Advocating Transcendence: Negative Identity between Marcuse and Laclau/Mouffe

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"This only can we tell you today
What we are not, what we do not want."
Eugenio Montale

1. Via negationis: advocating transcendence.

Certainly, we live in an epoch that demonizes the "negative." For various reasons, contemporary language practices seem to follow a rule according to which evil is categorized also as negative. The idea of "negativity" is generally associated with ominous images - unlucky days are typically classified as 'negative,' and we assume that there must be something negative behind an askew look. Also, the wrong advice pushes people toward a 'negative path,' and negative predictions usually foresee tragic events. Due to these gloomy aspects, the "negative" recalls a distorted functioning of the psyche. Negative feelings generally go along with a disconsolate view of life, bring about a sense of resignation, and generate a low-spirited mind-set. Accordingly, a "negative attitude" generally denotes a self-defeating mental disposition. For the common sense, the "negative person" is the one who, due to peculiar psychological characteristics, does not know how to interact successfully with other individuals, and is therefore not able to accomplish what the society imposes as reasonable and meaningful purposes. For these reasons, it is not surprising that negative dispositions are often associated with distorted moralities; dishonesty, corruption, and unfairness are values commonly deemed as negatives,

and so are the individuals who break the ethical code approved in a community.

Due to these psychological and moral meanings, the term "negative" is rarely associated with the norm; in most of the circumstances it represents the exception, the infraction of a rule, the disrespect for a certain state of affairs. Accordingly, the negative subject can hardly ever fit within a system, rather being the entity who *negates*, namely who "says no" to the socially accepted customs. He is defined through a logic of exclusion and is therefore the denial of a system.

Following this reasoning, single individuals are more frequently identified as negatives, while the communities stand for positive models; in this sense, the aspects characterizing the individual and pertaining the private space, as opposed to the public, could be considered negative.

If we adopt a terminology recently elaborated in philosophy, the word "community" does not stand for a free association of individuals, but rather for a primeval force that melts subjects with one another, with frequent destructive results. For this reason, "community" should be thought in opposition to "immunity,"[1] meaning the capability of the individual to preserve himself, to protect his own space and his individuality. In this sense, the "negative" should no longer be associated with psychological malfunctions or with moral degradation, but rather with immunitary and revolutionary ways of thinking, which aim at the reinforcement and the protection of the single from the influence of the community. This is certainly one of the ways in which Marcuse conceives of 'negativity.'

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[1] One example is Roberto Esposito's reinterpretation of Biopolitics, see Esposito (2008).

For Marcuse, the contemporary condemnation of negative thought went along with the development of new technological forms of control and with the diffusion of capitalism, which both rely on the promotion of a certain epistemological discourse. Marcuse observes that, mostly due to the strong influence exercised by sciences in the contemporary epoch, a certain type of *operational* theory of meaning took over the western cultures. According to the *operationalism*, elaborated by the philosopher of science Bridgman, the meanings of words and concepts are defined in terms of their technical function, namely in terms of operations: "We evidently know what we mean by length if we can tell what the length of any and every object is, and for the physicist nothing more is required. To find the length of an object, we have to perform certain physical operations."[2] This type of epistemological theory entails on one hand the emphasis on the pragmatic aspect of the words; on the other, it brings about the reduction of the word-content to its syntactic role. In fact, if in a sentence we carry out a superimposition between the meaning of a word and its function, we will melt the semantic level with the syntactic one, which will inevitably coincide with one another. Due to the coincidence of meanings with functions we also obtain the overlapping between concepts and words: "In this behavioral universe, words and concepts tend to coincide, or rather the concept tends to be absorbed by the word. The former has no other content than that designated by the word in the publicized and standardized usage, and the word is expected to have no other response than the publicized and standardized behavior (reaction)."[3] Due to this logic, words have lost half of their expressive power, and this is why in contemporary language practices we often witness discourses which conflate the "ends" with the "means," the "good" with the "utility," the "value" with the "profit." In this way, individuals have lost a large part of

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[2] Bridgman, The Logic of Modern Physics, quoted in Marcuse (1964), pg. 13.
[3] Marcuse (1964) pg. 87.

their thinking resources, their imaginary volume considerably decreased, and the duality of their mental dimensions has been reduced to one stratum. The way in which this *one-dimensional* rationality discloses itself and exercises oppression is through the reduction of semantic spaces, as well as through the elimination of alternative modes of thinking. This type of rationality has invaded every social area; it is the language spoken by entrepreneurs, politicians and media, but it took over several cultural contexts as well, from psychology to social sciences, from art to literature.

Within the context of this one-dimensional reality, Marcuse continues, a strong opposition would be expected from Marxist philosophers and socialist theorists. However, in his view, the new technological rationality brought about similar repercussions in Marxian negative thought, which has lost part of its meanings. In particular, the Marxian negation has been deprived of its Hegelian connotations, which are essential for opposing the operational logic. As Anderson points out,[4] Marx's debt to Hegel was ignored by Marxian theorists for quite a long time. Even though in *Capital* Marx wrote in support of "the Hegelian contradiction, which is the source of all dialectic," the first scholars tended to prioritize what he stated in a later postscript to the same work: "My dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it."[5] Also, Goldman observes that around the end of the century non-Marxian sociologists were hostile to Hegel, so that the Hegelian contribution to sociological studies was ignored until the end of World War I:

> Furthermore it is not accidental that in the interim, with Mehring, Plekhanov, Kautsky, Bernstein, and even Lenin at the time he

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[4] Anderson (1993).
[5] Anderson (1993), pg.243.

> wrote Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, Marxism was just as positivistic as academic science.[6]

For Anderson, a reevaluation of the Hegelian components of Marx's thought became more evident with Lenin in *Philosophic Notebooks*, with Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness*, but it found a definite concreteness with Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*. In this book, Marcuse takes into account several Hegelian works, such as the *Phenomenology of Mind*, the *Science of Logic*, the *Philosophy of History*, and the *Philosophy of Right*. What Marcuse highlights in Hegels' thought is first of all his vigorous attack on positivism. The epistemological theory promoted by Hegel conceives of knowledge as an activity which develops through creativity and self-expression, and therefore collides with the view of positivism, which teaches people "to view and study the phenomena of their world as neutral objects governed by universally valid laws."[7] For Hegel, 'reason' is not the empiricist attitude to organize and control phenomena, but rather the disclosure of freedom: "Reason presupposes freedom, the power to act in accordance with knowledge of the truth, the power to shape reality in line with its potentialities."[8] This type of epistemological view, utilized by Hegel for defending philosophy from the attack of British empiricism, opposes vigorously philosophical theories which are not subject-centered and aim at the reification of the human beings. The new enlightened science, which categorizes phenomena as bare facts qualitatively identical with one another, is compared with the new powers which exercise control upon the masses through homologation and uniformity, striving for the annihilation of the individual. For these reasons, as Anderson points out, Marcuse's interpretation of Hegel is completely new. While the majority of the scholars usually

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[6] Goldman (1976), pg.112-113.
[7] Anderson (1993), pp. 244.
[8] Ibidem, pp. 245.

insist on the absolutist aspects of Hegel's philosophy, emphasizing features of totality, mediation and reconciliation, Marcuse classifies it as a speculation whose main purpose is the reevaluation of the single. For this reason, in *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse takes into account the *Science of Logic*, showing that the essence of Hegel's philosophy is 'negativity': "Most clearly, what Marcuse wants to preserve and defend in Hegel is the central place given in his system to "negativity," the "power" of thought and action to reject and transform any putative positive reality, and the impossibility of understanding any such reality except in relation to this possibility. Accordingly, in *Reason and Revolution*, he again rejects in Hegel all those aspects of his thought that tend to suppress or overcome this negating potential."[9] For Marcuse, "negativity" represents the essence of German idealism and this is why he insists on Hegel's "negation of the negation," which prevents the process of knowledge from achieving a conclusive phase: "no method can claim a monopoly of cognition…The whole is true and the whole is false."[10]

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse attempts to recuperate the Hegelian negation in opposition to the previously described operational discourse; in so doing, he highlights further aspects of Hegel's negative method. Marcuse takes into account the inner frame of dialectic thought, showing that it structurally contains a negative element. Proper dialectic reasoning, such as the ones proposed by Plato and Hegel, develops according to the statement that "S is p," and contemplates definitions such as, for instance, "virtue is knowledge," "justice is the state in which everyone performs the function for which his nature is best suited," or "the perfectly real is the perfectly knowable."[11] In so doing, it also contains all the situations in which "'S is not

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[9] Pippin (1988), pg. 82.
[10] Marcuse (1960), "A Note on the Dialectic", quoted in Anderson (1993), pg. 255.
[11] Marcuse (1964) pg. 133.

p,' 'virtue is not knowledge,' and the perfectly real is not the perfectly knowable." For this reason, the general dialectic statement has an imperative content, telling us not only "what it is," but also "how it should be": "If these propositions are to be true, then the copula 'is' states an 'ought,' a desideratum."[12] In this sense, the negative element represents an openness to a second dimension, to the realm of transcendental ethical principles, and therefore, it involves a *political commitment*:

> Its realization involves subversion of the established order, for thinking in accordance with truth is the commitment to exist in accordance with truth (In Plato, the extreme concepts which illustrate this subversion are: death as the beginning of the philosopher's life, and the violent liberation from the cave.) Thus, the subversive character of truth inflicts upon thought an *imperative* quality.[13]

In this way, Marcuse points out that proper dialectic negation does not contemplate only "contradiction" and "opposition", but also "transcendence". Dialectic thinking always entails a reference to the idea of the "other," to "otherness," and for this reason it is *two-dimensional*: "By virtue of this dissociation, critical philosophic thought is necessarily *transcendent* and abstract."[14]

On the other hand, a non-Hegelian interpretation of Marx's philosophy seems to refer to the Aristotelian type of negation, which is not concerned with essences, belonging to a logic that abstracts from any material contents and aims at the formulation of universal laws of thought employed for controlling the reality. Within the Aristotelian system affirmation and contradiction are just poles of the same discourse, the first one denoting a correct argument,

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[12] Ibidem, pg. 133.
[13] Ibidem, pg. 133.
[14] Marcuse (1964), pg. 134.

the second one indicating a wrong logical procedure. In this context, the negation does not have any ontological properties and, consequently, any ethical repercussions: "In this formal logic, thought is indifferent toward its objects. Whether they are mental or physical, whether they pertain to society or to nature, they become subject to the same general laws of organization, calculation and conclusion – but they do so as fungible signs or symbols, in abstraction from their particular substance."[15] From the Marcusean analysis it seems that the main interpretation of Marx's philosophy has neglected the *transcendental* aspect of the Hegelian negation, favoring mere logical features. Accordingly, Marxian thinkers have tried to oppose the system accepting its logic, performing the simple function of sterile "contradiction", without the capability of producing *transcendental* alternatives. This type of opposition is just a reaction; it goes toward the contrary direction, staying on the same plane of discourse. In more political terms, for Marcuse it is not only a matter of supporting the workers in order to obtain higher wages, better treatment or more rights, but it is also necessary to propose an alternative and competitive idea of society which is able to capture and to modify the collective imagination of the individuals. This argument emerges implicitly from Marcuse's observations concerning the study of labor relations in the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company. In this regard, Marcuse shows that a language of opposition which is devoid of a solid transcendental content is no longer able to cope with a deceitful operational counterattack. In particular, he shows how complaints in support of the workers such as "the washrooms are unsanitary," "the job is dangerous," or "wages are too low" are translated and reformulated in operational terms which make them contingent and inoffensive, favoring the interest of the company: "For example, the statement "the washrooms are unsanitary" was translated into "on such and such occasion I went into this washroom, and the washbowl had some dirt

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[15] Marcuse (1964), pg. 136.

in it." Inquiries then ascertained that this was largely due to the carelessness of some employees, a campaign against throwing papers, spitting on the floor, and similar practices was instituted, and an attendant was assigned to constant duty in the washrooms."[16] Thus, the loss of this *transcendental* aspect of the Hegelian dialectic generated for Marcuse a *one-dimensional* form of Marxian opposition, which is no longer politically effective.

Marcuse's value of *transcendence* is in my view fundamental for the elaboration of an idea of *antagonism* which contemplates strong negative connotations, such as the one proposed by Laclau and Mouffe. In fact, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), the authors develop an idea of "negation'" that seems to move from the Marcusean interpretation of Hegel and reject, as Marcuse does, Marxian readings which do not contemplate *transcendental* features. The ambiguity that Marcuse had to solve when interpreting the Hegelianism, for Laclau and Mouffe manifested itself in several texts of the Romantic generation. On one hand, most of the German authors expressed the desire to pursue an absolutist way of conceiving the reality; on the other, this aspiration presupposed a loss of unity, which they inherited from the previous centuries. In particular, the seventeenth century witnessed the collapse of the universe as a meaningful order and the fall of man as a privileged 'being,' leading the "Romantic generation of the Sturm und Drung to an eager search for that lost unity, for a new synthesis that would permit the division to be overcome."[17] Due to this loss of "natural" unity between human being and cosmos, German idealism pursued an artificial and totalitarian self-assertion of the subject. Hegel, for Laclau and Mouffe, is the main symbol of this ambiguity. On one hand, he could be seen as the highest point of a totalitarian rationalism: "the moment when it attempts to embrace within the field of reason,

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[16] Marcuse (1964) pg. 109.
[17] Laclau and Mouffe (1985), pg. 94.

without dualisms, the totality of the universe of differences."[18] On the other hand, the Hegelian discourse presupposes and eventually entails the inevitable dissolution of this totality, generating a series of contingent and illogical transitions, which inevitably jeopardizes the unitary view of the reality: "If, however, Hegel's logical relations become contingent transitions, the connections between them cannot be fixed as moments of an underlying or sutured totality."[19] Most of the Marxian theorists focused exclusively on the first interpretation, neglecting the second one. In this way, they emphasized the rational-positivistic aspects of Hegelianism, paying scarce attention to "negativity" and the value of the "single." In fact, the rigid-scientific usage of objectified categories such as "class" and "structure," conceived as entities subsuming the existence of groups of individuals, brought about the wreck of the subject within the communities and the loss of his existential autonomy. As a result, socialism has lost its touch with the idea of "freedom," whereas capitalism has become the only one system that can guarantee individual liberty.

Laclau and Mouffe aspire to construct a socialist theory by moving from a reading of Hegel which seems to be similar as Marcuse's, being *subject-centered* and aiming at the reevaluation of the single. In fact, as Marcuse does, they emphasize "negativity" as the main characteristic of Hegel's philosophy, which is not reducible to aspects of "mediation" and "reconciliation":

> We must therefore, consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or *negative* essence of the existing, and the diverse social orders as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences. Accordingly, the

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[18] Laclau and Mouffe (1985), pg. 95.
[19] Ibidem.

> multiformity of the social cannot be apprehended through a system of *mediations*, nor the social order understood as an underlying principle. [20]

Their concept of *antagonism* is constructed starting from this reading of Hegel and, as the Marcusean type of 'negation', is not restricted to pure and simple logical meanings. While most of Hegel's scholars, including Marxian theorists, interpreted the Hegelian logic either according to the category of *logical contradiction* or to the idea of *real opposition,*[21] Laclau and Mouffe point out that neither of those notions entails a real *political commitment.* In fact, no political meaning is involved in the crash between two vehicles, and no antagonism materializes from the comparison between two statements: "We all participate in a number of mutually contradictory systems, and yet no antagonism emerges from these contradictions. Contradiction does not, therefore, necessarily imply an antagonistic relation."[22] A real political commitment does not appear as a consequence of the comparison between two stigmatized categories; it rather represents the limit of every objectification, involving the ethical projection of the "self" toward an other dimension, toward "otherness." In this sense, *antagonism* stands for the transcendental presence of the "other," as opposed to the limits of the "self":

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[20] Ibidem, pg. 96.

[21] A logical contradiction is a formula of the kind of : A, ~ A (A, not A). The two terms of this contradiction admit no third intermediate element and no solution, meaning that they annihilate each other without generating any further process. On the other hand, a *real opposition* is a contradiction of the type: (Black, White), or the case of 'two physical forces opposing one another'. In this case, the two terms of the contradiction do not necessarily cancel each other's existence, but rather admit a third pole which represents their solution. In fact, the solution for the first example would be "grey", whereas for the second one we would have "the resultant force".

[22] La Clau and Mouffe (1985), pg. 124.

> But in the case of *antagonism*, we are
> confronted with a different situation: the
> presence of the '*Other*' prevents me from
> being totally myself.[23]

The impossibility of being completely oneself without the reference to the other and without "transcending" oneself, is therefore the real essence of Laclau and Mouffe's antagonism. Here the core of the Marcusean discourse is entirely recaptured. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe start from the view of "negativity" as the heart of the Hegelian system, and point out that the Hegelian negation involves political engagement not due to its logical content, but rather because of its *transcendental* connotation. Consequently, both Marcuse and Laclau-Mouffe propose a transcendental idea of negation, which, as I will show next, is the theoretical basis for the development of a "negative identity."

2. Negative Identity.

Laclau and Mouffe's notion of transcendental negation parallels a conception of the social as completely unfixed and indeterminate; consequently, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* "identity" becomes a problematic concept. In my view, this aspect finds an important antecedent in Marcuse, whose discourse on the new technological society involves relevant consequences on the idea of 'subject'. Due to the operational logic previously described, it is spontaneous to infer that human identity risks to become, within the Marcusean society, *one-dimensional*; that is, limiting and oppressive.

The idea of "identity" is certainly related to forms of objectification and attachment. In order to have identity, we are compelled to postulate the existence of an object called the "self," to which it is possible to associate steadily

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[23] Laclau and Mouffe (1985) pg. 125.

specific images. The restriction of these attachments to excessively narrow scopes might lead the individual to perceive them as indispensable for his mental balance, for his relations with the others and, in extreme cases, for his own survival. When this happens, the sense of identity becomes obsessive and pathological. Marcuse's *one dimensional society* is definitely a society that exercises control by producing these types of attachments. First of all, Marcuse talks about attachments to commodities as a result of the creation of false needs: "We may distinguish both true and false needs. 'False' are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease."[24] Even though Marcuse does not provide concrete examples for these false needs, I do not think it is difficult to come up with some instances - the perceived need for technological tools, which apparently facilitate our lives, while simultaneously increasing laziness, generating obesity and diseases, certainly represent a valid example. People who associate their safety with certain medicines, developing an obsessive dependence, could stand for an other instance. In any case, what Marcuse points out is that individuals develop unhealthy attachments for these needs, which breed a pathological sense of identity: "No matter how much he *identifies* himself with them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they continue to be what they were from the beginning – products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression."[25] Thus, "identities" are portrayed in Marcuse's *one-dimensional society* as attachments to material objects and commodities.

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[24] Marcuse (1985) pg. 5.
[25] Ibidem.

The way to liberation from this type of mental attachments is through the proposed "negative" way. If oppression goes along with attachment and identification, then "detachment" will be the path toward freedom. Marcuse does not conceive of freedom as the class of choices which are available for the individuals: "The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual." Freedom is defined in terms of mental autonomy and independence of thought from predetermined schemes and addictions. Therefore, it will be conceived in terms of detachment, autonomy and de-identification, whereas freedom "from want" becomes "the concrete substance of all freedom."[26] According to these observations, the notion of "identity" is going to be rethought in a new way. Marcuse advocates a subject who does not attach himself to predetermined and rigid images, having the capability of questioning them repeatedly. In fact, many of those images might become *one-dimensional*. The subject described by Marcuse is a *two-dimensional* subject, who, through the negative component of his critical thought, is always open to a transcendent ethical dimension and to modify his ideas and his identity. This is certainly a Nietzschean subject, the snake portrayed in *Daybreak* that, in order to stay alive, is compelled to cast off its skin, overcoming its own self.[27] This necessity for defeating and conquering oneself, is also posited by Marcuse in formal terms when he explicitly questions the principle of identity: "The categorical S-p form states that (S) is not (S); (S) is defined as other than itself."[28] Accordingly, identity is something which is never reached, but it is in every case 'to come': "(S) must become that which it is."[29] With this statement, Marcuse clearly aims to show how pure dialectic

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[26] Marcuse (1964) pg.1.
[27] Nietzsche (1997) 573.
[28] Marcuse (1964) pg. 133.
[29] Ibidem.

thought contains structurally the Nietzschean idea of subject.

I would suggest classifying this notion of identity with the term *negative identity*. This idea of negative identity emerges in many parts of Marcuse's text, though not everywhere. In fact, it seems that for Marcuse some identities should not be deconstructed through this logic, but rather kept as positive categories. It is the case, for instance, of class-identity, which, due to the Marxian premises of Marcuse's philosophy, is still a fundamental presupposition for generating a revolutionary consciousness. Marcuse observes that the pathological sense of identity promoted by the technological society goes along with some important changes within the organization of labor. Particularly due to the utilization of the machines within the factories, which spare the workers from the heaviest and most tiring tasks, the contemporary society witnesses an increasing resemblance between productive and non-productive work, paralleling a decline of the "blue collar" force work with respect to the "white" collar element: "This kind of masterly enslavement is not essentially different from that of the typist, the bank teller, the high-pressure salesman or saleswoman, and the television announcer. Standardization and the routine assimilate productive and non-productive jobs."[30] As a result, the laborer is no longer the living contradiction of the system, since he has been ideologically incorporated within it, losing his sense of class belonging. Thus, Marcuse's sense of "negative detachment" is advocated with the purpose of the reconstruction of class identity, which is an indispensable tool for achieving revolutionary changes.

On the contrary, in Laclau and Mouffe's context every social category is deconstructed through the notion of "negative identity", which is, in my view, further developed. Along with attachment to material objects, Laclau and Mouffe

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[30] Marcuse (1964), pg.25.

classify every rigid auto-identification of the subject as dependent upon the capitalistic logic. In fact, all objectified identities are the result of the "commodification" of social relations:

> The commodification of social life destroyed previous relations, replacing them with commodity relations through which the logic of capitalist accumulation penetrated into increasingly numerous spheres.[31]

In this regard, they seem to extend the Marcusean discourse concerning "pathological attachments" to every type of social position or relation. From their point of view, every recognition of the self within a fixed category is the result of a consumerist logic and, therefore, could be considered as *one-dimensional*. Individuals who recognize themselves in their job, in their country or in their gender, respond to this consumerist discourse. All stigmatized categories, such as "sex," "race" or "nation" are an outcome of the same logic. "Identities" are sold by the consumerist society as *commodities*:

> 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.[32]

Thus, the Marcusean image of *one-dimensionality* seems to be extended by Laclau and Mouffe to the sense of class belonging as well. In this regard, Laclau and Mouffe carry out a deconstruction of the notion of "class" and express an

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[31] Laclau and Mouffe (1985), pg. 161.
[32] Ibidem, pg. 161.

appreciation of Marxian theories which do not assume its unity as a postulate. This is the case of revolutionary syndicalists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Georges Sorel, who conceive the working class as inevitably fragmented and undefined, and utilize it as a symbolic unification of the political struggles. Moreover, Gramsci's work is fundamental to Laclau and Mouffe's thinking on this matter, given that his notion of "historical bloc" moves from the rationalism and universalism of Marx toward a theory of a less unified social space: "It is equally evident that for Gramsci the organic ideology does not represent a purely classist and closed view of the world; it is formed instead through the articulation of elements which, considered in themselves, do not have any necessary class belonging."[33] The Gramscian perspective is adopted in *Hegemony* because class-identity is no longer a sufficient resource for supporting democracy. In fact, due to the proliferation of subject-positions and the consequent plurality of political struggles, a rigid notion of class would melt different antagonisms, such as urban, ecological, feminist and anti-racist, dragging them at the level of the relations of productions; however, this is an illegitimate theoretical move. For this reason, a rigid idea of identity has to be replaced by a "*negative identity*," which denotes the capability to switch one's own "self" according to a variety of socio-political issues, and is obtained through the reiterated application of the Marcusean "detachment." In this regard, it would seem that Marcuse's negative identity is *two-dimensional*, whereas Laclau and Mouffe's is *multi-dimensional*.

Bertram has observed that through the minimization of the role of the working class within the political context, Laclau and Mouffe risk to reduce their theory to a mere acceptance of the capitalist logic, without proposing a strong political alternative.[34] In this sense, Bertram talks about

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[33] Ibidem, pg. 68.
[34] Bertram (1995).

"dislocation" as the essence of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse: "For Laclau and Mouffe, there is no alternative to the dislocatory effects of capitalism. Their work attempts to continue the project of liberal capitalism while altering some of its traditional assumptions about the subject (i.e. the bourgeois ego). Postmodern dislocation is an intensified form of the interpellation of the subject under late capitalism."[35] According to his argument, the social subject would be described in *Hegemony* as a "dislocated" consumer: "The subject is free not because it exists outside of institutional control, or externals; it is free because it is dislocated."[36] For Bertram, the plurality of social movements described in *Hegemony* cannot carry out an efficient opposition against capitalism; whence, Laclau and Mouffe's philosophy does not contemplate revolutionary features. Certainly Bertram's observation has to be taken into account. However, I would not talk about 'dislocation' as the essence of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse. In fact, their attack on "identity" is not the mere acceptance of a separation between different antagonisms, but rather the attempt to create a socialist conjunction between them. Such conjunction would not be possible by pursuing a "positive" way which highlights the discrepancies between social groups: "It is because a *negative identity* cannot be represented indirectly, through an equivalence – i.e., *positively* – that it can only be represented indirectly, through an equivalence between its differential moments."[37] As a concrete example of their view, let us imagine a factory wherein the utilization of highly toxic materials jeopardizes the health of the workers, who are mostly immigrants. In this case, Laclau and Mouffe would suggest different social groups, such as the radical environmentalists and the anti-racism movements, to ponder their common interests and to join the working class for obtaining the installation of depuration systems. In this

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[35] Ibidem, pg. 85.
[36] Ibidem. Pg. 94.
[37] La Clau, Mouffe (1985) 128.

context, I do not think it is possible to conceive of the "negative subject" as the mere acceptance of the condition of the "consumer," as Bertram claims. Through the notion of "*negative identity*" Laclau and Mouffe mean rather to rely on the Althusserian view[38] that every fixed identification is overdetermined, namely defined through an oppressive imposition of meaning. For this reason, the steady attachment of the self to an identity perpetuates indefinitely an act of submission. This means that as long as a proletarian will perceive himself only according to the category of "class," and an "immigrant" will construct her identity through the idea of "nation," they will always accept a condition of inferiority. As Bertram himself acknowledges, the concept of citizenship is deconstructed with the same purpose: "The concept of citizenship, they tell us, was based on a model of the subject as a unified and unifying essence. Their conception of hegemony, then, allows for multiple subject positions that can form an axis of equivalence in order to further a plethora of democratic political ambitions."[39] Thus, considering oneself as belonging to a certain oppressed minority, such as "woman" or "foreign," would mean accepting political defeat from the beginning: "If, as was the case with women until the seventeenth century, the ensemble of discourses which constructed them as subjects fixed them purely and simply in a subordinated position, feminism as a movement of struggle against women's subordination could not emerge."[40] What helps political changes is the capability of the oppressed of perceiving himself in a flexible way, giving up his rigid sense of belonging; in this way, his position is never fully graspable on the side of the oppressor. This flexibility is the main resource for a socialist strategy which contemplates strong anarchic components and which is able to support an antagonistic pluralism. In fact, while a "popular struggle" divides the political space in two

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[38] Althusser (1971), pg 173.
[39] Betram (1993), pg.85.
[40] Laclau and Mouffe (1985) pg. 154.

sections, Laclau and Mouffe's democratic struggle splits it in numerous sections, never completely identifiable by oppressive powers. Thus, if Marcuse advocates the rebirth of class consciousness as well as the reestablishment of a two-dimensional political space, his move is not sufficient for Laclau and Mouffe, whose idea of *transcendence* is *multi-dimensional*.

Conclusion

As I have shown, Marcuse and Laclau/Mouffe's speculations on negative thinking have important repercussions on the philosophical problem of "identity." In particular, the idea of "negative identity" which is fully developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* can be better grasped if considered through Marcuse's Hegelianism. While most of the critics emphasize in Hegel aspects of mediation and reconciliation classifying his philosophy as an absolutist ontology, Marcuse reevaluates 'negativity' as the core of Hegel's Idealism which, for this reason, is subject-oriented and naturally lends itself to be used for critical purposes. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse depicts the dialectic method as the most effective theoretical resource for defeating the operational logic of the contemporary technological society, emphasizing the *transcendental* component of the Hegelian negation. The concept of *antagonism*, elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe, seems to be founded on a similar reading of Hegel and, in fact, recaptures the transcendental value that Marcuse references. Moreover, for these authors, the reevaluation of transcendence in critical thought entails a new manner of conceiving identity. As a release from the pathological attachments to commodities promoted by the capitalistic society, *One-dimensional Man* suggests to pursue a 'negative' de-identification, a notion which, in my view, is further developed by Laclau and Mouffe. In fact, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* the modern proliferation of subject-positions is explained as depending upon the consumerist "commodification" of all the social relations. Accordingly, a "negative identity" is theorized as a

perception of the self which rejects all fixed categories. Thus, while Marcuse's sense of "disconnection" is advocated with the purpose of reestablishing a *two-dimensional* class consciousness, which in his discourse is still a fundamental revolutionary instrument, Laclau and Mouffe's *negative identity* is utilized for supporting a pluralism of political struggles and is therefore *multi-dimensional*.

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