the concepts of the conditions of their historical existence. In this way, we can even to a certain extent generate modes of production which have never existed in an *independent* form, and which do not therefore strictly speaking form part of our ‘periodization’—modes of production such as Marx called the ‘mode of commodity production’ (the reunion of individual small producers owning their own means of production and setting them to work without co-operation); or modes of production for which it is only possible to *foresee* the general conditions, such as the socialist mode of production. The final result would be *a comparative table of the forms* of different modes of production which all combine the same ‘factors’. (216)

For Balibar, this idea of mode of production as a *structure* detached Marxian analysis from a *necessary* historical scenario (e.g., of the 19th century British capitalism) and at the one and same stroke provided a language to produce a knowledge of historical difference inflected by the lens of social relations of production.⁴⁶ Perhaps we should

⁴⁵ Two “invariant elements” Balibar emphasized were the relations of property and relations of appropriation (of surplus labor) (215). They are the “two connexions” that he refers in the quote below. Following Resnick and Wolff, one might reformulate these “invariant elements” as “entry points,” that is, “particular concepts that a theory uses to enter its formulations, its particular constructions of entities and relations that comprise the social totality” (1987, 25). “Entry point” is a better term than “invariant element” since “invariant” has the overtone that the meaning of the “element” remains fixed.

⁴⁶ Balibar’s analysis diverges from others that assert that Marx constructed the concepts of class analysis exclusively through his focus on capitalism and then applied them retroactively to “pre-capitalism.” This second view neglects how Marx persistently studied, theorized, and compared with one another different economic forms (feudalism, primitive communism, simple commodity production, capitalism) before he arrived at the concept of class. For two contemporary conceptualizations of the history of Marx’s production of the concept of class that share the anti-historicist

be careful here not to read into Balibar's formalist analysis of the mode of production a refutation of *historicity*, if what we mean by the latter is the understanding that different modes of production have historically specific and historically shifting conditions of existence. This would be confusing historicism with historicity. In fact, if anything, Balibar's argument implicates that it is precisely historicism that defies and is at odds with historicity. That is, historicism, through rooting the synchronic structure and the diachronic progression of history within a pre-determined essence, demotes, if not renders inconceivable, the incentive to analyze the *different* and *historically changeable* forms of class in their overdetermined existence.

To summarize the discussion advanced thus far, according to Balibar what Marx inaugurated with the concept of mode of production conceived as a complex structure was a new understanding of history that departed from the *necessity of history*; both from the epistemological determinism which stated that certain concepts (e.g., surplus labor, fetishism, and so on) were only deducible from and consequentially only relevant to understand a particular mode of production (e.g., capitalist mode of production), and from the ontological determinism which ordered the rational progression of the modes of production towards a predetermined goal. In fact, according to Balibar it was only through such a loosening of concepts from the epistemological and ontological dimensions of historical necessity that Marx was able

spirit of Balibar's analysis, see J.K Gibson Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000), and Örselçuk and Madra (2005).

to genuinely bring back historical specificity and difference (from a social relations of production standpoint) into social analysis.⁴⁷

3. 2. 1. 2. Transition as a structure

According to Balibar, just like mode of production, transitional conjuncture also had a *structure* of its own:

The ‘transition’ from one mode of production to another can therefore never appear in our understanding as an irrational hiatus between two ‘periods’ which are subject to the functioning of a structure, i.e., which have their specified concept. The transition cannot be a moment of destructure, however brief. It is itself a movement subject to a *structure* which has to be discovered. (273; emphasis mine)

Let us flesh out the argument of this dense paragraph. To start with, we should note that the target of Balibar’s critique here is not only historicism, but also the “linear-empiricist approach” to history, a representation which according to Balibar

⁴⁷ Balibar’s turn to the “formal” analysis of mode of production as a critique of historicism can be seen as yet another manifestation of the thorny old debate between formalism (theoreticism) and historicism that time and again flares up within social theory. From within the field of Marxism two very insightful responses to this debate are articulated by Gayatri Spivak (1994) and J. K. Gibson-Graham (2005). Departing from the premise of the non-identity of the concept to itself, these theorists underline the constitutive dialectic between the meaning of the concept and its historical outside, an unceasing dialectic that destabilizes the setting up of a strict division between formalism and historicism. More importantly, rather than siding with either pole of this debate in appeals to “theoretical accuracy,” these theorists draw attention to the salience and effects of conceptual importations across different historical contexts. For instance, against the accusations of the anachronistic and a-historical use of the concept of feudal in contemporary analyses of social sites and formation—as espoused in the works of scholars like Jenny Cameron (2000), Harriet Fraad, Stephen Resnick, and Richard Wolff (1994), and Serap Kayatekin (2001)—J.K. Gibson-Graham highlight the economic and social interventions and theoretical insights rendered conceivable through detaching the concept of feudal from its traditionally conceived historical setting (mediaeval Europe or Third World) and reinserting it into new contexts (e.g., contemporary US and Australian households, post-bellum Southern US, and so on).

compartmentalized history into a series of relatively stable periods, following one after another, only to be occasionally interrupted by some unfitting periods, the lapses of the so-called transitions. In this latter conception, transition is neither related to the contradictory dynamics of the existing mode(s) of production, nor is it approached as a process that required its own specific conditions of existence. Rather, in an idealist gesture, transition is conceived of as an abnormal moment, disrupting the otherwise normal periodization and linear unfolding of history. That is why, according to Balibar, this framework is able to accommodate transition only through enlisting some newly observable empirical condition(s), introduced with no explicit and substantive connection to its constitutive outside.

To Balibar, conceiving of transition as a specific and specifiable *structure* unmoored transition from its empiricist association with a period of erratic development. The topographical metaphor of *structure* enabled the envisioning of transition as a constellation and condensation of distinct and conflicting social forces. Rather than an isolated moment engendered by the disembedded emergence of a single and new determination, accessible and observable through empiricist inquiry, transition qua structure, became conceivable as an overdetermined process constituted by its specific conditions of existence, and in need of reproduction, support, and maintenance.

Indeed, Balibar initially devoted a considerable part of his essay in *Reading Capital* to an elaboration of the significance of reproduction, a central concept for Balibar (just like for Althusser) to deconstruct and dispel not only the myth of the self-production and self-perpetuation of any mode of production, but also the idealization of the self-emergence of transitional conjunctures.

Furthermore, Balibar's approach to transition as a *structure* also enabled him to distance the Marxian understanding of historical change from the evolutionist perspective: If transition had its distinct and autonomous structure, then its dynamics could no longer be explained by way of assimilation to some pre-mediated determination inherent to the pre-existing mode which governed its dissolution or "destruction." In insinuating that the present was an inevitable development of its pre-history, such an understanding eliminated the motivation and need for an inquiry into the novel and overdetermined dynamics of transition.

In order to construct and support his thesis of transition as overdetermined, Balibar drew at length on Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation in *Capital*, as well as on *Grundrisse* and *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, where Marx wrote about the constitutive conditions of the "pre-capitalist" modes of production and about the emergence of capitalist class processes. Balibar argued that implicit to such analyses was a "genealogical" exposition through which Marx demonstrated how different historical developments that surrounded the constitution of the capitalist mode production—in particular, the emergence of "free labor" and money capital—came together contingently, and not as bearers of any historical purpose or predisposition:

[T]he elements combined by the capitalist structure have different and independent origins. It is not one and the same movement which makes free labourers and transferable wealth. On the contrary, in the examples analysed by Marx, the formation of free laborers appears mainly in the form of transformations of agrarian structures, while the constitution of wealth is the result of merchant's capital and finance capital, whose movements take place outside those structures, 'marginally', or 'in the pores of society'. (281)

Not only the “elements” of the transition from feudal to capitalist mode of production were independent and free of any pre-mediated effect and disposition, but also each “element” had an internal multiplicity, since each was constituted through a plurality of historical trajectories. A case in point for Balibar was the three different and distinct histories of the emergence of “free labor,” the separation of the direct feudal producers from all means of production as discussed by Marx in the *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. Another example was Marx’s discussion in *Capital* of the three distinct forms of the “pre-capitalist” accumulation of money-capital, which in turn conditioned different paths of transition, and which Balibar stressed “[had] no one-to-one correspondence with the three forms of the constitution of the ‘free-laborer’”:

First, the merchant becomes directly an industrial capitalist. This is true in crafts based on trade, especially crafts producing luxuries and imported by merchants, together with raw materials and labourers from foreign lands, as in Italy from Constantinople in the fifteenth century. *Second*, the merchant turns the small masters into his middlemen, or buys directly from the independent producer, leaving him nominally independent and his mode of production unchanged. *Third*, the industrialist becomes a merchant and produces directly for the wholesale market. (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III, p. 330, cf Althusser and Balibar 1970, 283)

Drawing on Marx’s work in *Capital*, Balibar thus convincingly exposed the *contingency* and the *pluralism* in the historical emergence of capitalism. However, one can reformulate and sharpen the significance of Marx’s argument in this paragraph and bring to view its fuller implications, which Balibar left rather implicit. That is, one can argue that Marx here is providing a cartography of the different class processes that co-existed during the so-called transition from feudalism to capitalism, and, in this way, complicating the uniform and unidirectional dynamics of transformation

implicitly presumed by many traditional accounts of transition that are developed after him.

In these familiar narratives of transition, the distinct and heterogeneous class processes and their various conditions of existence that overdetermine the process of transition are often homogenized and lumped together within a totalizing story that treats both feudal and capitalist social formations as if they were unified and monolithic class formations, and, from there, proceeds to represent the transition from feudalism to capitalism also in terms of a total, unified, and monolithic transformation that is brought about often as a result of a single determination.⁴⁸

Even though Balibar fell short of pursuing his exposition to its fitting conclusion, his (and Marx's) analysis is rather suggestive of a different understanding of transition, one that challenges the dichotomy between transition as a period of one-dimensional and unified change (either in its disembodied version as conjectured by empiricism, or in its pre-mediated version as presumed by historicism) and mode of production as a period of consolidated stability and permanence. In opposition to the centered and totalizing narratives of transition and the disjuncture such narratives rigidly erect between the respective ontologies of transition and mode of production, the analyses provided by Marx and Balibar imply that both periods of transition and periods of "stable" mode(s) of production are internally heterogeneous and overdetermined (i.e., they are *structures* in this sense).

⁴⁸ A notable exception is Resnick and Wolff's (1979) timely and novel analysis, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

In the period traditionally assumed to be the transition from feudalism to capitalism, just like in any historical period, capitalist class processes coexist in relations of overdetermination with non-capitalist fundamental class processes (e.g., independent) and capitalist subsumed class processes.⁴⁹ Hence, transformations to capitalist class processes are always accompanied and undermined by multivariate and reverse transitions, as identified in Marx's example of the transformation from the fundamental class process occupied by the industrial capitalist to subsumed class process occupied by the merchant capitalist.

To conclude and bring the discussion back into the orbit of this chapter's thesis, by treating transition as a *structure*, Balibar wanted to reconceptualize the constitutive dynamics of transition as overdetermined, as a complex interweaving and coming together of "*the diversity of the historical roads* by which the elements of the structure are constituted..." (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 282). Approaching transition as a *structure*, Balibar wanted to distinguish a unique Marxian account of transition from the deterministic accounts (i.e., historicist and empiricist) of historical change.

⁴⁹ Richard McIntyre, for instance, by drawing on the contradictory relationships between capitalist and non-capitalist (i.e., ancient) class processes in contemporary US, provides an analysis of social transformation as an uneven development, "as a differentially changing combination of a variety of class processes and their conditions of existence..." (1996, 249).

3. 3. Reproductionism of the structure and Balibar's self criticism

Nonetheless, Balibar's essay in *Reading Capital* betrayed a theoretical inconsistency in the treatment of *mode of production qua structure*. Balibar tried to address this contradiction in his subsequent self-criticism in 1973, "Self Criticism: Answer to Questions from 'Theoretical Practice'." Thereof he diagnosed a "curious paradox," a conflict between his analysis of the reproduction of the (capitalist) mode of production and that pertaining to transition. According to Balibar, this "persistent ambiguity," which more broadly characterized the analysis of reproduction within the mode of production controversy at large, emanated from the rival conceptualizations of reproduction.

On the one hand, reproduction brought to light the "materiality" of the social relations of production, namely, the constitutive dependence of the maintenance of the mode of production on its outside, i.e., on the myriad economic, political, and ideological conditions of existence. On the other hand, reproduction referred to the autotelic reproduction of the dominant social relations of production. If the former tendency decentered and rendered contingent the sustenance of the dominant social relations of production, the latter postulated their unmediated and self-producing identity, positing their reproduction to be automatic.

Balibar criticized his previous position for not completely severing ties with this second and deterministic approach to reproduction, and, thereby, for slipping into the concept of structure a deterministic causality and especially for ascribing to capitalist

mode of production a necessary logic that regulated social reproduction. In *Reading Capital*, Balibar had previously referred to this logic as the “law of capitalist accumulation,” drawing on his reading of Marx’s *Capital*, in particular *Vol III*. Balibar did not deny that the “law of accumulation” entailed contradictions. In fact, Balibar understood “the law capital accumulation” itself as a contradictory structure involving the articulated unity of the tendency of the falling rate of profit and its countervailing tendencies (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 283-293).⁵⁰

Nonetheless, Balibar understood these countervailing tendencies (e.g., increasing intensity of exploitation, the depreciation of existing capital, the increase in the scale of production and the creation of an external market, the depression of wages below the value of labor-power, and so on) to be ultimately internal and “immanent” to the “law of accumulation,” such that the effects of the counter tendencies are regulated and “limited” so as to guarantee the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production in *infinitum*:

it [the law] determines these effects on the basis of the limits within which they can vary, and which do not depend on this variation (the same is true of wages,

⁵⁰ The traditional Marxian account of the falling rate of profit is as follows: Capitalist enterprises within an industry, in their concerted effort to outcompete each other, distribute their surplus value into the purchase of additional productive capital (C) and productive labor (V), biased towards productive capital. They carry this out in attempts to increase the productivity of labor and thus capture super profits, hence, the largest possible share of surplus value—that is, increase realized surplus value which includes both the surplus value realized within the enterprise as well as a non-class revenue flow of super profit. The social effect of this competition, however, is the raising organic composition of capital (C/V) and a fall in the value rate of profit within the industry. Cullenberg (1998), Ruccio and Amariglio (1998), and Resnick (2001) provide both succinct summaries as well as powerful critiques of the philosophical presuppositions underlying this traditional Marxian account.

the working day, prices, and the different fractions into which surplus-value is divided); *it is these limits alone which are determined as effects of the structure, and in consequence they precede the variation instead of being its average resultant.* It is by the law of its production from a single cause that contradiction is given us here, and not in the variation of its result (the level of accumulation)... Thus the only intrinsic result of the contradiction, which is completely immanent to the economic structure, does not tend towards the supersession of the contradiction, but to the perpetuation of its contradiction. (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 289-291)

In his self-critique, Balibar acknowledged that his slipping into the concept of *(capitalist) mode of production qua structure* a tendency of reproductionism steered his analysis towards contradictory explanations of transitional conjunctures: On the one hand, in the context of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, Balibar convincingly demonstrated that social transformation was overdetermined by a myriad of social forces, including the conditions that surrounded the mode(s) of production present in that particular transitional conjuncture. On the other hand, however, in the context of the transition from capitalism, the self-reproducing tendency that Balibar ascribed to the structure of the capitalist mode of production compelled him to seek factors that were external, outside, and autonomous from the conditions of existence of capitalist mode of production in order to be able to explain social transformation.

This tendency of reproductionism also explains why in *Reading Capital* Balibar turned to class struggle as the “irreconcilable antagonism” external to the structure of the mode of production and as the outside political factor which gave the impetus for transcending the regulative limits of the “law of accumulation”:

[I]f the effects within the structure of production do not by themselves constitute any challenge to the limits...they may be *one of the conditions* (the ‘material basis’) of a *different result*, outside the structure of production: it is this other result which

Marx suggests marginally in his exposition when he shows that the movement of production produces, by the concentration of production and the growth of the proletariat, one of the conditions of the particular form which the class struggle takes in capitalist society. But the analysis of this struggle and of the political social relations which it implies is not part of the study of the structure of production. The analysis of the transformation of the limits therefore requires a theory of the different times of the economic structure and of the class struggle, and of their articulation in the social structure. To understand how they can join together in the unity of a *conjuncture* (e.g., how if other conditions are fulfilled, the crises can be the occasion for a revolutionary—transformation of the structure of production) depends on this as Althusser has shown in an earlier study ('Contradiction and Overdetermination', in *For Marx*). (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 292-293)

Since the structure of capitalist mode of production left no place for social transformation (by limiting the field of influence of social contradictions to the regulative logic of reproduction), Balibar had to locate the source for transformation beyond capitalism, elsewhere in a realm that was outside the deterministic ontology of the capitalist mode of production. He located this outside in the “class struggle,” simultaneously displacing class struggle from the constitutive exterior of the relations of production and situating it as an external agency that disrupted the internally sealed structure of production. In the same move, while (capitalist) mode of production qua economic structure was aligned with determinism qua reproductionism and furthermore with stasis, permanence, and limitation, “class struggle” was aligned with the register of the political and with dynamics, social transformation, and contingency.

In his self-critique, Balibar does not really question this dichotomization of the “economic” and “political” as corresponding to two different “times” and logics. However, as I try to demonstrate below, this unwarranted partitioning of the social between the “economic” (mode of production qua structure) and “the political” (class

struggle qua contingency) continues to haunt Balibar's scholarship. So how did Balibar amend his position in his self-criticism? Balibar tried to reckon with his reproductionism in *Reading Capital* by first pointing to the adverse effects of two deterministic philosophical currents: (1) a certain understanding of cause, which Balibar admitted that he (and Althusser) carried over from the works of Spinoza, and which treated cause as "immanent cause," as "its own cause," i.e., as a self-explanatory self-identity, and (2) a certain positivist tendency in Marx, which Balibar argued that Marx himself surreptitiously inherited from classical political economy.⁵¹ This positivist tendency manifested itself in terms of a search in economic phenomenon for a set of "natural laws," which would verify, as in the case of price equilibrium, an "automatic, 'self-regulating' mechanism...that remains within the 'natural' limits of its functioning" (1973, 66).

In his later writings Balibar persists in his argument that while Marx's encounter with classical political economy has affected an irreversible departure from the naturalistic

⁵¹ In Chapter 2, I broadly discussed the different reasons that help us understand the desire to explain and secure social stability and the ways in which such desire procured a tendency of reproductionism within the mode of production debate—among the reasons I cited was the urge to dissociate Marxism from a deterministic and an idealist notion of social transformation promulgated by the economism and historicism of the Marxian tradition, the desire to break with the empiricism of classical political economy, but also a certain level of attachment to capital-centricism and rationalism. One might say that Balibar is here supplementing this discussion by pointing to a related yet different factor that bolstered a reproductionist approach to social reproduction and stability: The representation of the economy (as it is inherited from classical political economy) as a naturalistic and organic whole that is bounded and self-reproducing. For a similar but much more detailed analysis, see Antonio Callari's (1981) perspicuous elaboration of the political project that underpins classical's vision of the economy as self-balancing and harmonious.

understanding of reproduction, it has at the same time always been susceptible to lapse into reproductionism. Hence, on the one hand, Balibar repeatedly points out in Marx's analysis of exploitation a fundamental departure from the reproductionism of the "law of value": The regulative logic that is assumed to guide the circulation and distribution of abstract social labor time in the right proportion to achieve and secure social equilibrium. For Balibar what Marx's analysis of exploitation accomplishes is a shift of focus from the presumption of a self-perpetuating system of capital to an inquiry into the "*social conditions*" that have to be there, "in fact," that have to be "recreated and transformed" in order to sustain the continuation of capitalist relations:

By definition, the notion of reproduction has an economic origin. As we know, Marx used it in the wake of Adam Smith and Quesnay's *Tableau Economique*, to formalize the constraints imposed by the law of value on the circulation of social capital. Set in the perspective of the analysis of exploitation, it certainly takes on another significance. This new significance is what we have seen earlier with regard to the social *conditions* which must be combined, always "reproduced" (that is, in fact, recreated and transformed) to perpetuate the capitalist form of the labor process, and for the possibility of using labor-power as a "commodity." (Balibar 1988, 38-39)

At the same time, however, according to Balibar, Marx's approach to reproduction carries an internal ambiguity that perpetually subjects it to the danger of economic determinism:

[W]e are on a narrow ridge from which we can always fall either on the "economic side" (reproduction as regulation, as a rule of accumulation, broadening the idea of economic balance by integrating the "wage norm" into it), or on the "sociological" side (or "micropolitical": reproduction as a set of disciplinary homologous structures, among them, "power relations" and cultural norms). (Balibar 1988, 39)

In his self-criticism, after detecting within the concepts of reproduction, transition, and *mode of production qua structure* the effects of an oscillation between two very different ontological orientations of overdetermination and determinism (qua reproductionism), Balibar tried to rectify the deterministic tendency through reemphasizing the dependence of the reproduction of the mode of production on the surrounding social conditions. This has meant for Balibar recovering the concept of “social formation” as a stand in for the specific conditions of existence for a specific mode of production:

[I]t is not the mode of production (and its development) that ‘reproduces’ the social formation and in some sense ‘engenders’ its history but quite the contrary, [it is] the history of the social formation that reproduces the mode of production on which it rests and explains its development and its transformations. (1973, 70-71)

Thus, in connecting the concept of social formation to the multiple and changing historical conditions, Balibar highlighted the constitutive outside of the mode of production. In this way, Balibar tried to dismantle the remnants of an economic vision that informed the reproduction of the (capitalist) mode of production, and thereby render social reproduction and transformation truly overdetermined. In retrospect, one can say that this was Balibar’s first serious address at the problem of the contesting ontologies of determinism (qua reproductionism) and overdetermination, which not only marked the mode of production controversy overall, as Chapter 2 has argued, but also Balibar’s work in particular, where it manifested itself in a tension between a *reproductionist analysis* of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production and an *overdetermined/conjunctural analysis* of the reproduction and transformation of mode of production.

3. 4. Balibar’s “conjunctural analysis of structures” and its shortcomings

From his self-criticism in 1973 to his more recent reflections on nationalism, racism, and citizenship in the contexts of European unification and globalization, Balibar strives to practice a *conjunctural* analysis, situating pressing social events and issues as the complex effects of specific and conflicting economic, political, and cultural conditions. In these analyses, Balibar’s commitment remains, on the one hand, to elucidate the possibilities of democratic practices that go beyond the liberal ideas of sovereignty and citizenship, and, on the other hand, to continue rethinking communism as the horizon for departures from the contemporary global capitalist system (1993; 1996; 1998; 2004). Yet, for Balibar, the overdetermined character of contemporary orders permits no easy recipes and solutions: His frequent invocation of the phrase “optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect,” borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, conveys precisely the irreducible complexities that beset the task of overcoming the various and mutually implicated social injustices of racism, nationalism, and exploitation. Still, I argue that Balibar’s emphasis on “the complex nature of events” falls short of explaining his silence on the matter of envisioning economic transformations beyond capitalist exploitation. In this context, I entertain the thesis that the difficulty to think economic class difference in Balibar’s recent works is affected, in part, by the particular ways in which Balibar continues to remain within a capital-centric narrative and to operationalize “class struggle” as an essential political antagonism.

3. 4. 1. Capitalist mode of production (qua structure) as a limit

It's proper to start by revisiting the idea of *conjuncture* more closely. As we have already seen, this concept has been key for Balibar to develop a non-economistic and non-deterministic understanding of social reproduction. As the chapter so far tried to clarify, *conjuncture* for Balibar does not name a temporal segment of history, or even refer to the dominant ideology or the intellectual and cultural climate of an era.

Rather, *conjuncture* refers to the historically singular and complex coming together of a specified set of economic, political, and cultural determinations, in the language of *Reading Capital*, “the exact balance of forces...at any given moment.”

For Balibar, *conjuncture* is *determinate*: It is a historically specific coalescence of various social determinations that define the particularity and uniqueness of the *conjuncture*. *Conjuncture* is at the same time *provisionally and contingently stable*: It “can last for a long time...but it is always unstable” (1998, 177). In other words, in so far as the social forces that constitute the *conjuncture* are reproduced and maintained by the various social institutions and conditions, the *conjuncture* lasts; yet, since each social force, in its overdetermination⁵² by other social forces, exists in a field of

⁵² We should note that Balibar's concept of overdetermination somewhat departs from others, such as theorized by Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff. For Resnick and Wolff, as the primary relational concept, overdetermination implies that each site or relationship is the combined and total effect of an *infinite* number of processes. This surplus of determinations constitutes each object in contradiction. The surplus of determination in Balibar's formulation of overdetermination, however, is not so much due to the infinite multiplicity of determinations that constitute the *conjuncture*. In fact, as we have seen, for Balibar *conjuncture* refers to a social field constituted, not by infinite but rather a “determinate” set of social forces. Rather, the source of the surplus of determination is because overdetermination marks the internal limit, the

contradiction and conflict, the conjuncture is at the same time always on the brink of unraveling and characterized by unceasing instability.⁵³

The concept of conjuncture as a non-deterministic, unstable, yet, “determinate” conception of a “complexly articulated social whole” delivers then what the mode of production problematic strived to achieve: To explain the reproduction of the social relations of production in its overdetermined existence. At the same time, the concepts of conjuncture and overdetermination allow for finally overhauling the unwarranted ontological distinction between “transition” and “mode of production” and, for that matter, between “conjuncture” and “structure,” which Balibar went a long way in *Reading Capital* to dismantle, but nonetheless fell short of bringing to its wanting conclusion due to the creeping tendency of *reproductionism*: Transitions can no longer be isolated as those “short time spans” of contingency and overdetermination within the successive order of modes of production conceived of “long time spans” of necessary stability. Transition, if it were to be retained as a useful concept at all, rather marks the “unpredictable” because overdetermined nature of conjunctures

irreducible negativity of each and every conjuncture, subjecting it to perpetual and sudden transformations.

Balibar leaves ambiguous the explanation underpinning this negativity and vaguely evokes at times the Freudian notion of the “other scene,” that is, the unconscious, which disrupts the transparency and self-evidence of the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of the conjuncture and makes it impossible to conceive of an intelligible whole out of its many social forces (1995; 2002). And yet, as we will see, at other times this negativity is discussed in connection to the “irreducible nature of class antagonism.”

⁵³ It is more appropriate to envision conjuncture in terms of an assemblage, a constellation of social forces rather than a whole or totality. The latter smacks too much of cohesion and harmony among the various determinations of the conjuncture.

(1996, 115-116). In a similar vein, “[i]t is no longer a question of viewing the conjuncture as a short moment in the life of the structure or a transition between the successive stages of the structure, because the reality of the structure is nothing but the unpredictable succession of the conjunctures” (1996, 115).

Even while putting forth the concept of conjuncture (and overdetermination) in order to undo the ontological opposition between conjuncture and structure, however, Balibar still retains the idea of *the mode of production qua structure*. Why does Balibar persist in investing in this concept? The chapter’s thesis is that Balibar continues to deploy *mode of production (qua structure)* as a venue to introduce and conceptualize the different economic constituents that overdetermine every conjuncture—e.g., process of capital accumulation, process of capitalist commodification, division of labor between manual and mental labor, and so on. Ridden from the tendency of reproductionism, mode of production qua structure is finally freed from its association with “...a hierarchical schema for constructing sets or totalities” and instead refers to a complex field of “differential identities,” each of which, because overdetermined by other economic and social forces, fails to form a self-identity (1996, 161).

However, Balibar’s reconstruction of mode of production qua structure still runs into problems. While Balibar’s reappropriation of this concept strays in important ways from the schema of reproductionism, it simultaneously puts in place a truncated notion of economic (class) difference, especially when compared to the conceptualization of economic (class) difference marshaled within the mode of production debate: The differential structure of the economy that Balibar reclaims

involves only a limited number of the constitutive components of the capitalist mode of production (i.e., capital accumulation, capitalist commodification, capitalist division of labor).

More importantly, while the idea of reproductionism is cut loose, along with the synchronic and the diachronic determinism (the *telos*) that it implies, the origin/essence of this determinism (i.e., capital accumulation) that once secured reproduction is still kept. It is kept, however, in a modified form such that it now serves as an abstract boundary, the *limit* within which the effects of all other social determinations are shaped, governed, and constrained. Balibar often names this *limiting* force as the capitalist market economy and/or capitalist exploitation. Thus, for instance, Balibar subsumes what he calls the different “modes of (capitalist) exploitation,” “from the most ‘archaic’ (including unpaid child labour as in Moroccan or Turkish carpet factories) to the most ‘up-to-date’ (including job ‘restructuring’ in the latest computerized industries), the most violent (including agricultural serfdom in Brazilian sugar plantations), or the most civilized (including collective bargaining, profit sharing, state unionization,” under the rubric of a monolithic and global capitalist market economy (1998, 177).⁵⁴

This theoretical gesture detracts from Balibar’s previous position in *Reading Capital*, which enabled the theorization of the difference among different modes of production

⁵⁴ In these recent conceptions of the capitalist economy as the *limit* within which various economic modes and exploitative structures function, the influence of the world systems perspective of Immanuel Wallerstein is visible. Wallerstein has indeed been a close collaborator of Balibar in his recent works (1998, 2004).

in terms of the different forms of appropriation of surplus labor, and thus, allowed for envisioning non-exploitative and non-capitalist class relations. In contradistinction, the structure of the economy that Balibar more recently mobilizes, despite his claims otherwise, not only is much more flattened (i.e., reduced from an articulated structure of relations of production, property, distribution, circulation, and so on, to the elements of accumulation, commodification, and division of labor); not only renders invisible the different forms of class (qua appropriation of surplus labor); but also, functioning as a constraint, remains outside the play of overdetermination. In other words, rather than shaping and being shaped by political and cultural processes, *capitalist structure qua limit* acts as a break on the constitutive effects of other processes. It governs and contains the reach and effects of the overdetermination of the social field. Hence, capitalism operates as a power-centric concept.

3. 4. 2. Class struggle as a fundamental political antagonism

It is in the context of *capitalist structure qua limit* that the concept of class struggle within Balibar's framework attains an important function. It refers to the fundamental political antagonism that can explain the shifts and transformations from one capitalist conjuncture to another. Let us study more closely how Balibar uses the concept class struggle:

[I]t is fairly clear that the identity of Marxism depends entirely on the definition, import and validity of its analysis of class and class struggle. Without this analysis, there is no Marxism—neither as a specific theorization of the social, nor as the articulation of political 'strategy' and history. Conversely, *something* of Marxism can be considered inescapable as long as class struggle remains a principle of intelligibility of social transformation—that is, if not as the sole 'fundamental determination' or 'motor' of historical movement, at least as a universal.

irreconcilable antagonism from which no politics can abstract itself. (1998, 156; underlined emphasis mine)

According to Balibar, it is meaningless to pursue a Marxian analysis without at the same time retaining some notion of class and class struggle—although Balibar cautions that such a notion needs to be detached from the essentialist ways in which it has been mobilized within economic and historicist narratives. Balibar then redefines class struggle as an “irreconcilable antagonism” that shapes and casts its effects on other social antagonisms. So, what exactly is the content of this “irreconcilable antagonism”? And why is class antagonism “irreconcilable”?

[T]he root of antagonism, first of all, is the fact that exploitation is something *unbearable* for individuals and, above all, for collectivities. This would mean that, although capitalism actually succeeds in imposing the forms of “real subsumption” upon the labor force—that is, transforming labor power into a commodity—there is an actual limit to this process. In the last analysis, the form of human labor (both individual and collective) remains *irreducible* to the conditions of a commodity, which is exactly what we must understand under the name of the “unbearable.” (1996, 117)

Balibar thus connects the irreducible and inevitable character of class antagonism to the “unbearable” effects of exploitation: Exploitation is unbearable because it pushes to extreme the commodification of labor.⁵⁵ According to Balibar, redefining class struggle in this minimal way as the concept of an escapable negativity and as the

⁵⁵ Attending Balibar’s other writings on this very subject (1998, 160-168), we can discern that by commodification of labor Balibar in fact lumps together two very distinct developments: (1) The transformation of non-commodified forms of laboring into the commodity labor power that can be bought and sold in the market. (2) The transformation of the non-commodity conditions of existence of the reproduction of labor power into commodity forms (for instance, while before the reproduction of the labor power of the husband and children could in part have depended on woman’s surplus labor, appropriated in the form of household use-values, now such reproduction might depend on commodity use-values purchased from the market).

source of the irreducible resistance to exploitation—which, in turn, no longer clearly designates different forms of surplus extraction and appropriation but is rather redefined in relation to an increasing tendency of the commodification of labor and its conditions—accomplishes to sever this concept from pre-given interests and pre-determined actions. Class struggle refers to a “*process of transformation without pre-established end*, in other words, an endless transformation of the identity of social classes” (1998, 168). And yet, class struggle thus conceived poses a series of problems:

First, while class struggle no longer evolves towards a pre-established historical destination, it is at the same time denied a well-defined and precise meaning that would allow for distinguishing it from other forms of social antagonisms. Second, it becomes hard to justify without falling into theoretical humanism the reasons for the “unbearable” nature of capitalist labor and its conditions of existence.⁵⁶ Within the Marxian tradition, a particular current, which focuses on Marx’s early works, discusses the “unbearable” experience of direct producers in capitalism in reference to their “alienation.” This current generally starts with the assumption of a subject with a pre-given nature and attributes (e.g., subject of labor) that push her to strive towards fulfilling a set of pre-determined needs and goals (for instance, realization of a certain

⁵⁶ For meticulous discussions of theoretical humanism that build on Althusser’s critique of humanism, see Resnick and Wolff (1987), Ruccio and Amarglio (2003), and Madra (2007). Madra defines theoretical humanism as a problematic that arrives at the harmonious unity of the social from the assumption of a centered, rational, and self-conscious subject “who possesses or who can eventually possess the full knowledge of his “true” interests (ends) and who has the capability to employ the necessary means to realize these ends” (2007, 31-32). In other words, humanism places the subject as the cause and origin of all social developments that evolve towards the goal of realizing and reconciling the pre-given and “true” interests (and/or an abstract “human potential”) of human beings.

“human potential” or creativity through either individual or collective laboring). Following from the premise of humanism, this discourse essentially grounds the injustices of exploitation and the antagonism to it on the alienation of the subject from her “true” nature, needs, and goals in capitalist formations. Various attributes of capitalist formations—such as markets and the generalization of commodity production (separation of direct producers from their means of consumption), private property (separation of direct producers from their means of production), mechanization and development of division of labor—are discussed as so many forms in which capital comes in between and against the direct producers and dominates them as an alien force of their own creation, sapping their potential and estranging them from their true goals and needs.

It is important to note that discourse on alienation shifts the critique of capitalism from one that highlights the economic injustice of capitalist exploitation to another that emphasizes the political injustice of the unequal power relations between the direct producers and the alien force of capital that subjects them. More precisely, there is a shift of focus from the injustice of capitalist exploitation to one centered on capitalist domination.⁵⁷ Indeed, Balibar’s revised understanding of exploitation seems to accord with this power concept of exploitation as it relocates the injustice of exploitation with respect to the ways in which capitalism *subjects* increasing number of populations to wage labor, commodity means of subsistence as well as a labor process

⁵⁷ I owe this insight to John Roche (2005).

and division of labor which deprives workers of their intellectual and technical knowledge.

In this sense Balibar's account begs the question of how his exposition differs from the humanist problematic of alienation. Indeed, Balibar poses the very same question to himself and more broadly to the post-Althusserian social theory. Although the quote is long, it is worth reproducing here to convey Balibar's dilemma in reclaiming a notion of class struggle which is unceasing and yet which does not fall into the pitfalls of the humanist problematic of alienation:

[I]t would seem impossible to define negativity apart from alienation—the alienation of an empirical subject or the alienation of the metaphysical subject that emerges in universal history. It seems to me that, although he probably never found the best philosophical formulations for it, at least in his published writings, Althusser progressively realized that the concept of negativity (better said: *a certain* concept of negativity) cannot be spared. Without such a concept, there is no real possibility of formulating structural antagonism as something irreconcilable, rooted in the experience of the unbearable and taking the forms of a “radical” resistance. Therefore, the horizon of Althusser's project is a question that, admittedly, is especially difficult (and I have no solution for it): the question of whether it is possible and (philosophically consistent) to think of a *negativity without a subject*, in the sense of a *constituent* subject (whether pictured in psychological, transcendental, or historical terms). I would even dare say: a negativity or *an alienation without a subject*. I am thinking of the “alienated” proletariat but also of other social forces that in the history of capitalism become caught in the movement of generalized valorization, which at the same time becomes the condition for their existence and makes life impossible for them so that they must “find” a way out. Possible, it is this kind of problem that emerges at the end, without a clear answer, in Althusser's political and philosophical reflection. (1996, 118-119)

The above paragraph demonstrates a difficulty Balibar encounters to account for the incessant nature of class antagonism unless the latter is rooted in some “unbearable” experience of a subject that is stirred up to resistance as her underlying nature is

violated in the encounter with exploitation.⁵⁸ I venture to say that insofar as Balibar implicitly retains an understanding of capitalist structure qua *limit*, as a structural constraint on social change and impervious to the overdetermined effects of other social processes, he is compelled to seek in “class antagonism” an equally powerful and irrepressible force that would regenerate and reproduce resistance against the different “modes of capitalist exploitation.” Put differently, as Balibar leaves the ontology of the (capitalist) reproduction and transformation void through flattening the capitalist mode of production qua structure to a *limit*, and hence, closing it off to overdetermination, he surreptitiously calls back, however tangentially, a centered subject that could serve as the agent of change under the so-called constraint of “different modes of capitalisms.”

3. 5. Conclusion

We thus witness two different ontological orientations and explanations of social change within Balibar’s framework that coexist in tension. On the one hand, the concept of *conjuncture* posits a post-foundational understanding of the social, the complex and precarious constitution of which lacks a final closure due to the negativity of overdetermination. On the other hand, the concept of *structure* retains an

⁵⁸ This does not suggest that the discourse on alienation is necessarily circumscribed within a humanist problematic. John Roche (2005), for instance, argues that it is possible to “make claims about what is normatively appropriate for human beings without grounding these claims in a human essence” (336). Nonetheless, Roche’s discussion does not provide an answer to Balibar’s question of whether such a conception can hold the unceasing nature of class antagonism. While Roche detaches the subject of essence (or rather *as* essence) from the discourse of alienation, he does not question the historicist idea that alienation, and hence, class antagonism will disappear with the disappearance of capitalism.

essentialist understanding of the capitalist economy as a *limit*, whose hold over the social is only to be disrupted by the fundamental negativity of “class struggle.”

This chapter tried to trace the genealogy of this tension between the concepts of the *conjuncture* and *structure* from Balibar’s work in *Reading Capital* to his more recent writings. The chapter argued that while Balibar has developed a particular critique of the mode of production controversy and through the concept of *conjuncture* aimed at developing an understanding of social reproduction as contingently constituted and overdetermined, he has at the same time failed to dislodge reproduction of capitalism and class from the purview of essentialist narratives.

It is true that Balibar, through his sophisticated critique of historicism in *Reading Capital* and reproductionism in his subsequent writings, has tried to detach Marxian social theory from a deterministic logic of social reproduction and transformation. Nonetheless, while Balibar has discarded “the law of capital accumulation” as a necessary principle of structure and *telos*, he has ultimately retained it as a structuring *limit*, an abstract force that staves off the incursion of overdetermination from outside. It domineers over social change at the same time that it dominates over workers. Against the backdrop of this power-centered notion of capitalism, Balibar has kept “class struggle” as an equally powerful force, which motivates social transformation within and beyond capitalism(s), the source of which resides in the “unbearable experience of exploitation.”

In Balibar’s work, then, the contradiction of the mode of production problematic between the ontology of determinism and overdetermination is displaced and restaged

in a modified form in the tension between the concepts of the *structure qua limit* and *conjuncture*. At the same time, the ontological dichotomization between the necessity of economy and contingency of the political that the dissertation argues to prevail within the post-Althusserian field finds its peculiar version in Balibar's work in the figures of the capitalist economy as a *limit* and "class struggle" as the motor of social transformation.

CHAPTER 4

FROM MODE OF PRODUCTION TO POLITICS OF HEGEMONIC ARTICULATION: BREAKS AND CONTINUITIES IN THE WORKS OF ERNESTO LACLAU⁵⁹

I haven't rejected Marxism...it was a question of a rather more subtle process of continuity and discontinuity than is evoked by the idea of simple 'rejection'...For me it was clear right from the start that the articulation between 'mode of production' and political and ideological 'levels' could not be seen in terms of the endogenous logic of the mode of production. As you can see, it was the very act of rigorously limiting certain categories to their Marxist content which enabled me to move towards a theory of articulation and thus of social totalities; and it became increasingly clear that this theory was post-Marxist. All these distinctions were not that clear in my mind in the early 1970s, of course. But since then the development of my thought would seem to me to be more a maturation of certain original intuitions than a break with previous work. (Laclau 1990, 201-203)

4. 1. Introduction

In the epigraph, excerpted from an interview organized for the book volume *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, Ernesto Laclau responds to a question that alludes to his “rejection of the Marxist framework.” Laclau answers by disputing the very terms of the question. In particular, he objects to the overtone of the question that he rejected Marxism and instead stresses the subtle relation of “continuity and discontinuity” with his previous position in 1970s when he partook in the mode of production debate. In providing an account of this process of continuity and

⁵⁹ While his collaboration with Chantal Mouffe has been formative for Ernesto Laclau in his “break” with the Althusserian mode of production controversy and in the initial formulations of the theory of hegemony, the critique of the mode of production problematic as well as the theory of hegemony are more explicitly theorized by him. Therefore, the analysis of the trajectory of Laclau is the real focus of this chapter.

discontinuity Laclau relates the development of his post-foundational political theory of hegemony, and in particular his resuscitation of the concept of articulation, to the “rigor” with which he “limited” “certain categories to their Marxist content.”

That theoretical development is uneven and overdetermined, the complex involvement of which cannot be assessed in the simplistic terms of a wholesale affirmation or rejection of a tradition is something that the dissertation concurs with Laclau. This chapter fundamentally disagrees, however, with Laclau’s particular reading of his uneven relation to the Althusserian mode of production problematic as this analysis fixes Marxian categories with rigid meanings in an appeal to theoretical “rigor.” What the chapter finds especially troubling is the way in which Laclau’s reading represents Marxian concepts to be circumscribed by an invariable determinism that disallows theoretical reconstitution, leading to the conclusion that Marxism is a theory that needs to be superseded. This certainly leaves Laclau’s elaborate opposition to the allegations of his “rejection” of Marxism somewhat of a suspect. Indeed, contrary to what his self-history tells us, the chapter delineates in Laclau’s work a constant resistance to, if not a rejection of, Marxian political economics.

More concisely, the chapter builds the following thesis. Laclau’s initial search for a way to theorize the overdetermined reproduction of class relations while eschewing the *reproductionism* of the mode of production problematic is followed by his rejection of Marxian political economy categories (e.g., class, abstract labor, value, labor power as commodity, and so on). Hence, his release of the overdetermined logic of social

reproduction from the discursive closures governed by economic determinism (and class reductionism) has brought about the disappearance of Marxian political economy in his works. This is because Laclau has persistently resisted a non-essentialist reconstruction of Marxian categories and conceived them to inherently entail economic determinism. Laclau's analyses of capitalism and anti-capitalism suffer from this essentialist orientation. Laclau predominantly represents capitalism as a structural and dislocatory force and leaves under-theorized its contingency and complexity. Thus he forecloses the possibility to envision economic transformation both within and beyond capitalist class processes.

The chapter substantiates this thesis by reading closely Laclau's theoretical formulations, spanning the period from his participation, along with Chantal Mouffe, in the Althusserian mode of production debate to his more recent configurations of a post-Marxian political theory approach. In this reading, the chapter registers the conceptual displacements that brought unwarranted closures on the categories of Marxian political economy, and especially on class.

The chapter locates in these displacements and closures the traces of the "unthought" of the political theory of hegemonic articulation, that is, the ways in which a non-essentialist economic conceptualization of class is persistently foreclosed⁶⁰ and

⁶⁰ I prefer the term foreclosure than say omit, since it better captures the overdetermined relationship between what a text explicitly states and what it leaves un-reconstructed. From the lens of foreclosure, the "unthought" of the text is not simply an innocent or a careless omission that could be easily added without perturbing the meaning of the text. Rather it can be conceived of as a blindspot or an

rendered irreconcilable with the post-foundational ontology of hegemony. Alongside this essentialist closure brought on class, the chapter argues that the ontology of the economy is also gradually flattened, mutating from a differentiated structure in Laclau's early works—in which, for instance, relations of exchange was clearly differentiated from the mode of production, a key point in Laclau's (1977) challenge to the totalizing world system approach of André Gunder Frank (1969) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974)—to a reified and uniform moment subordinated to the self-unfolding logic of capitalist accumulation and commodification in his latter works. Finally, the chapter emphasizes that Laclau's theoretical fixing of class and capitalism stands in apparent tension with a contrary aspiration that informs his writings. At times Laclau aspires to “reabsorb” and “redefine” class struggle such that it coheres with the anti-essentialist logic of hegemony and to present “the links between the different moments and components of economic processes” to be “themselves the results of hegemonic articulations” (2006, 1, 25). A reductive reading of Laclau's works would gloss over such textual reversals and ambiguities and in an analogous manner that mimics the failure of Laclau's reading to discriminate carefully among the different tendencies of the Althusserian-Marxian tradition, it would reiterate, this time from a Marxian angle, the fundamental incompatibility of class analysis with the anti-essentialist social ontology. Chapter 1 has already distinguished the position of this dissertation from such a view, which nonetheless informs the spirit of many of the realist critiques of post-Marxism.

inarticulate tension that is partly signified by what the text explicitly argues, and in its turn, that will resignify the arguments produced by the text once it is articulated.

In opposition to this prevalent mode of critique, this chapter aims to restore to Laclau's texts their constitutive contradictions and probes into the conditions of existence for such textual symptoms. This is not carried out simply for the sake of establishing the irreducibly contradictory nature of any position, including Laclau's, or to illuminate the historical situatedness of such contradictions. Rather, the objective of this particular reading is to point to the missed opportunities for class transformation when class and capitalism are theorized as essentialist entities rather than as overdetermined by the complex and combined effects of their constitutive outside, thereby, shaped by various economic, political, and cultural processes. The discussion of these implications is the object of Chapter 5.

4. 2. Mode of production debate and the problem of “class articulation”

In a seminal article that highlights the significance of a Gramscian perspective for developing a non-reductionist Marxian political theory, Chantal Mouffe posits the fundamental challenge facing such an endeavor in the following terms:

The central problem of contemporary marxism lies in the elaboration of a non-reductionist theory of ideology and of politics which will account for the determination in the last instance by the economic...[h]ow are the principles of overdetermination and of determination in the last instance by the economic combined? Let us first take overdetermination.

The social agent possesses several principles of ideological determination, not just one: he is hailed (interpellated) as the member of either sex, of a family, of a social class, of a nation, of a race or as an aesthetic onlooker etc., and he lives these different subjectivities in which he is constituted in a relation of mutual implication. The problem consists in determining the *objective* relation between these subjective principles or ideological elements. In a reductionist perspective, each of these has a necessary class-belonging. But if, on the contrary, we accept the principle of overdetermination, we must conclude that there can exist no

necessary relation between them, and that it is consequently impossible to attribute a necessary class-belonging to them. However, it is here that the second principle—the determination in the last instance by the economic—intervenes. To stress determination in the last instance by the economic is equivalent to saying determination in the last instance by the social classes inasmuch as we define classes as constituting antagonistic poles in the dominant relations of production. This brings us, therefore, to the following assertion: if the ideological elements referred to do not *express* social classes, but if nevertheless classes do in the last instance, determine ideology, then we must thereby conclude that this determination can only be the result of the establishing of an articulating principle of these ideological elements, one which must result in actually conferring upon them a class character. (1979, 171-172; underlined emphasis mine)

Despite its significant length it is worth reproducing this passage since it captures the quintessence of the tension that the concept *articulation* embodies between the two main objectives of the mode of production problematic⁶¹: To assert the overdetermination of social reproduction (or of subjectivity) and at the same time to account for the reproduction and stability of class dominance (or the unity of subjectivity around class subjectivity).

On the one hand, the constitution of social totality and subjectivity are envisaged as *overdetermined* in which the relations among the different levels of the economic, political, and ideological and among different subject positions are conceived to be irreducible to the dictates of a necessary logic derivable from relations of production. On the other hand, the unity and reproduction of social totality and subjectivity is deemed unimaginable without the reinstatement of a necessary logic that stabilizes and unifies the relationships among different social levels and subject positions, a last

⁶¹ Chapter 2 elaborated at length the diverse motivations of the mode of production problematic that are condensed in the meaning of “complex articulation.”

instance economic determinism that would center the reproduction of social totality and subjectivity on relations of class.

Mouffe evokes “articulating principle” as the relational concept that would impart the needed unity and consistency to the social and subjectivity. The principle of articulation is what would cohere the contingent and complex relations among the non-class subject positions and ideological elements through bringing such relations into the orbit of class relations. The first thing to note is that this “articulating principle” entails no necessary and positive predicates, no concrete ideological content apart from the fact that somewhat it has to be the exclusive expression of a “fundamental class” hegemony:

The unifying principle of an ideological system is constituted by the hegemonic principle which serves to articulate all the other ideological elements. It is always the expression of a fundamental class. (194)

What does it mean that a hegemonic order expresses the interest of a fundamental class when interest lacks any positive content and rather refers to an empty node that necessarily unifies all ideological interpellations? Mouffe offers no theoretically tenable answer to this question. The hegemony of the fundamental class seems to be secured through a rather tautological reasoning: Fundamental class is circularly defined as the hegemonic class and vice versa. What needs to be emphasized is that a spontaneous relation is thus established between the (fundamental) class and command of hegemony. Referring to the articulating locus of social unity, class is implicitly cast to be the necessary logic which, emanating from the economic level (i.e., relations of production), secures social reproduction.

In his polemical exchange with Poulantzas (1973) on the class character and dynamics of the rise of European fascism, Laclau similarly partitions the ontology of social totality into the respective realms of the contingent and the necessary. According to Laclau, the inconsistency in the arguments of Poulantzas stems from his theoretical insistence to attach a class character to all ideological elements, all the while applauding the need to critique class reductionism (1977, 109). For Laclau, Poulantzas fails to come up with the necessary concepts to deliver the autonomy of the non-class ideological elements from the determinism of class contradiction and class struggle. Laclau tries to mitigate the remnant of class reductionism in Poulantzas by providing a social topography grounded in the distinction between mode of production and social formation.⁶² This distinction, Laclau alleges, carves out a theoretical field for the independent and contingent operations of non-class ideological processes while still recognizing the necessity of class articulation:

If class contradiction is the dominant contradiction at the abstract level of the mode of production, the people/power bloc contradiction is dominant at the level of the social formation. We must ask ourselves, then, what is the relation between these two contradictions, and as part of the same problem, what is the relation between class interpellation (=ideology) and popular-democratic interpellation (=ideology)...if not every contradiction can be reduced to a class contradiction, every contradiction is overdetermined by class struggle. According to basic Marxist theory, the level of production relations always maintains the role of determination in the last instance in any social formation. This in itself establishes the priority of the class struggle over the popular-democratic struggle since the latter takes place only at the ideological and political level (the 'people' do not, obviously, exist at the level of production relations.) This priority is revealed in the fact that popular-democratic ideologies never present themselves separated from, but articulated with, class ideological discourses. (108)

⁶² As we have already seen in Chapter 3, Balibar also pursued a similar theoretical strategy in his self-critique.

Thus, much like Mouffe, Laclau also divides the social totality into the respective realms of necessary class relations of mode of production and contingent non-class relations of social formation. In doing so, he aligns class struggle and class contradiction with an *abstract determinism* of the economic. On the other hand, he associates the constitution of non-class ideological elements with *concrete* and *contingent* social forces that belongs to the political and ideological levels of the social formation. However, this ontological bifurcation of the social totality into the respective realms of the necessary and the contingent, mapped onto the divide between the *economic* and the *political* and *ideological* levels, and the concomitant ascription of the function of articulation to the class positions within production relations, do not really solve but rather reproduces the problem of class reductionism that Laclau initially criticizes Poulantzas for.⁶³

To summarize the argument pursued thus far, both Laclau and Mouffe tried to resolve the problem of the reproduction of class dominance in an overdetermined social totality by way of endowing the “fundamental classes” with the necessary function of articulation and unification. This implied that dominant classes were

⁶³ George DeMartino (1992) discusses the three ways in which the contingency-necessity dualism is posed and “resolved”—rather unsatisfactorily—in modern social theory. They are respectively the “contingent context resolution” in which the sphere of influence of contingency is contained to specific contexts that are not generalizable: “the temporal bifurcation resolution” in which the logic of contingency and necessity are argued to apply to two separate temporalities; and “the synchronic bifurcation resolution” in which social ontology is treated as if it is comprised of two sub-ontologies of contingent factors and structural determinations that necessarily ground them. Sticking to DeMartino’s terminological schema, the “resolution” offered here by Laclau and Mouffe to the dualism of necessity and contingency seems to fall under the third category of separating the social ontology in two sub-structures: The necessity of the mode of production and the contingency of the social formation.

naturally predisposed to be hegemonic: Not only must they have had some necessary set of class interest attached to them, but also they needed to be capable of subsuming the non-class interests and ideologies to their own class interest in order to fulfill the necessary function of commanding hegemony. As a panacea to class reductionism, however, Laclau and Mouffe refrained from attaching any pre-given and positively defined interest to “fundamental classes.” So instead they ended up defining class interest in an abstract and tautological manner, in terms of an inherent disposition to self-reproduce and preserve social unity, i.e., as the propensity for establishing hegemony. As a consequence, the necessary class belonging of ideological elements was rejected only to be replaced with the necessary function of articulation performed by a “fundamental class.” For the purpose of this dissertation what needs to be emphasized is that class came to stand for this determinist logic.

4. 3. Essentialisms in the works of Laclau (and Mouffe): Continuities in the “break” with the mode of production problematic

4. 3. 1. Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Reconstructing the concepts of articulation and hegemony

The dualistic approach to ontology—bifurcating the social into the separate spheres of necessity (mode of production and class) and contingency (social formation and non-class) and then bridging this split by the determinism of “fundamental class” articulation—eventually became untenable for developing a truly post-foundational theory of the social. In this context, one can regard the book *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy* as Laclau and Mouffe’s attempt to revise their previous work and reconstruct

the main concepts of the mode of production problematic in a way that reconciles with an ontology of social reproduction that is finally unburdened by economic determinism.

While *articulation* is still key in *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy* as a concept that refers to the partial institution and fixing of the impossible fullness of the social, its association with a necessary logic of social reproduction is radically questioned and dropped. Instead, *articulation* is resignified as a discursive practice of establishing relations among heterogeneous social demands such that in this process a particular demand assumes the position of a “nodal point” (or an “empty signifier”) in relation to which other demands are redefined and form a partial unity. Simultaneously, this process unsettles the meaning of the particular demand qua “nodal point” and redefines and universalizes it through expanding the representative potential of its claim. In this sense, the dynamics of articulation play a key role for the constitution of what Laclau and Mouffe calls *hegemonic politics*—the generation and reproduction of a certain order.

Nonetheless, all hegemonic formations are only temporarily enduring, partially fixed, and always affected by an unceasing instability. The partial character of this fixation and its constant instability proceed from the *overdetermined* ontology which discards the idea of a final ground that arrests and grounds the play of discursive substitutions among the chain of signifiers (1985, 111-113). As already mentioned in Chapter 1, Laclau and Mouffe name this overdetermined and “negative” ontology as *the political*, differentiating it from the concrete and partially stable constellations of *hegemonic politics*.

No longer limited to a regional domain within the Althusserian topography of social totality next to the economic and the ideological, *the political* rather becomes the missing ground, “the negative foundation” that makes possible the “contingent foundations” of the social and the “plurality of hegemonic moves that seek to ground society without ever being entirely be able to do so” (Marchart 2007, 7). With the designation of *the political* as the name of the post-foundational ontology, the “radical” character of hegemonic articulation is redefined as well such that it is no longer associated with class-based and/or other (non-status quo, anti-capitalist, and so on) concrete demands, but rather with the overdetermined, hence, the incomplete and contingent constitution of the social.⁶⁴

At this point, we need to highlight that Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of hegemony significantly differs from other post-foundational conceptions of hegemony or social order (such as the *conjuncture*) also developed within the post-Althusserian social theory (Balibar 1994; 1996; Hall 1988; Miklitsch 1995; Swanson 2002; 2005). While to an extent Laclau and Mouffe’s conception elucidates the political (e.g., processes of power, formation and execution of authority and subjection), cultural (e.g., processes of meaning production, dissemination, and identification), and ethical dimensions of hegemonic constellations, the specific effects of these aspects on the constitution of hegemony are analyzed at a highly general and disaggregated form.

⁶⁴ Chapter 1 discussed at a greater length the two distinct ways in which post-Marxism aligns radical politics with contingency and situated the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe within the “negative” approach to radical politics.

For instance, while Laclau and Mouffe use articulation in reference to the practices of constructing relations between discrete social demands around certain universals, the specification of such relationships generally remains undertheorized and vague. As a result of the practice of articulation, one among various social demands gains political legibility, gathers the rest of the demands around itself, and becomes the representative for them. What is swept under the rug in this depiction of the constitution of hegemony is an explicit account of how these particular demands relate to, support or undermine each other. It is as if the expressive capacity of the universal demand to represent other demands is taken for granted, rendering obsolete the necessary analysis of the various conditions of existence of hegemonic formations.

In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe's articulation resembles Althusser's (1977) notion of *condensation* borrowed from Freud. As explained in Chapter 2, Althusser deployed condensation as a political logic (and another name for overdetermination) in order to describe those conjunctures in which the various contradictions in the social formation are fused to bring about social change or revolutionary transformation. In a similar vein to Althusser's deployment of condensation, Laclau and Mouffe use articulation as a cultural and political practice through which the meanings of discrete social demands are temporarily fixed and merged around a particular demand that assumes the role of a universal. However, the specific linkages through which the condensation of different political demands, antagonisms, and so on takes place beg elaboration. In itself condensation does not reveal much about how these different struggles might promote or contradict each other in the process of their coming together. Furthermore, since the conditions of existence of these struggles and

demands are not made part of the inquiry, the constitution of hegemonic formations is somewhat left as an enigma.⁶⁵

More important for the argument of this chapter is that the economic dimension is thoroughly missing in the constitution of hegemonic formations. In fact, the absence of any formidable analysis to present economic and class processes to be overdetermined by, as much as overdetermining, the constitution of hegemonic orders continue to provoke critical responses from scholars broadly working within the field of post-foundational theory (Barrett 1994; Hall 1988; Swanson 2002; _i_ek 1999; 2000). Hence, it would be worthwhile to probe into the reasons of this uneven development in which Laclau and Mouffe miss a reconstruction of the concepts of *class* and *the economy* that is analogous to their reconfiguration of the concepts of *articulation* and *hegemonic politics*.

4. 3. 2. Laclau’s essentializing reading of Marxian political economy

Jonathan Diskin and Blair Sandler aptly diagnose that the asymmetry in Laclau and Mouffe’s framework—between the subtle reconstruction of political concepts and the failure to treat basic Marxian economic concepts in a similar manner—reveals a *conflation of logics with conceptual objects* (1993, 30). According to Diskin and Sandler, by necessarily ascribing determinism to Marxian political economy categories, Laclau

⁶⁵ Differing from Laclau’s exposition of the formation of hegemony, Jacinda Swanson theorizes hegemonic formations as “messy, complicated, contradictory webs of social relations and practices” contingently constituted at the intersection of “concrete multiple and contradictory conditions of existence” which are economic, cultural and political (2005, 107).

and Mouffe have rendered them as essentialist things in themselves.⁶⁶ In particular, Diskin and Sandler demonstrate persuasively how Laclau and Mouffe reject the conception of “labor power as commodity” because they mistakenly and necessarily assign to the Marxian concept of “commodity” an economic determinism that subjects workers to the “logic of capital” without any need for the support of a constitutive exterior, thus rendering the productive consumption of the commodity labor power automatic. In their critique, Diskin and Sandler rectify this essentialist understanding of “commodity” wrongly attributed to Marx by way of illuminating the various political, economic, cultural, and natural conditions of existence that make the extraction of labor from the commodity labor power only contingently possible.

Similar essentialist treatments of other Marxian political economy categories populate Laclau’s work. This chapter demonstrates how class is yet another Marxian concept

⁶⁶ In this manner, Laclau and Mouffe reproduce the very essentialism they try to dissipate. For instance, they explicitly refute an approach which establishes necessary relations among concepts. This comes out most forcefully in their critique of Hindess and Hirst’s “logical deconstruction” of the Althusserian problematic. In particular, Laclau and Mouffe argue that since the critique of “determinism” produced by Hindess and Hirst continued to impute necessary logics to concepts, at the end Hindess and Hirst were forced to reject all conceptual apparatuses as deterministic:

For, a logical deconstruction can only be implemented if the disconnected ‘elements’ are conceptually specified ad fixed; that is, if a full and unequivocal identity is attributed to them. The only path that is then left open is a logical pulverization of the social, coupled with a theoretically agnostic descriptivism of the ‘concrete situations’. (1985, 104)

Despite this criticism of Hindess and Hirst, Laclau and Mouffe end up engaging in precisely the same pulverization in the context of the Marxian theory of the social, through fixing the Marxian categories “with a full and unequivocal identity” of a determinist logic.

that Laclau imbues with economic determinism. So is abstract labor, which Laclau rejects because he argues it serves as the *a priori* essence of the value of commodities in Marxian theory (Laclau 2005). In yet another closely argued point, Laclau regards the labor theory of value as a rationally built social theory that closes itself around its internal categories that are logically and deterministically deducible from one another as if they were parts of a jigsaw puzzle. So much so that, according to Laclau when the logical inconsistencies of this rationalist construct are “revealed” by a series of critiques that demonstrate the logical failure in the transformation of labor values into prices of production—as carried out by Böhm-Bawerk, Bortkiewicz, Joan Robinson, Piero Sraffa and Ian Steedman—labor theory of value is proved to be defunct (Laclau 2006, 12).

Certainly, Laclau is not alone or unjustified to critique Marxian labor theory of value for essentializing labor and production at the expense of other possible factors that may also contribute to the formation of value. In these familiar criticisms, however, more often than not the critique is mistakenly displaced from its true object, i.e., determinist forms of Marxian value theory, to Marxian value categories themselves. Yet, there are different ways to oppose the determinist tendency of Marxian value theory. One approach, which a genuine commitment to anti-essentialist social theory would opt for, is to reconstruct a Marxian value theory using overdetermination. Indeed a growing literature on *socially contingent labor theory* does just that without jettisoning the concept of abstract-labor. Rather than casting the category of abstract labor as the objective and ultimate determinant of commodity values, this literature takes abstract-labor as the suturing point in the overdetermination of values by

market demand and capitalist competition (Wolff *et al* 1982; Biewener 1998; Kristjanson-Gural 2003).

The conflation of economic determinism with conceptual categories diverts Laclau from embarking on a similar reconstructive critique. The next two sections survey how such conflation leads to contradictions in Laclau's post-foundational approach as he holds onto essentialist notions of class and capitalism. Before proceeding to the next section, however, I want to open a parenthesis and highlight an epistemological tendency that informs Laclau's method of critique in a more general sense, including his particular critique of the Marxian tradition that renders Marxian categories incompatible with the post-foundational logic of the social. To elaborate, let us turn to one of the clearest formulations by early Laclau of what he understands from the practice of theoretical critique and knowledge production in general:

To show the inadequacy between the system of axioms which defines the ambit of a theory and the assertions relating the objects arising within this theory itself is, at the same time, to demonstrate the internal contradictions of the theory...in so far as the object of knowledge is produced by theoretical practice itself, the methods of verification are part of the theoretical system itself. A theory is only false to the extent that it is internally inconsistent, i.e., if in the process of construction of its concepts it has entered into contradiction with its postulates.

Hence, *theoretical* problems, to the extent that they are truly theoretical cannot, strictly speaking, be *solved*: they can only be *superseded*, which is not the same thing...if the problem really is theoretical this means that it cannot be resolved within the system of postulates of the theory, that is to say, *that it has no solution*. This suggests that a theory has reached the limit of its possible development and that, consequently, it enters into contradiction with itself. From this point on, the only way forward is deny the system of axioms on which the theory is based: that is, to move from one theoretical system to another. But as the problem generating this theoretical crises has emerged and exists only within the theoretical horizon of the previous system it cannot, in this case either, be said to have been solved: it has simply been superseded, it has dissolved as a problem with the emergence of a new theoretical system. From the theoretical system to the theoretical problems

and from them to a new theoretical system: that is the course of the process of knowledge. (1977, 59-61)

At a first glance, Laclau's approach to theoretical critique appears similar to the premise of "symptomatic critique" in that he acknowledges the contradictory nature of theory and regards such contradictions as emblematic of the internal limits of theoretical vision. Despite this surface level similarity, however, Laclau's understanding of "internal critique" diverges from "symptomatic critique" in some significant ways. According to Laclau, the generation of contradictions and the degree of their successful accommodation is respectively a sign of the "logical" weakness and strength of a theory's development. Laclau concedes that as the theory builds its analyses of social phenomena, i.e., as it moves from its abstract initial postulates to the elaboration of concrete determinations, contradictions might eventually emerge. However, he regards these contradictions to signal the "logical failure" of theory in need to be "superseded."

This epistemological position regards theory (e.g., Marxian political economics) much as a machine-like system, a totality whose internal coherence is held together by a singular and unchanging logic (e.g., determinism) between its internal categories. Inside a theory, you can rationally slide from one concept (e.g., values) to another (e.g., prices of production) simply following the causal chain that links concepts as if they were deducible from another. Once the internal contradictions between the concepts put this singular logic into doubt, however, not only the logic but the theory

as well as the categories are declared to be deficient, and thus abandoned.⁶⁷ I would like to argue that despite Laclau's avowed post-foundational approach to epistemology, his fascination with the logicist and rationalist tradition of theoretical critique as exemplified in the above quoted passage and in the epigraph has partly lead him to declare the contradictions of Althusserian Marxism in general and of Marxian political economy in particular to be "logically" insurmountable and from there to justify his theoretical passage to "post-Marxism."

4. 3. 2. 1. The antinomies of class: Full identity or a floating signifier?

One can find Laclau's most recent engagement with the concepts of class and class struggle in his response to Slavoj Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality:*

Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (2000). After disapproving of those scholars who in their analyses habitually invoke class in addition to other identities, Laclau continues:

What the speaker does not realize is that what she has enounced is something which is radically incompatible with the Marxist theory of classes. The Marxist notion of 'class' cannot be incorporated into an enumerative chain of identities ['of race, gender, ethnicity, etc., *and* class'], simply because it is supposed to be the articulating core around which *all* identity is constituted. What do 'classes' mean when this articulating function is lost, and they become part of a chain embracing a plurality of identities? Differences of wealth? Professional categories? Group belonging in terms of differential geographical areas? It is indeterminate. The term 'class', by becoming part of an enumerative chain, has lost its articulating

⁶⁷ At this point, perhaps the reader can detect the radical difference between the epistemological position of Laclau and those of others in the post-Althusserian field such as Balibar, Resnick and Wolff, and J.K. Gibson-Graham who assume an overdeterminist approach to theoretical formations, considering them as historically changeable and irreducible contradictory. Furthermore, the overdeterminist approach also recognizes the partial and partisan position of the theorist/critic. In contradistinction Laclau's schema implicitly positions the theorist/critic in a meta-position from which she reads the contradictions of any theory as "logical problems" to be rationally smoothed out or supplanted.

role without acquiring any new precise meaning. We are dealing with something approaching the status of a ‘floating signifier’. (2000, 297)

Laclau’s critique of a predominant trend in social analyses—enumerating social identities as if such categories and the relations among them were self-evident—is well placed. However, the implication of his statements moves beyond this valuable critique: It is as if class, now that it is demoted from its privileged status as the “articulating core” of social identity, is forever expunged from the realm of signification. It remains inherently incapable of being theoretically reconstituted. Why should class as a category defy the resignification to which other signifiers are subjected? One reason, in light of our previous analysis, is the inability to imagine class other than an economic determinist logic, which in turn is derivable from the concept of class. Reading further in the same text, we come across another possible explanation. According to Laclau, “late capitalism” not only spawns ever newer non-class subject positions, it also dissolves and renders politically irrelevant “the last remnants” of unified class identities, such as those of industrial workers, the peasants, and the miners. This tendency is made clear in the following assertion:

There are still remainders of *full class identities* in our world— a mining enclave, some backward peasant areas—but the main line of development works in the opposite direction. (2000, 301; emphasis mine)

In this quote, on the one hand, we spot Laclau in the position of restaging the essentialist problematic of class when he entertains the impossible scenario for class to actually ever exist as a “full” and self-constituted identity. On the other hand, we find him falling into empiricism when he reads off the contemporary irrelevance of such an economically determinist logic from the disappearance of “actually existing”

groups that once embodied class. First, the reduction of class into a determinist logic, and second, the deduction of the irrelevance of that logic from the disappearance of an empirical reality is gravely at odds with the post-foundational epistemology that underpins the political theory of hegemony and rejects the essentialist understanding of knowledge as already inhering in concepts or in empirical facts.

Conceivable only as a fully formed and transparent identity—either as an economic determinist logic of articulation or a disappearing social group—class, *to a large extent*, is made theoretically and politically irrelevant in Laclau’s analyses, since in the forms it takes class cannot sit easily with the overdetermined logic of the social which renders all categories contingent and incomplete. I want to emphasize the qualifier *to a large extent* because in the very same text another conception of class momentarily surfaces and destabilizes the essentialist remnants of class. While class is predominantly cast as a retreating category, this other notion opens up a space for a non-essentialist conception of class. At this point I want to recollect the discussion of “symptomatic reading” at the beginning of the dissertation and treat this alternative concept of class as a manifestation of the unwarranted closure on class as an essentialist category, thereby, as providing an occasion not only to question once more the asymmetry in Laclau’s treatment of *class* and *articulation*, but also to rethink class in an anti-essentialist way.

In this particular rendition, class is defined as an empty subject position that gets animated through its interaction with the non-class discourses. In referring to perhaps one of his most quoted passages Laclau lays out this conception of class:

In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, I have argued that class antagonism is not inherent to capitalist relations of production, but that it takes place between those relations and the identity of the worker outside them...The capitalists extract surplus-value from workers, but both capital and labour should be conceived of, as far as the logic of capitalism is concerned, not as actual people but as economic categories. So if we are going to maintain that class antagonism is inherent to the relations of production, we would have to prove that from the abstract categories 'capital' and 'wage labour' we can logically derive the antagonism between both—and such a demonstration is impossible. It does not logically follow from the fact that the surplus-value is extracted from the worker that the latter will resist such extraction. So if there is going to be antagonism, its source cannot be internal to the capitalist relations of production, but has to be sought in something that the worker is outside those relations, something which is threatened by them: the fact that below a certain level of wages the worker cannot live a decent life, and so on. Now, unless we are confronted with a situation of extreme exploitation, the worker's attitude *vis-à-vis* capitalism will depend entirely on how his or her *identity* is constituted—as socialists knew a long time ago, when they were confronted by reformist tendencies in the trade-union movement. There is nothing in the worker's demands which is *intrinsically* anti-capitalist. (2000, 202-203)

The text is suspended in self-conflict. On the one hand, class refers to the respective subject positions within relations of production defined in relation to the extraction of surplus value. There is no explicit hint that class is deployed as the name of an essentialist logic. In fact, Laclau clearly argues against deducing a deterministic understanding of class antagonism from class positions. On the other hand, while class is accorded some space of effectivity (as a possible condition of existence for the maintenance or the disruption of other identities), the content of such effectivity is left obscure as class is deprived of any positive definition. What are the dynamics of class which might threaten or provide conditions of existence for other identities? We do not know. The delinking of the meaning of class from a deterministic logic appears to come at the expense of class losing its *specificity* as a category. This leaves the reader with a question: While other discourses constituted elsewhere (such as social demands articulated around 'a just standard of living') are argued to trigger class antagonism,

insofar as class is an empty place holder, we are not presented with a clear sense as to why Laclau continues labelling such antagonisms with the *adjective* of class. Why not simply call them antagonisms around standard of living and give up on the qualifier of class: Laclau leaves the question moot.⁶⁸

The deployment of class as an empty category disrupts the essentialist uses of class in Laclau's political theory of hegemony. However, with class lacking any content, the emergent potential to imagine an anti-essentialist concept of class is vulnerable to its displacement by the dominant forms class takes. It is not surprising then that the quote ends by reintroducing class as a determinist logic, the intensity of which varies, and accordingly determines the effectivity of class antagonism: Up to a certain threshold of exploitation, class remains an empty identity filled by other discourses; beyond that, the worker automatically assumes the class subjectivity that the exploited position allegedly imposes upon her. To conclude, while at moments class strays away from the hold of an essentialist imaginary, lacking theorization, it once again fails to act as a viable economic concept and a distinct object of economic struggle.

⁶⁸ The discourse of exploitation itself can be that constitutive "outside" of the class relations that would incite "class antagonism." The discourse of exploitation, in bringing into existence an economic injustice in which the direct producers are left bereft of the surplus labor/value that they have produced, provides a cultural condition of existence which lies in the constitutive exterior of the capitalist relations of production and which might in turn trigger the resistance of direct producers against such relations. However, Laclau fails to theorize the theory of exploitation as a condition of existence for "class antagonism" since he has given up on the Marxian economic concept of exploitation. David Konstan makes a similar point when he argues that Laclau elides exploitation by collapsing it to oppression in general (1991, 118).

4. 3. 2. 2. Contradictory conceptions of capitalism

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe appropriate Michel Aglietta's analysis of post-WWII transition from an extensive to an intensive regime of capitalist accumulation and depict the trajectory of "late capitalism" in the following manner:

This penetration of capitalist relations of production, initiated at the beginning of the century and stepped up from the 1940s on, was to transform society into a vast market in which new 'needs' were ceaselessly created, and in which more and more of the products of human labour were turned into commodities. This 'commodification' of social life destroyed previous social relations, replacing them with commodity relations through which the logic of capitalist accumulation penetrated into increasingly numerous spheres. Today it is not only as a seller of labor-power that the individual is subordinated to capital, but also through his or her incorporation into a multitude of other social relations: culture, free time, illness, education, sex and even death. There is practically no domain of individual or collective life which escapes capitalist relations. (1985, 160-161)

While the category of class is rendered mute, the category of capitalism occupies a central stage in the framework of Laclau and Mouffe: Capitalism functions as a homogenizing motor of dislocation, spawning ever newer sites of social struggle. In particular, capitalism acts as the source which has engendered the plurality of new social identities and struggles in the current conjuncture. In the absence of a well-defined meaning of class, capitalism ceases to refer to *one* type of class process among others, and instead, is reified as the self-enclosed and all engrossing logic of accumulation and commodification. In J.K. Gibson-Graham's words, "[c]apitalism is rendered as the "subject" of history, an agent that makes history but is not correspondingly made" (1996b, 38) and is treated as if it is immune to the contradictory effects of its constitutive exterior.

It is important to note the regression in Laclau and Mouffe's account of capitalism when it is compared to Laclau's position within the mode of production debate, most clearly expressed in his polemical exchanges with the world systems theorists André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. In these exchanges, Laclau insisted on the theoretical importance of delimiting the concept of (capitalist) mode of production to the sphere of production and distinguishing it from the concept of an "economic system" which he defined as the articulation of the different modes of production. According to Laclau, this distinction was key to be able to differentiate among different modes of production and especially to determine capitalism's specificity.

In fact, Laclau argued that the theoretical shortcoming of world systems theorists emanated from equating the capitalist mode of production to an "economic system," specifically to international market relations. This made it impossible for world system theorists to distinguish capitalism and its contradictions from other modes and their contradictions: Rather than constituted by "a rich and complex totality of theoretical determinations," deprived of its specificity, "world capitalist economic system" is reduced to a "vacant and homogenous totality created by eliminating differences instead of articulating them" (Laclau 1977, 44-45).

For Laclau then, divorcing capitalism from market relations enabled the theorization of the economic space as an internally differentiated and complexly articulated totality comprised of different modes and their conditions of existence:

For his [Frank's] notion of capitalism is so wide that, given the level of abstraction on which he moves, he cannot define any contradictions that are specific to it. If Cortes, Pizarro, Clive and Cecil Rhodes are all one and the same, there is no way

of tracing the nature and origins of economic dependence in relation of production. If, on the other hand, we cease to regard capitalism as a *Deus ex Machina* whose omnipresence frees us from all explanatory problems, and try instead to trace the origins of dependence in concrete modes to production, the first step we must take is to renounce all talk of a single unique contradiction. (1977, 36)

Almost a decade after the mode of production debate, in his analysis of the emergence of the new social movements, Laclau appears to lapse into the very same position for which he critiqued the world systems theorists. Capitalism becomes that precise “*Deus ex Machina* whose omnipresence frees us,” this time, from the trouble of theorizing the complex and contingent constitution of capitalist reproduction and the relation between class and non-class processes.

Still, one also runs into a somewhat different understanding of capitalism which occasionally surfaces in Laclau’s writings. One such example is culled from the pages of *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* where Laclau intervenes into the debate on the relationship between capitalism and racism in South Africa. Challenging the neo-Marxist arguments that think of racism solely in functionalist terms, as the superstructure that regulates the rate of exploitation, Laclau counter argues:

if racism is a functional requirement of the form of capitalist accumulation existing in South Africa, does this not mean that racism is a condition of existence of such accumulation? In that case—and given that the fluctuations in racist politics are determined by a number of processes (struggles and divisions in the dominant elite, international pressure etc.) which are not directly linked to the endogenous logic of capital accumulation—does this not mean that the economy has a constitutive ‘outside’ and that the abstract logic of capital, far from dictating the laws of movement in every area of social development, is itself contingent, since it depends on processes and transformations which escape its control? (1990, 23)

Unlike the passage taken from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* here Laclau casts capitalism, or rather the logic of accumulation, as an economic entity contingently

constituted by its conditions of existence (although in a manner that self-contradicts himself since he continues to use the adjective “endogenous” in conjunction with capital accumulation, thus insinuating, while at the same time denying, that there is a cause self-given in capital accumulation). Nonetheless, left under-theorized in class-analytic terms, it is hard to define what capitalism is, and how it differs from other class formations beyond the vague notion that capitalism is a self-given dislocatory force, yet constituted by its outside: A contradiction in terms?

The discussion in these last two sections has emphasized the contradictions that underpin the conceptions of class and capitalism in Laclau’s works. The notion of class appears in a two-fold composition—either as an essentialist or an empty category—that stands in contradiction not only with each other, but also with the anti-essentialist ontology and epistemology of the politics of hegemony. The constitutive ground of capitalism, on the other hand, oscillates between an essentialist and anti-essentialist ontology. Building on Diskin and Sandler’s critique of Laclau and Mouffe, such contradictions could be conceived as “symptomatic” of the “unthought” of Laclau’s work: His conflation of the categories of Marxian political economics with a deterministic logic.

4. 4. Conclusion

This chapter has supplemented and expanded on the original critique offered by Diskin and Sandler. It has situated the theoretical conditions of the asymmetry in Laclau’s (and to an extent Mouffe’s) treatment of political concepts and Marxian political economy categories in relation to his uneven “resolution” of the main tension

of the mode of production problematic. By developing the concepts of *hegemonic articulation* and *the political* Laclau has offered a thorough critique of the reproductionist tendency of this problematic and constructed a theory of the social, which allows for conceiving social reproduction to be both partially stable and hegemonic and yet overdetermined.

However, Laclau's wrestling of the contingency of the social and the autonomy of the political from determinism ("the endogenous logic of the mode of production") has come at the expense of subordinating the constitution of class processes to a deterministic logic. In particular, Laclau has not advanced from his original and essentializing conceptualization of class as the "articulating core" of social reproduction and subjectivity. In this way, the ontological duality of the mode of production problematic (overdetermination vs. class reproductionism) is restaged in Laclau's works in a new form: The contingency of the political (or better put, contingency *as* the political) and the necessity of class and capitalism.

Laclau's theoretical investment to expose the essentialist strain within Marxism has been valuable to the extent that it was imperative to critique the politically stifling implications of Marxian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, over time, the emphasis on the class essentialist moments of Marxism has produced a perverse effect; identifying class as nothing but an essence has precluded the possibility to glean a totally different reading of class from within the Marxian tradition as well as from Marx's own writings. By refusing to explore the irreducible heterogeneity and clashing tendencies

of the Marxian political economy tradition, Laclau's reading has perpetuated, in the mode of a critique, the very essentialism it sought to discredit.

Finally, the particular critique of Laclau this chapter has developed departs not only from Laclau's self-account of his uneven relation to the Althusserian Marxism, but also from the predominant form of criticism addressed at Laclau which refuses to engage with the contradictions and internal tensions of the theory of hegemony, an attitude that often leads to the wholesale rejection of Laclau's post-Marxism (Boron 2000; Geras 1987; Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Veltmeyer 2000, Zizek 1999; 2000; 2006a). My critique identifies not so much a fundamental incompatibility between Marxian political economy and Laclau's post-Marxism, but rather some blind-spots and tensions in Laclau's work that, if pushed in certain ways, might allow for a space to introduce Marxian political economy categories.

Certainly, this does not simply suggest the insertion of class into the constitution of hegemonic formations as another political identity to be shuffled with other identities. On the contrary, Marxian economic categories such as abstract-labor, class, exploitation, capitalist reproduction and the economic framework that makes use of these concepts need to be distanced from political logics of identification and reconstructed as economic categories from an anti-essentialist perspective. The post-Althusserian position inaugurated by Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff (1987) develops such a Marxian class analytical perspective using the key concepts of *class qua surplus*, *condition of existence*, and *overdetermination*. The discussion of this framework is the object of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

MARXISM WITHOUT ESSENTIALIST CLOSURES: THE OVERDETERMINIST CLASS ANALYTICS OF STEVE RESNICK, RICHARD WOLFF, AND AESA

5. 1. Introduction

The preceding Chapters 3 and 4 presented two different “resolutions” of the central tension of the Althusserian mode of production problematic that Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau developed in critical reflection of their previous works.⁶⁹ The objective was to illustrate that although they significantly differ in the ways they read the Marxian tradition and Marx, these two approaches nonetheless display a shared tendency that characterizes the post-Althusserian post-Marxian field in a more general manner: What follows from these undertakings to rescue the contingent ground of the social from the reproductionism of the Althusserian tradition is the not so much recognized or admitted persistence to under or un-theorize class and the economy. Left un-theorized, these concepts are prone to the reoccupation of a number of essentialist closures that bear their contradictory effects as they collide with the anti-essentialist terrain of the post-Althusserian post-Marxian social theory.

⁶⁹ This dissertation has situated this tension within the effort of the mode of production debate to explain in a simultaneous fashion the *overdetermination* and the spatial and temporal *stability* and *reproduction* of the social relations of production. This tension was handled through the reinstatement of a deterministic tendency qua *reproductionism* when explaining the dynamics of social reproduction and transformation.

Moreover, despite what their explicit intentions would suggest, the dissertation finds the approaches of Étienne Balibar and Ernesto Laclau complicit in upholding a prevailing tendency in post-Althusserian social theory. In the post-Althusserian field, those who seek to explain social transformation—whether they remain at the level of acknowledging the ontology of contingency as the fundamental condition for social transformation (i.e., negative approach to the political) or whether they refrain from expanding uncritically the scope of the political in reference to contingency alone and instead, insist on a “thicker” and more substantial specification of ontological conditions for radical change (i.e., positive approach to the political)—*turn to* the political writings of Althusser as they *turn away* from the political economy (i.e., mode of production) analysis based on Althusser’s novel reading of *Capital*.

In fact, for some theorists like Laclau, this seems to be the only strategy if one is to preserve and expand on those insights of Althusser that aid to formulate a post-foundational ontology and dispense with the reproductionism of the mode of production problematic. The dissertation is motivated by a different argument. It proposes that the maintenance of the conceptual asymmetry in the treatments of the political and the economic follows, at least in part, from the ways in which post-Marxian positions have “settled accounts” with the reproductionism of the mode of production problematic in a manner that paradoxically let essentialisms survive in their approach to economy (capitalism) and class.

There is, however, a decidedly different way to critically engage with the Althusserian mode of production framework that institutes the play of overdetermination at the

heart of the constitution of economy, including capitalist and other class (qua surplus) processes. This is a path Althusser himself took in his later writings, a thesis that Chapter 2 has pursued. For quite some time it has also been in the works of theoretical elaboration in the context of the research agenda that has been inaugurated and developed by Steve Resnick and Richard Wolff and by an affiliated network of scholars and students coalesced around the *Association for Economic and Social Analysis (AESAs)* and the journal of *Rethinking Marxism*.

Without discounting the plurality of motivations, methodologies, and theoretical inspirations that inform the different veins of this research institution, one can highlight a shared premise: The explicit acknowledgement of overdetermination as the constitutive ontology of all social processes, not only political and cultural, but also economic, and the adoption of a particular understanding of class—the economic processes of the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor—as the “entry point” to explore the complex linkages between class and its specific conditions of existence in the constitution of particular social phenomena. Involving an overdeterminist perspective of class, this framework is able to think both *economic difference* from capitalism and the *contingency* of social reproduction, including the contingent constitution of the capitalist economy.

This chapter demonstrates the salience of the concepts of *overdetermination*, *class process qua surplus*, and *condition of existence* for building an analysis that can conceptualize the contingent reproduction of the social from a class perspective and envision the transformations from capitalist to non-capitalist class processes without lapsing into

reproductionism. In this demonstration, the chapter at once establishes the ways in which the overdeterminist class analytics undo the particular essentialist sutures which pertain to the Marxian categories within the field of post-Althusserian post-Marxism, especially as exemplified in the positions of Hindess and Hirst, Balibar and Laclau.

5. 2. Overdetermination in theory and of theory

The original contribution of Resnick and Wolff to the mode of production controversy is their article “The Theory of Transitional Conjunctures and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism in Western Europe” (1979). Here, drawing on the theorizations of Althusser and Hindess and Hirst, Resnick and Wolf elaborate and expand on the distinction of a particular Marxian epistemology and social theory from the dominant modes of essentialisms within the Marxian tradition, i.e., rationalism and empiricism in epistemology and economism and humanism in social theory.

As they situate their analysis of transitional conjunctures within the terrain of the Althusserian problematic, it also becomes possible for Resnick and Wolff to concurrently distinguish it from the deterministic Marxian narratives of “monolithic transition” that not only approach social formations as undifferentiated class structures, but also generally privilege a single and essential cause (or a composite of essential causes) as the determinant of transition. That is, most traditional Marxian analyses of European transition from feudalism to capitalism reduce the complex and numerous forces that constitute and reproduce social formations to a defining condition or relation (e.g., reproduction of feudalism is defined by the lack of

generalized markets, or by the necessary correspondence between feudal relations of production and feudal forces of production). Starting with this premise, they then reduce transition to a simple contradiction between this essential attribute and one particular social condition (e.g., generalization of commodity production or intensification of struggles over feudal rents occasioned by the lagging productive forces).

The overdeterminist class theory of transition developed by Resnick and Wolff is quite different from these analyses. Starting with an alternative premise that each social formation is a complexly articulated totality of a number of class and non-class processes, Resnick and Wolff conceptualize the transition from feudalism to capitalism as the overdetermined effect of the diverse and protracted struggles over and among the feudal and non-feudal class processes (e.g., the fundamental class processes of “petty mode of production” or “ancient” class processes in towns and country side as well as the subsumed class processes occupied by merchants).⁷⁰ These struggles are in turn overdetermined by, as they overdetermine, their constitutive outside, i.e., the struggles over the various cultural, political and economic conditions of existence of such class processes.

As the dissertation has previously noted, in his contribution to the mode of production controversy Wolpe pointed to the possibility of theorizing a contradictory social

⁷⁰ Resnick and Wolff have interpreted Marx’s discussion of the distribution of surplus labor towards securing the conditions of reproduction of the *fundamental class processes* in terms of *subsumed classes*. *Fundamental class processes*, in turn, refer to the producing and appropriating of surplus labor.

totality that followed from the concept of overdetermination and that allowed for conceiving of the articulation of the different modes of production without ascribing a necessity to any (dominant) mode to serve a regulative and reproductive function (1980a, 37). Resnick and Wolff's analysis of transitional conjunctures lies precisely in the direction of the research agenda that Wolpe suggested the mode of production controversy could have developed. By forefronting the concept of overdetermination in their analysis, Resnick and Wolff detach the reproduction of economic and social totality from any remainder of a systemic and self-regulating law. Moreover, they infuse the meaning of overdetermination with contradiction by redefining overdetermination as an ontology in which each process fails to fully constitute itself because of the constitutive push and pull of all the other processes.

Despite its significance, Resnick and Wolff's article does not appear in the surveys of the Althusserian mode of production problematic that are better known in the literature (Talad and Wolpe 1976; Foster-Carter 1978; Wolpe 1980a). While the timing of the article certainly played a role in this absence, other specific circumstances which surrounded the production and dissemination of Resnick and Wolff's work might have also constrained it to remain relatively unacknowledged at the time. At the end of the 1970s, when Resnick and Wolff's first collective publication appeared, the intellectual stimulation and enthusiasm that followed the translation of the works of Louis Althusser into English and expressed itself in the mode of production problematic—more formally institutionalized around the British journals *Economy and Society* and the short-lived *Theoretical Practice*—was already fading.

Certainly, this loss of intellectual energy was partly an effect of the philosophical stalemate which the contenders of the problematic confronted as they tried to steer clear from the essentialist tendencies of the mode of production debate while holding onto a complex analysis of social formations involving a relations of production perspective. One would also think that the debate must have suffered from the detrimental effects of the social transformations happening at the time. A constellation of economic, cultural, and political reconfigurations, which has shaped and culminated in what we today refer to and analyze as neoliberalism, found (and still finds) one of its cultural conditions of existence in the demotion of, if not an outright attack on, Marxian and more generally left thinking.⁷¹ At the same time one can speculate that the geographical context of Resnick and Wolff's writings, North America, might have acted as an obstacle in the communication and circulation of their work across the Atlantic. Furthermore, they were producing theory within the discipline of economics whereas the backgrounds of the contenders of the mode of production problematic were predominantly in disciplines like economic anthropology, history, sociology, political theory, and philosophy.

⁷¹ This rudimentary account is obviously not doing justice to the complexities of the conjuncture. At the very least it elides the question of why certain components of Marxian and left thinking fared better than others under "the same" unfavorable social conditions. For instance, why did the mode of production tradition lose its prominence while another current focusing on the inner contradictions of capital accumulation strengthened its hold within Western Marxism? Some preliminary answers exist in the literature. For instance, while Norton (2001) demonstrates the appealing theoretical simplicity of this second current to those Marxists who make careers out of betting on the end of capitalism, the incipient research initiative on neoliberalism by Madra and Adaman (2008) is suggestive of a more insidious alliance between the philosophical assumptions of neoliberalism and the accumulation essentialism within the Marxian tradition.

Another plausible factor that explains the silence around Resnick and Wolff's work is the way in which a certain closure was already brought upon the reading of the tensions and contradictions of the Althusserian problematic, especially in the shape that it took within the self-reflexive criticisms of the British Marxists Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst. As the two authoritative figures and rigorous theorists of the mode of production problematic Hindess and Hirst, after subjecting the concepts of "structural causality" and "determination in the last instance" to a serious critique, gradually dismantled the Althusserian problematic to finally declare it to be epistemologically and ontologically a dead end (Hirst 1976; 1979; Hindess 1977; Hindess and Hirst 1977; Cutler *et al.* 1977; Hirst and Wooley 1982).

By presenting the social formation as a contingently constituted totality, comprised of a set of relations of production together with their economic, political and cultural conditions of existence, Hindess and Hirst indeed came very close to an understanding of "a complexly articulated social totality" detached from any governing principle of social reproduction. This might explain the reason why their ultimate denouncement of the Althusserian problematic, in an unexpected denial of what their analysis was actually capable of conceptualizing, had a significant impact on the course of the subsequent reception of Althusserianism and has become a signpost in the lineage of criticisms which have targeted the Althusserian framework in the name of its unflinching rationalism and determinism.

Perhaps, this is also why in their turn to Althusser, Resnick and Wolff felt compelled to first "settle accounts" with Hindess and Hirst, whose influence on their work they

openly acknowledge, in order to open a space for a different reading which, rather than closing the Althusserian problematic around its essentialist moments, teases out and renders visible other moments that establish the significance of the concept of overdetermination for epistemology, social theory, and particularly for Marxian economics. In this respect, revisiting Resnick and Wolff's critique of Hindess and Hirst would shed light not only on the theoretical trajectory of Resnick and Wolff, but also on the constitutive conditions of a different reading of the Althusserian mode of production that destabilizes the essentialist closures post-Marxism brings on class and the (capitalist) economy.

According to Resnick and Wolff, Hindess and Hirst's rejection of Althusserian project (and, in fact, the Marxian discourse as a whole) follows from their "rejection of epistemology" as such once they assert it as an inherently essentialist and dogmatic enterprise in itself:

For them [Hindess and Hirst], *all* forms of epistemology must involve a conceptual dichotomization—a gap—between thinking and a reality conceived to be independent of thought. In their definition, any epistemological standpoint must then posit a necessary relationship to bridge, via correspondence, the so-conceived gap... No Marxian or non-Marxian discourse can offer any "epistemological solution" to their posed epistemological dilemma of the distinction/correlation couple since epistemology as such is defined (and thus in their view forevermore dogmatized) as starting with such a couple. For Hindess and Hirst the only acceptable "solution" is the rejection of epistemology per se. This is perhaps their key discovered truth. (1987, 102-103)

In other words, according to Resnick and Wolff, Hindess and Hirst conflate epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with how knowledges are produced, with a particular epistemological position that juxtaposes a pre-constituted subject (thought) to an independently existing and pre-constituted object (reality).

Under this assumption, conceptual production is then associated with an illegitimate and indeed hopeless task of bridging this gap. Since the premise of conceptual production as envisioned by Hindess and Hirst permits neither the thought process nor the reality to be constituted and transformed by the practice of knowledge production, possible “solutions” to filling in the gap between thinking and reality can only come from the terrain of essentialism. Reducing the field of epistemology to its essentialist forms, Hindess and Hirst thus naturally end up running into either rationalism or empiricism, be it in their own theorization or in their criticisms of other theories.

As Resnick and Wolff persuasively demonstrate, their position on epistemology impelled Hindess and Hirst to reject the Althusserian conceptual apparatus for its epistemological essentialism, since such a position averted the possibility of a different reading that might have extricated this apparatus from its rationalist moments. In fact, from Hindess and Hirst’s perspective not only the concepts of the Althusserian problematic functioned within the field of rationalism—in a way to capture and express in thought the essence of the different concrete social formations existing in reality—but also the development and construction of the Althusserian conceptual apparatus itself followed a causal order in which certain concepts operated as the essential determinants of other concepts. In this sense, Hindess and Hirst read into the mode of production problematic not only rationalism, but also determinism in social theory (Resnick and Wolff 1987, 104).

And since Hindess and Hirst's critique of rationalism took place in a terrain which accepted the very assumptions of rationalism and determinism, their initial attempts at deconstructing the Althusserian concepts that allegedly embodied determinism (e.g., mode of production and articulation) and replacing them with new concepts (e.g., relations of production and their conditions of existence) only led to them to find in the new concepts the very essentialism they desperately tried to avoid. Finding themselves imprisoned within a notion of theoretical practice that is inherently rationalist and deterministic, Hindess and Hirst were driven to protest the Althusserian conceptual apparatus in particular and conceptual production in general.

Resnick and Wolff's explicit commitment to both *overdetermination of theory* and *in theory* offers a way out of the deadlock which Hindess and Hirst put themselves. On the one hand, *overdetermination of theory* acknowledges that thinking is both overdetermining as well as overdetermined by its constitutive outside including the "reality" it studies. At one and the same time the subject/thinking—object/reality duality which serves as the ground for essentialist epistemological positions is rejected. The field of epistemology is therefore enlarged beyond the essentialist options of rationalism and empiricism. On the other hand, *overdetermination in theory* implies that there is neither a pre-given essence nor an ultimate determinant of social "reality" which the theorist could privilege in the production of explanations. All aspects of social reality interact to mutually determine each other in contradiction, i.e., all aspects are overdetermined.

However, this insight does not converge with the conclusion that Hindess and Hirst arrived at, which is that there can be no conceptualization. All conceptualizations have to start somewhere. Yet, since there is no privileged social cause or determinant that binds the objective of social analysis, the entry into conceptual production, what Resnick and Wolff theorize as the *entry point*, is *arbitrary* (Resnick and Wolff 1987, 25; Wolff 1999). It is arbitrary in the sense that the particular choice of entry point is overdetermined by numerous conditions including, but by no means exclusive to, a person's upbringing, religious beliefs, educational experience, political desire, investment in particular forms and/or objects of critique, motivation to communicate with particular audiences, and a whole host of other effects. Entry point is also *constitutively split* (overdetermined). The "fullness" of its meaning is continuously disrupted and remolded as it is linked to and interacts with other concepts that are brought into the realm of analysis as the so many specific determinations.⁷²

Overdetermination of theory together with *overdetermination in theory* imply that there can be no logical order in the production of concepts of a social theory that is presumed to capture and express a pre-constituted and deterministic causal structure of social phenomena. The production of concepts is rather overdetermined by its conditions of existence, one of which is the production process of the concepts itself. This in turn implies that the meaning of the concepts cannot be fixed; a full and equivocal identity, let alone a deterministic logic, cannot be attributed to them.

⁷² Reclaiming a Hegelian gesture, Richard Wolff (1996) theorizes this constitutive movement between the fullness and emptiness of meaning in terms of the unceasing dialectic between the essentialist and anti-essentialist moments in the production of a concept.

Certainly, the same conclusion would be true for the concept of class. Nonetheless, the post-Althusserian post-Marxian positions studied thus far leave the category of class unreconstructed and/or reminisce it as a signifier imbued with essentialism—as the (economic) determinist logic orchestrating identification, if not an empty placeholder, in Laclau’s framework and as the referent of a fundamental antagonism in Balibar’s framework. The next section reconstructs a very different understanding of class where class acts as an entry point rather than an essence. Such an understanding enables the conceiving of the contingent reproduction of the social by its class and non-class (political, cultural, and economic) exteriors. It also allows for conceiving of class transformation from capitalist to non-capitalist and non-exploitative forms.

5. 3. Against class essentialism(s): Reconstructing class and class struggle

5. 3. 1. The significance of class qua surplus and as process

Resnick and Wolff (1987) define class as an *economic process* that is comprised of three distinct moments: (1) the moment of production of surplus labor, (2) the moment of the appropriation of surplus labor, when the presence and the form of exploitation are figured, (3) and the distributive moment, when the appropriated surplus labor is dispersed to a variety of social destinations. This three-pronged *economic* definition of class renders visible a unique notion of exploitation. Different from the versions circulating within the post-Marxian field, exploitation does not refer to the domination of direct laborers or to their experience of an unbearable “alienation”

within capitalist relations of production. Nor is it associated with particular conditions of laboring such as the increasing disparities between the manual and mental labor under capitalism. Rather, exploitation is defined as the appropriation of surplus labor (or its products) by those who did not produce it. Class processes such as capitalist, feudal, and slave are exploitative class forms. Non-exploitative class processes, on the other hand, refer to those forms in which the direct producers of surplus labor also appropriate it, such as the communist and ancient (independent) class processes.⁷³

Second, the presentation of class as comprised of three separate moments highlights the singularity of the distributive moment of class, which is generally glossed over in traditional class analyses. Conventional approaches to Marxian political economy primarily center on *Volume 1 of Capital*, where Marx writes about the tendencies and conditions that surround the production and appropriation of capitalist surplus value. Unfortunately, this uneven emphasis has perpetuated a truncated reading of Marx that comes at the expense of ignoring the detailed explorations in *Volume 3*, where the focus of analysis shifts to the distributions of capitalist surplus value. Decentering “the conception of class politics from the capital-labor relation” (Gibson-Graham and O’Neill 2001, 63), this shift in focus expands the range of struggles over class and

⁷³ The distinction exploitative vs. non-exploitative class processes might seem similar on the surface to another distinction between capitalism vs. pre-capitalism often mobilized by the mode of production problematic. However, it presents a qualitatively different understanding of *economic difference*. Not only does it make exploitation, rather than capitalism, the focal point of making sense of difference in economic forms, but also it gets rid of the remnants of historicism (informed by a Eurocentric and modernist vision) in the language of “pre-capitalism,” which insinuates that non-capitalist forms of class belong to the past.

brings into existence a wide variety of social actors and sites to which surplus-labor is and can potentially be dispensed, or from which it can be withheld.

Defining class as a *process* is a deliberate theoretical choice. Process attributes to the constitution of class ceaseless change and contradiction. It not only rules out any essence of self-reproduction, but also conveys the impossibility of any final closure to institute class. In a sense, the ontology of overdetermination and contingency is always already assumed when one talks about class as a process. On the one hand, class as a process qua surplus has a precise designation and conceptual existence. On the other hand, its content is constituted retroactively—and in this sense is partial—as it is articulated with the specific conditions of existence which impart their unique effects to the determination of the meaning of class. Put in the succinct expression of J.K. Gibson-Graham, there is a:

continual theoretical movement between the conceptual fullness of a category that focuses attention on surplus labor relations of production, appropriation, and distribution, and its ultimate emptiness until its schematic and homogenous form is filled with specific constitutive relations of race, gender, nationality, affect, and so on. A radical heterogeneity of class relations is the product, though not the starting place, of this theoretical process. (2005, 41)

It follows that class as an economic process offers a route out of the tripartite closure that post-Marxian positions imposes on class in the figures of an essentialist logic, a fundamental antagonism, or an empty political position. The process-oriented notion of class decouples it from any necessary attachment to fixed identities and demands, predicates of class-belonging (in terms of property, income, occupation, position in power hierarchy, cultural habits, and so on), pre-constituted entities or social groups (e.g., working class), essentialist logics, privileged sites (e.g., factories, migrant

neighborhoods, miner towns), and fundamental behavioral predispositions (e.g., resistance against “alienation”). A (contingent) relation to class is enacted whenever and wherever surplus-labor is produced, appropriated, and distributed. Hence, there are continuous attempts to institute class relations at sites as diverse as households, universities, neighborhoods, highways, and unions, as well as within transnational corporations.

Similarly, class struggle is no longer attached to pre-constituted subjects doing the struggle, be it spontaneously or as a result of some necessary economic determination or subjective ordering. Class no more refers to subjects, but to an object of struggle, the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor. Resnick and Wolff state this in a precise way:

Classes, then, do not struggle or do anything else for that matter. The term *class struggle* must refer to the object of groups struggling, not to the subjects doing the struggling. (1987, 161)

Hence, whenever individuals or collectivities are mobilized around flows of surplus labor, there is a place for the articulation of class struggle.⁷⁴ While such mobilizations have effects on class, social agencies implicated in such struggles may or may not identify themselves in terms of the conventional narratives of “class experiences” (which the discourse of “alienation” is one). Moreover, even when they identify with a certain notion of class, their designation might not match with the definition of class deployed by this dissertation. Nonetheless, such non-class identifications are components of the constitutive outside of class processes. They might support existing

⁷⁴ More properly, one should talk about *struggles over class* rather than class struggle.

surplus labor flows. Alternatively, they might provide a condition of existence for redirecting distributions of surplus labor to new destinations or for the emergence of new fundamental class processes.

As one example, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff (1994) discuss the ways in which religious discourse and religious identifications, in the way that they shape gender meanings in terms of what a woman should and should not do and be, provide a condition of existence for the reproduction of feudal class processes in the household. In turn, the churches that propagate such discourses receive distributions of women's household surplus in the form of labor and use-values (1994, 11).⁷⁵ In another example, Blair Sandler (1995) develops an analysis of the articulation between capitalist class processes and cultural conceptions of the environment. He shows how certain environmental cultural attitudes and beliefs might and do provide a condition of existence for capitalist commodification through its emphasis on the production of "environmentally friendly commodities." While the example discussed by Fraad, Resnick and Wolff demonstrates how a non-class cultural discourse maintains an existing fundamental class process, Sandler's example shows the ways in which cultural conceptions overdetermine the emergence of new (capitalist) class processes.

⁷⁵ This example also shows how cultural discourses and meanings are maintained by economic condition of existence. Class processes sustain certain identifications and cultural claims at the expense of others, which do not have access to the flows of surplus labor.

5. 3. 2. A Marxian approach to the contingency of the social: Struggles over necessary/surplus labor

The particular Marxian concept of class deployed in this chapter follows from a discursive distinction between necessary labor and surplus labor. Since this distinction has been one of the classical targets for the allegations of essentialism by post-Marxism—as evidenced in Laclau’s reading of Marx—it is relevant to revisit it and demonstrate both the contingency of the distinction as well as the distributions of surplus value to this or that destination.⁷⁶

Marxian economics measures the value of commodities through the concept of abstract labor-time, and the value of each commodity is determined by the amount of living and dead labor that is socially necessary for producing it at a given moment in time. Differentiating between living labor and dead labor, Marx defines the former as that which begets more value, and deploys the latter as the stand-in for the value of the means of production. Living labor is “living” in the sense that it adds to the mass of abstract-labor that exists in society. Because “the conditions of reproduction of the economy are not reducible to the reproduction of the individual labourers” (Hindess and Hirst 1975, 27), because the sociality is always more (or less) than the aggregation of its individual parts, in every mode of production the direct laborers will need to perform more living labor (i.e., surplus labor) than what is socially necessary for reproducing their own immediate conditions of existence as laborers (i.e., necessary labor).

⁷⁶ The discussion in this section is informed by the analysis of Özelçuk and Madra (2005).

The concept of abstract-labor is essential not because it serves as the true measure or the irreducible substance of economic value. Rather, abstract-labor, and the class analysis it makes possible, is significant for its theoretical effects and social implications. When the economy is viewed through labor-time accounting, one is presented with an understanding of social interdependency formed in relation to abstract-labor production and distribution—instead of, for instance, an aggregation of rational individuals who are engaged in self-maximizing market exchanges, as purported by neoclassical economic theory. In a related point, the split between necessary and surplus labor is important as a discursive device to read social interventions and historical dynamics in terms of struggles over class processes. The distinction enables the conceptualization of the economy around a classed understanding of social conflict.

Let us not leave any doubt for essentialism: Neither the respective quanta of necessary and surplus labor nor the potential destinations of the appropriated surplus labor could be determined a priori. Indeed, there is no biologically, culturally or economically fixed and universally accepted way or logic of conducting and institutionalizing the process of the performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor. It is this very absence of a pre-constituted/pre-given guideline that turns the division of the living labor into its necessary and surplus labor components and the distribution of the surplus into the loci of struggle and overdetermination.

In fact, we can conceive of this splitting of living labor into its necessary and surplus labor components as another way of suggesting that “society does not exist” (Laclau,

1990, 89–92). Just as Laclau argues that subjectivity and the social are never given, but continually shaped in hegemonic struggles over cultural meanings, what is “necessary” and what is “surplus,” as well as the distributions of the latter, are not set in stone, but always negotiated, struggled over and socially overdetermined. In fact, one might suggest that Marxian political economy, with its distinction between necessary and surplus labor that installs instability at the heart of economic analysis, has always already been conceptually aware of the post-Marxian theoretical insight pertaining to the contingency of social reproduction and the impossibility of an ultimate ground for fully and completely instituting the social.

The ways in which the struggles over the division of living labor into its necessary and surplus labor components and over the distribution of surplus labor overdetermine social reproduction and transformation are considered in Fraad, Resnick and Wolff’s analysis of the Reagan-Bush years (1994). The authors focus in particular on the restructuring of the US enterprises and households in their mutual interaction during this period. The discussion of this example is especially informative in demonstrating the convergences and divergences that exist between the overdeterminist class analytics and the post-Marxian analyses of Hindess and Hirst, Balibar and Laclau.

In their analysis Fraad, Resnick and Wolff unpack the ways in which a unique constellation of economic, cultural and political forces, often discussed under the name of *Reaganomics*, has shifted the “crisis” that the US capitalist enterprises and state confronted at the end of 1970s to households. According to the authors, during the 1970s the capitalist enterprises in US faced an economic crisis as their increasing

expenditures outgrew their revenues as a result of the expanding claims on the surplus value appropriated by their board of directors—of particular importance were the increased demands on the surplus value by the sellers of input commodities and by managers.⁷⁷

In attempts to mitigate and “manage” the impending crises around the distributions of surplus, US corporations were compelled to struggle over reconfiguring their subsumed class distributions. In particular, they strived to eliminate the distribution of monopoly wages to direct producers—a distribution over and beyond the value of labor power that the corporations previously felt compelled to make in order to get access to the commodity input of labor power—and to decrease the corporate tax distributions to the state.⁷⁸ The realization of these outcomes meant that the US corporations could continue to secure certain conditions of existence (such as access to labor power and access to state services of security and legal protection of contract and private property, and so on) for a smaller distribution of surplus value than had been previously “necessary” (1994, 96).

At this point a clarification would be pertinent. The continuation of these conditions of existence of the appropriation of the capitalist surplus value does in no way imply a

⁷⁷ The higher distribution of surplus value to the purchasing of input commodities was due to the prices of these commodities having risen above their exchange value. The higher distribution of surplus value to managers was to increase productive capital accumulation with the aim of increasing labor productivity.

⁷⁸ The crises in the federal state budget triggered by lower corporate tax revenues was managed by increased personal income taxes and social security taxes, significant cuts in the state expenditures directed to households as “social programs,” limitations on state employment, and state borrowing.

logical requirement or historical necessity for the capitalist class processes to continue. The distribution of surplus value to these ends rather than others is contingent upon the struggles to fashion and maintain a particular social consent which accepts certain conditions of existence as socially necessary and indispensable, while disregarding others as simply unessential. Hence, the “necessity” of the conditions of existence is not pre-given in the concept of the social relations of production (a point that Hindess and Hirst also made, however, later on gave up). Rather such “necessity” itself is in need of being continuously fabricated. In their analysis, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff point to how the nationalist discourse and nationalist identifications provided *one* particular cultural condition of existence for US citizens to come to believe in the “necessity” for lower corporate taxes and lower wages in the name of strengthening the international competitiveness of US enterprises in anticipation of the future benefit for all (1994, 98).

In addition to the reconfiguration of the distributions of capitalist surplus value, another effect of this particular conjuncture was the redefinition of the division between necessary and surplus labor. As a result of various economic forces and political and cultural mechanisms of coercion and consent (e.g., unemployment produced by the business cycle, attack on unions, the social consent on the necessity to protect US economic competitiveness, entry of more women into the labor force) workers in US came to accept the “necessity” of a new and lower value of labor

power,⁷⁹ affecting a significant increase in the rate of exploitation. As a consequence, US households became sites of an accentuated class struggle in which the wives were pushed to increase the feudal surplus they produced in attempts to make up for the falling standard of living of the household. However, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff claim that the pressures that this development added to the already strenuous conditions of feudal surplus production rather triggered class transformations within US households: Ironically, the increasing numbers of dissolving feudal class processes have given way to the emergence of ancient and communist class processes.

A series of important consequences follow from the overdeterminist conjunctural analysis of Fraad, Resnick and Wolff that are worth emphasizing. First, in drawing attention to the various conditions of existence of (capitalist and feudal) class processes, their analysis illustrates the contingency of the reproduction of class processes and their dependence on their constitutive outside. This constitutive outside of class processes is itself dynamic and overdetermined by class and non-class struggles. As a result, certain conditions of existence might get reproduced, certain others might no longer receive surplus flows if deemed “socially unnecessary,” while new ones might be brought into existence.

Second the contingent maintenance of class processes by these numerous economic, political, and cultural conditions of existence points to the myriad ways in which the transformation of exploitative class processes into non-exploitative forms could take

⁷⁹ Following Marx, Fraad, Resnick and Wolff designate this change in the value of labor power as the change in the “historical and moral element” determining the value of labor power (1994, 106).

shape. Stated in a slightly different way, there is no necessity which connects class transformation to a pre-established cause that is presumed to underpin class struggle. Class transformation does not have to come about by the active political resistance of the “exploited” in their confrontation with a “situation of extreme exploitation” (Laclau 2000, 203), or as a result of their “alienation” under the “unbearable” life under capitalism (Balibar 1996, 117-119). There is no necessary correspondence between class tendencies and the politics of agency.

In fact, the implications of the analysis by Fraad, Resnick and Wolff precisely challenge such anticipations and understandings of resistance. On the one hand, direct producers could very well acquiesce to an increased rate of capitalist exploitation as happened under *Reaganomics*, such consent being overdetermined by the other class and non-class processes in which the workers participate. On the other hand, transformation from exploitative (in the context of the household example, feudal) to non-exploitative class processes (i.e., ancient and communist) could as well come about as the overdetermined effect of various social forces, without an active and collective mobilization of the “exploited” and/or around “exploitation.” Though such resistance might certainly provide *one* particular condition of existence for class transformation.

This overdeterminist class analytics shares with Balibar’s *conjunctural analysis* and Laclau’s conceptual apparatus of *hegemonic articulation* the motivation to theorize the contingency of social reproduction as it is overdetermined by its constitutive outside. However, one significant way that the overdeterminist class approach diverges from

the latter is the manner in which it detaches the notion of class from any centralizing mechanism of identification or any behavioral predispositions to class antagonism. In this way, it can elucidate the ways in which class processes overdetermine and in turn are overdetermined by non-class processes as they all bear their unique effects on the contingent reproduction of the social.

5. 4. Against capital-centricism(s): Reconstructing economy

The importation of class in its essentialist and/or un-theorized forms into the field of post-Althusserian post-Marxism is one determinant behind the re-composition of the economy as an undifferentiated realm of necessity. The re-conceptualization of the *structure of capitalist mode of production as capitalism qua structural power* is another one.

Certainly these two essentialisms—class essentialism and capital-essentialism (or capital-centricism)—are related in the way they sustain each other. With class essentialism, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to produce a language of economic difference in its class dimension; with capital-essentialism, there is little motivation to reconstruct class and there is no conceptual space to envision class transformation from capitalism.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, they are two distinct forms of essentialisms. Hence, they deserve separate attention.

⁸⁰ One can perhaps distinguish two different versions of capital-essentialism/capital-centricism. A structuralist version posits an understanding of the economy as a pre-existing whole and specifies a capitalist law of motion as an inner principle that causes and gives expression to the different aspects of this whole. While it domesticates economic difference, the structuralist version nevertheless acknowledges it. A humanist version, on the other hand, anthropomorphizes capital and treats it as a “subject” of drive that acts as the origin and the end of all other economic and social processes. It seems that the recent representations of capitalism within post-Marxism

The dissertation has already highlighted the ways in which Balibar and Laclau's recent writings situate capitalism outside the ontology of overdetermination and contingency. Capitalism appears as a self-reproducing entity in both cases, although its effects differ. In Balibar's framework, capitalism is viewed to inhere a drive for accumulation (as well as commodification) that impels it to subsume to itself different "modes of capitalist exploitation." In this way, it functions as a *limit* to the articulation of economic difference and to the field of economic transformation. In Laclau's framework as well capitalism is often evoked as a drive for accumulation (and also commodification) although its effect works in a different and diametrically opposite manner. Rather than exerting itself as a constraining force on the constitution and transformation of the social, capitalism acts as the mechanism of dislocation, bringing into existence new forms of social identities and demands.

What needs to be emphasized is that both discourses, in representing capitalism either as a *limit to* or a *generator of* social change, essentialize capitalism as a self-driven structural power. Certainly, understanding capitalism as an entity driven by necessity (i.e., the self-conflicting, self-expanding logic) is a conception not foreign to the

carry traces of this humanist version of capital-centricism—although they certainly do not have the totalizing ambition (to explain everything in reference to this ontology) and the telos of the humanist approach. See, for instance, Žižek's discussion of the logic of capitalist accumulation in his *The Parallax View*:

drive inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, *systematic*, level: drive is that which propels the whole capitalist machinery, it is the impersonal compulsion to engage in the endless circular movement of expanded self-reproduction. We enter the mode of drive the moment of the circulation of money as capital becomes "an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits." [...] (2006, 61)

Marxian tradition. Indeed the “efforts to discern capitalism’s destiny- determining inner contradictions” have largely dominated Western Marxism since Marx’s death (Norton 2001, 23). What is odd is the way in which Balibar and Laclau have swayed to converge with this capital-centric current of the Marxian tradition despite the fact that they both started out as theorists who were self-consciously engaged in the project of producing a discourse of a differentiated economy—comprised of different moments of production, consumption, distribution, and circulation as well as different modes of production.

In opposition to capital-centric vision of post-Marxism that locates capitalism as a *political force* external to the overdeterminist ontology, the overdeterminist class analytics reconstructs a *space of the economy* as internally differentiated and overdetermined. Indeed one can highlight two related but distinct trajectories in which such a reconstruction is taking place. A first trajectory focuses on capitalist economies and capitalist enterprises as de-centered webs of contradictory and ever-changing relations with no driving logic or governing center.⁸¹ Capitalist economies, then, are the articulated formations of the different moments of the economy (i.e., production, consumption, distribution and circulation) with capitalist class processes as well as with cultural and political processes (Callari 1987). The unity and

⁸¹ This approach is critical of all forms of centric approaches within the Marxian tradition, including not only capital-centricism (Gibson-Graham 1996b), but also production-centric value theory (Roberts 1996), accumulation centricism (Norton 1994; 2001; Resnick 2001), and approaches that essentialize certain laws of capitalist competition (Amariglio and Ruccio 1998; 2003).

coherence of such formations are only partial and temporary given their overdetermined existence.

A second trajectory approaches economies as *diverse* formations that involve not only capitalist economies and capitalist enterprises, but also a whole host of different forms of transactions (i.e., nonmarket, market, alternative market), laboring (i.e., unpaid, wage labor, alternative paid), and enterprises (i.e., alternative capitalist, communal, independent, feudal, and slave) (CEC 2001; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). Conceptualizing the economy as a field of economic diversity opens up a vision and provides a language for the making of economic collectivities in relation to such diversity. *Community economies* research project pioneered by Gibson-Graham is one such attempt to build open-ended social interdependencies and negotiations over needs, the generation and distributions of surplus (in use-value, labor and/or value forms), consumption and sustenance and enlarging of commons (Gibson-Graham 2006). The next section will take up the first approach of destabilizing and undoing capital-centricism. Then, the concluding chapter of the dissertation will involve a brief discussion of this second approach.

5. 4. 1. De-centering the capitalist economy

According to the overdeterminist class approach to the capitalist economy, there is no necessity or “law of motion” that unifies and reproduces the linkages among the economic (e.g., consumption, production, distribution and circulation), cultural and political processes towards some pre-disposed goal of *expanding value* (i.e., the production of surplus value) or *the expanded reproduction of capital* (i.e., the reinvestment of

the newly created surplus value in additional productive capital). Let us now take each case, keeping in mind their distinction.

The fact that there is no immanence in the production of capital can be elucidated by momentarily turning to the reproduction of Marx's circuit of capital. The circuit of capital (M-C...P...C'-M') is Marx's attempt to identify the moments of the movement of capital from one form to another in the process of the creation of value (i.e., expansion of value or the production of surplus value). In other words, the circuit of capital does not prescribe an invariant, unmediated, self-constituted logic, a "law of motion," but rather *formalizes* the metamorphoses of capital: First, capital is to transform from its money-form (finance capital) to commodity-form (when the industrial capitalist purchases the means of production and the labor power and puts them to work); then, once the new commodities are produced, capital is to transform back into money-form in order for the surplus value performed by the living labor in production to be realized.

However, the creation of value is never a smooth and frictionless process. Each transformation of capital is contingent upon and continually maintained by numerous conditions of existence that constitute the circuit. Throughout the three volumes of *Capital*, Marx shows how the industrial capitalists need to (1) raise funds (which compels them distribute a part of the surplus value as subsumed class payments to the financial capitalists); (2) be able to purchase the productive capital and productive labor; (3) make sure that the workers work hard and produce the commodities (which makes them dependent not only upon the maintenance of the mental/manual

division of labor, factory supervision and legislations, but also on the social agencies and institutions of reproduction, such as the trade unions, the government, the family, and so on); (4) ensure that the commodities are sold in the markets so that the capital does not remain in commodity-form but attains its original money-form (which makes them dependent on the merchant capital, the services for storage and transportation, the demand for commodities, and so on). There is no necessity for these conditions to be secured and reproduced in order to render spontaneous the process of the expansion of value.

Just as there is no “logic of capital” to ensure the expansion of value, there is no necessity for the expanded reproduction of capital. Even though a pantheon of Marxist political economists, including Paul Sweezy, David Gordon, and David Harvey, posit that “accumulation for accumulation’s sake” is “the rule that governs the behaviour of all capitalists” (Harvey 1982, 29), the argument that the endless circular movement of the circuit of capital is propelled by an accumulation drive is not necessarily one that Marx himself would subscribe to. Indeed, Bruce Norton, through a close reading of Marx’s *Capital*, convincingly argues that, for Marx, it was Adam Smith and other classical political economists who claimed that “accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production” is “the historical mission of the bourgeoisie in the period” in which classical political economy has dominated (Marx 1976, 742). Ridiculing the pompous virtuousness of this position even in *Volume 1 of Capital*, Marx highlights the historical shift from Smith’s accumulating capitalist to the capitalist spender, who is now compelled to devote one

part of the surplus to conspicuous consumption and yet another part towards maintaining its “business status” (1976, 741, cf. Norton 2001, 45).

Indeed, if one were to expand the concept of capitalism to include Marx’s explorations in *Volumes 2 and 3*, and his analysis of the numerous claims on surplus value, then it becomes very difficult to reduce the movement of capital into a self-regulating “expanded self-reproduction.” An endless number of social agencies located within and outside of the capitalist corporation strive to receive a cut of the surplus value and to this end, they need to struggle with one another and, on occasion, justify their “necessity” for the continued existence of the capitalist form of extraction and distribution of surplus value. The agencies of these “competitive battles” could be different recipients of surplus distributions within a corporation, different corporations (within and across industries), different forms of capital (industrial, financial, and merchant), and even nation-states and trans- and international institutions (Ruccio and Amariglio 1998; 2003, 239-244; Resnick 2001).

What needs to be emphasized is that there is no order or *telos* that guides these competitive battles towards a pre-determined goal or end. Similarly, the particular location and function of a particular claimant/recipient of surplus value is thoroughly contingent.

Therefore, from the overdeterminist class perspective, the motivation is not to “discover” what propels the circuit of capital and the process of the self-expansion of value (there is no such essence to pin down), but rather to highlight the arbitrariness of the exploitative form of capitalist appropriation of surplus value once the conditions

of existence that reproduce this form are rendered as sites of ceaseless struggles, contingent and arbitrary. In turn, the conceptualization of contingency in the reproduction of the capitalist class processes and the circuit of capital opens a space for a whole set of questions that are eclipsed by the capital-centricism of post-Marxism: What are the non-exploitative forms of appropriating the surplus value? What might be the *conditions of existence* of such non-exploitative forms in specific conjunctures? How might we rethink the linkages between the economic processes of consumption, production, distribution, and exchange when these processes are conceived to be open to articulation with different class processes, rather than subsumed to a governing logic of capitalism? What kind of linkages could be established among these processes if we motivate the analyses of the economy with an eye towards cultivating the conditions of non-exploitative forms of class?

5. 4. 2. Reproduction and repetition

Before concluding, there is one more issue to briefly address. Does affirming the overdetermined and contingent constitution of the capitalist class processes and their conditions of existence suggest that we can no longer talk about the partial stability or endurance of capitalist or any other class process? How can we explain and understand the temporality of reproduction from an overdeterminist class perspective that approaches each process as constituted in ceaseless change and contradiction?

In order to formulate and initiate a response to such questions, perhaps we can once more turn to Marx and his emphasis on the concept of “repetition”:

It is in the interest of the ruling section of society to sanction the existing order as law and to legally establish its limits given through usage and tradition. Apart from all else, this, by the way, comes about of itself as soon as the constant reproduction of the basis of the existing order and its fundamental relations assumes a regulated and orderly form *in the course of time*. And such regulation and order are themselves indispensable elements of any mode of production, if it is to assume social stability and indifference from mere chance and arbitrariness. These are precisely the form of its social stability and therefore its relative freedom from arbitrariness and mere chance. Under stagnant conditions of the production process as well as the corresponding social relations, it achieves this form by mere repetition of its own reproduction. If this has continued for some time, it entrenches itself as custom and tradition and is finally sanctioned as an explicit law. (Marx, *Capital, Vol III*, 773-774, cf. Althusser and Balibar 1970, 258-259; underlined emphasis mine)

Marx's insights, when carried into the context of this dissertation, suggest that the continuity and hegemony of capitalist relations, far from being intransigent, is maintained through "the mere repetition" of the practices and performances that sustain the conditions of existence of such relations. There is no "law" ordaining the specific social processes that constitute the capitalist or any other class relations, except for the semblance of a law that comes into being by the repetitive cycles of reproduction of such relations that, in its turn, require the repetitive performance and maintenance of their specific conditions of existence.⁸²

⁸² While theorizing the temporality in the reproduction of the hegemony of capitalism, Swanson makes a similar point through the notion of *reiteration* which she borrows from Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. In particular, she quotes Derrida who makes an analogous argument to Marx:

a structure gains its status as a structure, its *structurality*, only through its repeated reinstatement. The dependency of that structure on its reinstatement means that the very possibility of structure depends on a reiteration that is in no sense determined fully in advance, that for structure...to become possible, there must first be a contingent repetition at its basis. (Derrida 1982, cf. Swanson 2005, 104-105)

It is through the blind force of repetition that over time certain relations might get prioritized at the expense of others; certain sets of contradictions are elevated to social significance while others are neutralized and repressed; certain conditions of existence of a class process are posed as “socially necessary” while others are regarded as “socially dispensable.” However, what we should add to Marx’s analysis of repetition is that repetition of a process itself is ridden with fundamental instability. Since every process is constituted in the overdetermined swirl of all other processes existing at a particular point in time, the reiteration of every process is also caught up in constant change. A process when repeated is never the same as before. Therefore, in so far as relationships are constellations of a set of processes that self-differ in their overdetermined repetition, the so-called stability of relationships is always already prone to unraveling and constitutive instability.

5. 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed a particular overdeterminist class framework that undoes the essentialist closures on Marxian categories which post-Althusserian post-Marxism is unable or unwilling to recognize. At the same time, through tracing back the genealogy of the development of this overdeterminist class perspective to the Althusserian mode of production analysis, I highlighted the possibility of a different path out of the *reproductionism* of this problematic, which is alternative to the essentialist readings produced by Hindess and Hirst and Laclau. I demonstrated how this framework reconstructs the Marxian concepts of epistemology, ontology, class and the capitalist economy from an anti-essentialist perspective.

In particular, I showed how this framework re-conceptualizes class and capitalist economy through assuming an *overdeterminist epistemology* and through making *overdetermination a general ontology* which pertains to the constitution and reproduction of not only the political and social, but also economic processes. What distinguishes this perspective, then, from others in the post-Althusserian field is its ability and commitment to produce a knowledge of the social from a perspective that analyzes the different forms of class performance, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor in their irreducibly contradictory and overdetermined relations with each other and with the rest of the social processes.

In allowing for different configurations of *class qua surplus*, in its exploitative and non-exploitative forms, the overdeterminist class framework is able to articulate and give economic content to “anti-capitalism” in terms of non-exploitative economic organizations of surplus labor. Furthermore, in theorizing the reproduction of class, including the capitalist class process, as overdetermined by various *conditions of existence*, this perspective is able to proclaim the contingency of class: So many conditions of existence are at once *necessary* for reproduction, in the sense that there is no self-reproduction of a class process, and yet *arbitrary* and *contingent*, in the sense that there is no logical or historical necessity for some particular condition(s) of existence to be in place.

In rendering the constitution and reproduction of class (and the capitalist economy) contingent and overdetermined, class transformative projects of “anti-capitalism” becomes possible to envision. At the same time, however, such projects need to be

rethought in terms of complex and laborious practices that lead to contradictory outcomes as they continuously engage in analyzing and transforming the conditions of existence of exploitative class processes as well as in cultivating new conditions of existence for non-exploitative class processes. An endeavor with no pre-established logic to anchor itself, no privileged agency to root for, and no guaranteed outcomes.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: PROBLEMATIZING THE POLITICAL VS. ECONOMIC DIVIDE IN POST-ALTHUSSERIAN FIELD

This dissertation has posed as a problem a prevalent tendency in post-Althusserian social field and addressed its context and consequences. This tendency aligns social transformation, contingency and overdetermination with the *political* and structural power, necessity and determinism with the *economic*. The demarcation of the political and the economic as two separate realms with corresponding logics is a long standing formulation propagated not only by deep-seated habits of thinking, but also by new philosophical orientations and conjunctural concerns. The partial perspective of this dissertation has highlighted one particular aspect by relating the constitution of this conceptual asymmetry to the different ways in which the post-Marxian approaches under study have “settled accounts” with the *reproductionism* of the Althusserian mode of production problematic. It is argued that in their critical exegeses of this Althusserian debate, post-Marxian approaches have left unquestioned and, hence, maintained in modified forms the essentialist closures on the conceptualization of class and the capitalist economy. In so doing, they have embraced the political as the moment of fleeing from the certainties, constraints and the essentialist grip of the economic.

The aspiration of the dissertation has been to demonstrate that the Althusserian mode of production analysis could indeed be *read* and engaged with in a different way that institutes the play of overdetermination at the heart of the constitution of the (capitalist) economy and class. Guided by such a reading, the economy can be reclaimed as a de-centered and internally differentiated space, the overdetermined reproduction of which could be analyzed through the class dimension. Through constructing a particular genealogy for the emergence of the post-Althusserian field, the dissertation has argued that such an overdeterminist approach was already in the works in *Reading Capital*, amplified and brought into relief in Althusser's later writings. This approach was also adopted and elaborated to an extent by Hindess and Hirst, Wolpe and Balibar, who nonetheless have failed, in different ways, to follow through its rich and expansive implications. And since late 1970s, the overdeterminist approach to class and economy has been developed and finessed by theorists in political economy such as Resnick and Wolff and J.K Gibson-Graham, in economic methodology such as Amariglio and Ruccio, and more broadly by the affiliated institutions of *AESA* and *Rethinking Marxism*.

Making sense of the discrepancy in the readings of the Althusserian mode of production problematic requires an appreciation of the irreducible contradictions and internal struggles of this theoretical tradition over how to formulate and address its constitutive theoretical tension. In a related sense, acknowledging the unique place of the Althusserian problematic within the Marxian tradition demands the recognition of the profound differences within Marxism and a willingness to distinguish carefully the theoretical currents of this rich and diverse tradition. Through a nuanced

rendition of Marx's writings, Bruce Norton (2001) delineates two distinct theoretical passions that have given way to two such distinct currents within Marxism. While one particular current explores the historical and changing conditions and forms of class and class exploitation with an eye towards envisioning the transformational possibilities, the second current investigates the inner contradictions of capitalism that push it towards ceaseless transformations.

This dissertation has aimed to recover the significance of the Althusserian mode of production problematic for this former current that focuses on the different forms class in their overdetermined existence. To this end, the dissertation emphasized the mode of production framework as a separating activity (formulated in opposition to the ideologies of social harmony) and stressed as one of its central motivations the thinking of the distinctions of social totality without prescribing a necessary unity or a law of motion. The problematic distinguished among the economic, political and cultural; among the economic moments of consumption, production, distribution and circulation; among capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. These "elements," the conceptual building blocks to approach and analyze all social formations, allowed for a de-structured and overdetermined vision of social reproduction, the unity and stability of which was articulated in specific ways in determinate social formations. Doing so made it possible to theorize both *economic difference* from capitalism and *overdetermination* of social reproduction analyzed through the filter of social relations of production.

However, this passion and effort to theorize economic (class) difference and economic (class) contingency clashed with a deterministic tendency within the mode of production debate and is later forgotten and eclipsed in the field of post-Althusserian post-Marxism. Chapters 3 and 4 have demonstrated how this particular theoretical field predominantly confines the conceptualizations of class either to a unifying logic of identification—as it predominantly operates in Laclau’s framework—or to a fundamental political antagonism—as it is deployed by Balibar. The thesis has been that such conceptions of class both maintain and are maintained by another essentialist theoretical move, that is, the collapsing of the differential structure of the economy into a structural and power-centered understanding of capitalism. Operating as a reified force with no constitutive outside, capitalism acts in post-Marxism to constrain or generate social change.

Chapter 5 has sundered open these essentialist closures on class and capitalism that reduce the latter into political categories. On the one hand, an argument is made for reconstructing class as an economic *process qua surplus*. Such a re-conceptualization, through recovering *difference in* and *contingency of* class, opens a field of investigation to inquire into the overdetermined relationships between the reproduction and transformation of different forms of class processes, exploitative and non-exploitative, and their conditions of existence. On the other hand, the reproduction of capitalist class processes is detached from any “law of motion” or *telos* (e.g., the drive to accumulate) and rendered overdetermined by the competitive battles and intractable antagonisms over the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value.

In this overdeterminist analysis of capitalism, the concept, *conditions of existence*, has occupied a central role. Conditions of existence mark the dependency of capitalist exploitation on its constitutive outside and, hence, exhibit the contingent and precarious character of capitalism's existence, pointing to the possibilities of class transformations within and beyond capitalist class processes. No longer conceivable as an essential and logical requirement of an object's existence, conditions of existence rather refer to constitutive relations of existence. It is in this sense that the concept of conditions of existence not only enables the deconstructive and "negative" project of rendering capitalism contingent, but also allows for the "positive" project of thinking about as well as building non-exploitative modes of appropriating and distributing surplus labor (Charusheela 2005, 25; DeMartino 2003; Gibson-Graham 2005).

Within the overdeterminist class analysis, such a "positive" project is being carried out in relation to the *diverse economy* and the *community economy* frameworks of J.K. Gibson-Graham. The *diverse economy framework* situates the economy as a de-structured field of different economic activities, involving different forms of class processes (capitalist, alternative capitalist, communal, independent, feudal, and slave); transactions (nonmarket, market, alternative market); and forms of laboring (unpaid, wage labor, alternative paid, formal, informal) (CEC 2001; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). It presents economic processes, actors, and sites that have been marginalized and neglected by the dominant representations of the economy and, thereby, expands the vision and language for building economic collectivities in relation to such diversity.

The theory and practice of the *community economy* is one such attempt to build open-ended social interdependencies between the disparate elements which the diverse economy renders visible. A significant component of this research project is to envision (and practice through the constitutive participation of communities) the ways in which existing flows of surplus labor/value might be redirected and new non-exploitative and communist forms of appropriating and distributing surplus might be constructed with an eye towards cultivating “community economies.” *Conditions of existence* is a key concept here to think about the ways in which the constitutive outside (diverse economy) can sustain or undermine such non-exploitative, communist and/or community-oriented economic reorganizations of surplus appropriation and distribution.

One might argue that the project of the *diverse economy* deconstructs the capital-centric totality of the economy and renders visible distinct economic processes that then provide the resources and building blocks for *community economies*. Nonetheless, these two projects should not be thought in terms of a sequential relation. There is rather a dialectical and constitutive movement between them. While the *community economy* provides an “entry point” or an “empty signifier” to build social interdependencies and construct *conditions of existence* among specific class and non-class processes that comprise the diverse economy, the *diverse economy*, in acknowledging the irreducible diversity in economic needs and demands, provides a continual occasion to renegotiate the boundary between the existing/imagined community economy under construction and its excluded constitutive outside.

In this sense *community economy* does not designate an economic blueprint or prescription. Rather, it refers to an *ethical economy* in the sense that economic decisions over the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus as well as over needs, consumption, common property, and so on, are uncertain, slippery and problematic as they are subject to overdetermination and contradiction as is everything else.

Should a worker cooperative increase the rate of surplus value production in order to distribute the “extra surplus” to support local community-economy institutions and, in so doing, sustain new relations of existence? Or should it just produce enough surplus value to meet the existing conditions of existence? (Healy and Bryne 2006).

Should a transnational cooperative corporation, such as Mondragon, extend its owner-worker property structure to plants which operate outside its local region, or should it prioritize growing cooperative owner-employment opportunities in its locality? (Gibson-Graham 2005). Not only are these decisions unanchored in any moral ground or economic necessity, but also the consequences of such decisions are uncontrollable and bring forth new social contradictions. It is in this sense that building community economies and sustaining communist class processes are ethical projects with no guarantees.

I want to conclude by revisiting the internal struggle and debate within post-Althusserian post-Marxism between “negative” and “positive” approaches to the political. This dissertation and the above discussion of the research project by Gibson-Graham offer insights that could extricate this debate from a set of confining and essentialist assumptions and arguments. To recollect, the advocates of the “positive” understanding of the political are discontent that upholding the negative

ontology of contingency is inadequate to think about and create the conditions for a radical break with the hegemonic orders of liberalism and capitalism. Their interest is focused on those exceptional discourses and identities that “embody” the potential to spawn revolutionary transformations and inaugurate new universals. Those who insist on the “negative” approach to the political, on the other hand, point to the dangers in the positive approach: Idealizing the political as created *ex nihilo*; bringing back a totalizing (utopian) closure on the social; as well as privileging certain subjects and discourses as the cause and the origin of the new. The central deadlock of this struggle seems to revolve around the question of how to conceptualize the emergence of a new order (alternative to liberal market capitalism) that at the same time acknowledges and allows for a space for antagonisms, struggles, contradictions and renegotiations, i.e., for ethics?

This dissertation has disagreed with the terms of this debate. In particular, the dissertation has rejected the delegation of radical change and transformation to a political dimension and the unwarranted ontological divide thus established between the economic and the political. Nonetheless, this internal debate within post-Marxism points to an important tension. If we extricate the object of this debate from the language it is originally formulated, and situate it within the framework of overdeterminist class analytics, we can repose its central question as one which asks for a “positive” project of “anti-capitalism” that is not prescriptive and totalizing, but open-ended. The overdeterminist class perspective, through reconstructing a conceptual apparatus around *class qua surplus*, *overdetermination*, and *condition of existence*, responds to this question by offering a “positive” project of envisioning and building

non-exploitative and communist class processes and community economies that are never complete, overdetermined, and contradictory, and hence, ethical.

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