

Historical Materialism and Ordinary Language: Grammatical Peculiarities of the Class Struggle “Language Game”

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The postmarxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as the term *post-marxism* suggests, is supposed to transcend marxism. Marxism lacks a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the “symbolic” or “discursive” aspects of social existence. Laclau and Mouffe offer an alternative symbolic totality which they try to weld to Wittgenstein’s concept of “language game.” But there is a fundamental disjunction between Wittgenstein’s language game and postmarxist discourse: postmarxist discourse tells us only *how signs are related to each other* while Wittgenstein tells us that *we use words and actions to do things*. Wittgenstein’s focus on the use of language in social processes, in the context of a marxist theoretical framework, can help us to develop a *practical* understanding of the symbolic. The first steps in this direction, without the benefit of an acquaintance with Wittgenstein’s language games, already have been taken by Vološinov. His marxist philosophy of language provides the starting point for a historical materialist exploration of the generative powers of discourse.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) conceive postmarxism as a project intended to develop the expansive “logic of the symbol,” hitherto limited within the confines of the marxist superstructure, to a point where the fetters of the “literal” economic base are burst asunder. They think that they are finishing a job that was started by the likes of Luxemburg and

Gramsci, and pushed as far as marxism would allow by Althusser. Postmarxism finishes the job by abandoning Althusser's "last instance" of the economy.

What, in Laclau and Mouffe's postmarxism, is left from marxism once the symbolic subverts all literality?

All that is left of marxism is Althusser's concept of articulation. But now it "acquires a different theoretical status" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 109). Articulation is now genuine articulation, "a discursive practice which does not have a plane of constitution prior to, or outside, the dispersion of the articulated elements" (109). Once the last instance is abandoned, everything is articulated *and everything is constituted in that articulation*.

Laclau and Mouffe's Discursive Totality

There is nothing outside articulation to be represented. Although Laclau and Mouffe might object to the label of "totality" for their "discourse," they assert that everything socially relevant is somehow implicated in articulation, and that articulation is "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (105). Therefore, the ensemble of articulatory practices must constitute nothing less than "totality" or, as Laclau and Mouffe call it, a "structured totality" or a "discourse."¹ This totality can also be understood as an ensemble of "differential positions" articulated by articulatory practices. These differential positions are referred to as "moments" (105). Moments are contrasted with "elements," differential positions that are not articulated (105). Once some kind of relationship is established between elements, they are brought into discourse and therefore become moments, but not "fully" (110–1). An element is a kind of "floating signifier" (113) that acquires meaning (identity) through articulation in a relational ensemble (difference). But the identity thus acquired can never be exhaustive. There is an elemental capacity left over (hence, the transition from element to moment is never complete). This elemental leftover can be appropriated by yet another articulatory practice, thus changing the meaning by rearranging the relational ensemble. A new system of difference and, therefore, new identities are thereby created. But these are just as incomplete as they ever were. The process continues ad infinitum. Thus, totality (or discourse) is necessarily incomplete, continually in flux (111).

Nevertheless, the whole point of articulatory practice, in this model, is to aim at a sort of completion. The closed totality of "society" has been abandoned for the open

1. Laclau and Mouffe explain that insofar as the establishment of a relation among elements modifies their identity, a "structured totality" results (1985, 105). This never "fully constituted" structured totality is a discourse. And even though "the social" is never fully constituted either, the various ensembles of articulated practices come together to form one big discourse of "the impossible object": society (112). Even though there are elements that will eventually disturb this structured totality, thus creating new configurations of articulatory practices, these elements are meaningless until they too are brought into relation with the totality through articulatory practice.

totality of the “social,” but “the social only exists . . . as an effort to construct that impossible object [society]” (112). Articulatory practices are thus *attempts* at closure of the totality, but they are attempts that *must fail*. Articulatory practices fix meaning, but never absolutely. There are always elemental leftovers in articulated moments. Totality itself—discourse—“is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a center” (112). But there *is* no center. The center was abandoned, by Laclau and Mouffe, in the form of Althusser’s last instance.² Everything is now overdetermined. The last instance is thus *relativized*. It was one failed attempt to construct a center. Centers are now multiple. They are “privileged discursive points” or “nodal points” (112). Laclau and Mouffe thus summarize articulation as follows: “*The practice of articulation . . . consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity*” (113).

Laclau and Mouffe are careful here to disassociate themselves from idealism. They argue that “[t]he fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition” (108). The postmarxist position does not deny that “objects exist externally to thought” (108). There is a material reality that exists whether or not we think about it. Nevertheless, it is impossible for this reality to constitute itself “outside any discursive conditions of emergence” (108). We cannot know material reality “in itself,” outside discourse, because we can only look at it in the context of a totality of differential positions. Actual material objects *themselves* occupy some of these differential positions.

Therefore, Laclau and Mouffe claim to be affirming “the *material* character of every discursive structure” (108) in contrast to the model of representation that posits “an objective field constituted outside of any discursive intervention, and a discourse consisting of the pure expression of thought” (108). With the representation model, material reality is represented in a discourse consisting of thoughts, ideas, concepts, language, and so forth. But Laclau and Mouffe reject the “assumption of the *mental* character of discourse” (108). In lieu of the representation model, they propose their own articulation model where “linguistic and non-linguistic elements . . . constitute a differential and structured system of positions—that is a discourse” (108). And, since these “differential positions include . . . a dispersion of very di-

2. Of course, Althusser argues that his dual principles of “determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production” and “the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity” constitute a *decentering* of the Hegelian dialectic. Hegelian consciousness, to avoid idealism, would require “circles *with another center than itself—decentered circles*—for it to be affected at its center by their effectivity, in short for its essence to be over-determined by them” (Althusser 1990, 102). Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe would argue that Althusser manages to decenter totality only up until the “last instance,” where a final recentering takes place. Laclau and Mouffe see themselves as carrying Althusser’s operation of decentering through to the conclusion that, because of his commitments to marxism as Laclau and Mouffe perceive it, he could not accept.

verse material elements” (108), the charge of idealism is more properly leveled at so-called materialists who think that discourse is a ghostly, imperfect, subjective representation of objective, material reality that exists “outside of any discursive intervention” (108).

Discourse: A “Language Game” or “Playing with Words”?

The post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein’s argument against nominalism seems to parallel the postmarxist argument against representation. Like the postmarxists, Wittgenstein points out the capacity of social agents to construct themselves and their environment with their words and their actions. He does not accept the notion that words are simply a way to represent material objects that have an “ultimate literality.” Although Wittgenstein starts out with this nominalist picture of language in his *Tractatus*, he later comes to the conclusion that it ignores the way our words actually function in their ordinary social contexts. This is why Wittgenstein becomes a philosopher of “ordinary language.” Unlike his approach in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1968) does not start from the abstract, constructing a model of how language ought to work in order to apply that model to actual cases. Instead, he does numerous case studies in order to clarify how language actually functions when it is used to get things done. In doing so, he reveals the lacunae of his past nominalism.

Wittgenstein calls these case studies in ordinary language use “language games.” Laclau and Mouffe see an adumbration of their discursive totality in the Wittgensteinian language game: “Language games, in Wittgenstein, include within an indissoluble totality both language and the actions interconnected with it” (1985, 108). Since Wittgenstein is trying to show how ordinary language is actually used in particular social circumstances, his language games involve people using words combined with actions to get things done. Thus, in the language game cited by Laclau and Mouffe, there are two builders who use blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams along with the words “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam” in cooperative work to build a structure (108).³ It is the combination of the actual building stones, the actions of the workers and the words that they utter that gives meaning to any one of these elements. This whole structure of meaning is the language game. Wittgenstein does not accept the notion that the words simply represent the material objects of the language game. The words “play a part” in the language game. Speaking a word is an *action* on par with moving a building stone. According to Laclau and Mouffe, these two types of action, and the material objects involved, “constitute a differential and structured system of positions—that is, a discourse” (108).

However, to call language games a “totality,” discursive or otherwise, is profoundly un-Wittgensteinian. Wittgenstein finds the game metaphor to be useful precisely because it is impossible to specify *in general* how the different elements of *all* games

3. The example is from Wittgenstein (1968, pt. 1, sec. 2, 3e).

perform their respective functions. One can understand the function of a game “piece” or a game “word” only by looking at the concrete situation in which it is imbedded. Nor can one define what games are *as a whole*, or as a totality. Each game must be understood in its own terms in order to understand its relationship to other games.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? . . . For if you look at them you will not see something common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. . . .

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (Wittgenstein 1968, pt. 1, sec. 66, 31e–32e)

Just as games must be understood in their own terms, so too must language games be examined in their particular social contexts in order to see what relates them to other language games in other social contexts. There are “family resemblances” like “the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc.” that “overlap and criss-cross,” but none are common to the whole family, or set of games (pt. 1, sec. 67, 32e). Wittgenstein warns against being misled by the uniform “clothing of our language” (pt. 2, sec. xi, 224e) into the view that there is a uniformity to the “whole” language game. He emphasizes, instead, the “prodigious diversity of all the every-day language-games” (pt. 2, sec. xi, 224e).

Laclau and Mouffe’s totalization of Wittgenstein’s concept of “language game” is entirely at cross-purposes with the reasoning behind the game metaphor. The construction of a totality out of a “differential and structured system of positions” is an instance of what Wittgenstein calls “playing with words”: “if someone wished to say: ‘There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties’—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: ‘Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres’” (pt. 1, sec. 67, 32e).

Postmarxism makes the discursive construction of the social consist of the “articulation” of commonality and disjunction or, in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, “equivalence and difference.” And since equivalence and difference are mapped onto the liberal democratic principles of equality and liberty, this amounts to making the liberal-democratic language game what constitutes the social totality. It is a social totality that functions as liberal democracy.

As we have already observed, the elements are worked upon and partially fixed as moments around nodal points. The partial fixation of meaning works according to two opposed but mutually reinforcing “logics” of equivalence and difference. The establishment of relations of equivalence among elements is the basis for the “antagonisms” that make society impossible. The establishment of relations of difference among elements is a tendency toward the construction of the impossibility of society.

How do relations of equivalence constitute the basis for social antagonisms, and how do differences tend toward the construction of the impossible object of society? Conceptually, the moment of difference is the founding moment of the postmarxist totality. Equivalence is a continuous subversion that both presupposes and is presupposed by the totality it subverts. Nevertheless, equivalential meaning is a “second” meaning, “parasitic on the first [differential meaning]” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 127). “Society,” insofar as it is able to constitute itself as this impossible object, is a system of differences. This is essentially a model of the social totality based on the Saussurean model of the linguistic totality. In fact, despite their previously stated intention to include nonlinguistic elements in their social totality, Laclau and Mouffe slip back and forth quite easily between the respective totalities of “language” and “society” (125–6). It is clear that social totality is conceived as a semiological system and that, like Saussure (1972, 73), Laclau and Mouffe find the “master pattern” for all semiology in language.

Although a society of purely constituted difference is, strictly speaking, impossible, Laclau and Mouffe draw examples of this tendency from the “one nation” ideology of Disraeli and the “positivist illusion” of welfare-state ideology (1985, 130). In these cases, there is a more or less stable system of differences where the meaning of each element is transformed into a moment in the social ensemble. The examples are taken from narrative pleas for social peace rather than concrete case studies because the social totality is always penetrated by antagonisms. Social totality, as such, can only take on illusory forms. Just as Derrida (1978, 280) shows that the Saussurean linguistic totality must necessarily subvert itself (due to the necessary failure of the “transcendental signified” to achieve absolute presence), Laclau and Mouffe extend the same principle to their social totality. “If language is a system of differences, antagonism is the failure of difference: in that sense, it situates itself within the limits of language and can only exist as the disruption of it—that is, as metaphor . . . for every language and every society are constituted as a repression of the consciousness of the impossibility that penetrates them” (125).

How do relations of equivalence subvert the social totality and thus constitute the basis for social antagonisms? Laclau and Mouffe suggest the example of a colonized country to demonstrate a society that is particularly “impossible” due to its division by a very clear antagonism, that of the colonizer and the colonized. This antagonism is “made evident through a variety of contents: differences of dress, of language, of skin colour, of customs” (127). But these “differences,” insofar as they constitute a social antagonism, are only strictly differentiated in a bipolar way. They are differences that have equivalent social meanings: “Thus equivalence creates a second social meaning which, though parasitic on the first, subverts it: the differences cancel one other out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all” (127). The bipolar organization of social space is not, however, capable of completely dissolving social totality.

For if we could differentiate the chain of equivalences with regard to something other than that which it opposes, its terms could not be exclusively defined in a negative

manner [bi-polar opposition] . . . If society is not totally possible, neither is it totally impossible. This allows us to formulate the following conclusion: if society is never transparent to itself because it is unable to constitute itself as an objective field, neither is antagonism entirely transparent, as it does not manage totally to dissolve the objectivity of the social. (129).

Laclau and Mouffe argue that this postmarxist position develops the Gramscian concepts of articulation and hegemony beyond the “essentialism” that was blocking them in the marxist framework. For postmarxism, the bipolar antagonism of class is no longer the central antagonism around which other antagonisms are articulated in a fundamentally bipolar hegemonic formation. The configuration of antagonisms in the postmarxist hegemonic formation can be articulated in a completely unpredictable variety of patterns, some of which will tend toward bipolarity, but the bipolar hegemonic formation will be the *exception to the rule*. Gramsci argued that oppositional struggle, insofar as its goal was fundamental social transformation, would have to develop the working-class end of this bipolar formation, welding together the diverse groups into a counterhegemonic force with a class project. The postmarxist position is that oppositional struggle involves articulating many diverse bipolar antagonisms, none of which are central, while allowing each particular struggle its autonomy within the counterhegemonic force. Whatever counterhegemonic project develops from this situation will have no necessary class character (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 137).

The tendentially bipolar hegemonic formation, whether divided between capital and labor or between colonizer and colonized, is characterized as a situation productive of “popular” struggle. This situation is more typical of the Third World than of Western societies. Western societies, since the French Revolution, have tended to develop more complex configurations of antagonisms. Popular struggles have petered out over the past two hundred years, being replaced by “democratic” struggles. “Democratic” struggles involve a multiplicity of antagonistic relationships. Since the central antagonism of popular struggles is now recognized as a constructed center that only partially fixes social meaning, “it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of ‘democratic struggle,’ and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among the democratic struggles” (137).

Democratic struggles operate within the framework provided by liberal democracy while taking as their goal the deepening of the latter’s social meaning. Thus, it is argued, “*The task of the Left . . . cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy*” (176). Both the “liberal” and the “democratic” sides of liberal democracy are integral to postmarxist democratic struggles. Liberty, so valued within liberal discourse, is the principle that protects the autonomy or the “difference” of the multifarious democratic struggles. Equality, a principle that must be given its due for any system to call itself democratic, allows the demands brought out by “equivalences” of antagonisms a degree of legitimacy. There is, in other words, a mapping

of difference onto liberalism and liberty, on the one hand, and a mapping of equivalence onto democracy and equality on the other. Paradoxically, any struggle that looks beyond liberal democracy thus appears as an attempt at “closure”—an attempt to fix a system of differences, or a bipolar antagonism, with an absolute meaning.

Democracy requires both the democratic equality of the democratic revolution and the liberal liberty that has been articulated with it. Democracy without the ethical principle of liberalism is not really democracy at all. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe conflate democracy and *liberal* democracy. Their decentered, pluralist, counterhegemonic project is, therefore, not only “internal to the democratic revolution” (156) but also internal to the current liberal democratic system. And however “radical” it is claimed to be, it does not look beyond liberal democracy. Liberal democracy is the meta-language game that makes all the democratic-struggle language games possible.

Ironically, this means that any fundamental *challenge* to the current liberal democratic system is, *by definition*, an attempt to institute an antidemocratic “closure.” Such a challenge would either present one democratic set of equivalences as constitutive of counterhegemony as such, or it would present the “nation” as a stable system of differences. The equivalential challenge would mean a subordination of all difference to one equivalential opposition. Laclau and Mouffe seem to have as their model, here, a centralized state-socialist alternative to liberal democracy, where all difference is labeled “bourgeois” and purged by violent means. The differential challenge would mean an active valuation of the differences that make up the “nation,” while chains of equivalence are labeled “unpatriotic” allegiances and are broken up by violent means. The fascist state best represents this alternative. Despite the language of “equivalence” and “difference,” we can see that this is a very old and familiar argument for liberal democracy. It is the same argument that Karl Popper (1962, 63, 162) made in the 1940s, for the liberal democratic “open” society and against the fascist and communist “closed” societies. And if the choice is between liberal democracy, fascism, and Stalinism, it is obvious which alternative is most “open.”

The conservative politics of Laclau and Mouffe are not unrelated to their transformation of the Wittgensteinian language-game concept. The fundamental disjunction between the Wittgensteinian language game and postmarxist social totality can be stated as follows: the former is an “antimodel” while the latter is a “metamodel.” The language-game antimodel allows for the greatest possible variance in its application to particular contexts. The meaning of any word or action is *entirely dependent on its particular social context*: how it is used in “ordinary language.” There are language games that have *nothing* in common save their linguistic “clothing.” The social totality metamodel starts from this universal linguistic integument and derives a *functioning semiological system*. As I have argued, Laclau and Mouffe conceive social totality on the Saussurean linguistic model of mutually related *signs* (although signs include nonlinguistic elements, this does not change the fact that language is the master pattern). The words and actions that make up language games find their ultimate social meaning in the semiological system. Their meaning depends

on their articulation as differential and equivalential moments, which both constitute and dissolve social totality, or “discourse.” It may appear on the face of it that Laclau and Mouffe, like Wittgenstein, are not positing something common to all the various language games, but merely that they are all mutually related in ways similar to the various games in Wittgenstein’s list. But Laclau and Mouffe do not merely say that language games are related in a variety of unpredictable patterns. They claim that language games are all *symbolically* related⁴ on the model of commonality and disjunction or equivalence and difference. This claim is then *reified* when equivalence and difference are mapped onto equality and liberty, respectively. With the first move Laclau and Mouffe are playing with words—they are constructing a false common element that runs through the thread. With the second move they are saying that this word play is real, that the common element that runs through the thread is a very important property of the thread that tells us what we can do with it. Since liberty and equality are what constitute the thread, we can only do liberal democratic things with it (unless we want to live in a “closed” social totality).

Even though “actions” are part of Laclau and Mouffe’s semiological system, neither actions nor words are actually *doing* anything here the way that they do things in ordinary language games. The only thing that “gets done” in postmarxist discourse is the establishment of new differential and equivalential relations through the rearticulation of elements. Signs are mutually related, but things get done only at the level of speech (*parole*). This is where signs are *used* for particular purposes.

Laclau and Mouffe use Wittgenstein’s example of two workers building a wall to illustrate their concept of discourse. Here, something gets done; a wall is built. The actions and the words of the builders are *used* and *meant* in this context of *doing something*. When Laclau and Mouffe go on to discuss the differential and equivalential relations of words and actions that constitute discourse, one is given the impression that they are suggesting that equivalence and difference somehow render the building of the wall possible in the way that Saussurean language (*langue*) renders speech (*parole*) possible. But they never come back to explain the *doing* of anything else.

Laclau and Mouffe go on, in their fourth and final chapter, to explain two hundred years of history as the play of differential and equivalential logics. History *happens*, but nothing *gets done*. Workers recognize certain commonalities among themselves that put them in opposition to the bourgeoisie, but the fact that they recognize these commonalities while building walls, or *doing* other things for their bosses, seems incidental.⁵ Gender equivalences are established in a similar way. The fact that things in the home and workplace are *done* in a gendered way seems unimportant.⁶ Furthermore, these struggles are autonomous not because workers and women *do* dif-

4. This is the significance of Laclau and Mouffe’s claim: “Every social practice is . . . in one of its dimensions—articulatory” (1985, 113).

5. “Socialist” issues are put on the agenda because relations of political equality between the ensemble of the citizenry can be seen as inconsistent with relations of economic inequality (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 156).

6. Political equality is revealed to be inconsistent with gender inequality and, voilà, feminism is born (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 154).

ferent things, but because liberal ideology allows the distinct oppositions of class and gender to be autonomously articulated.

By contrast, Wittgensteinian language games explain precisely how words and actions are used to *get things done*: how *A* and *B* use words and actions to build a wall, how one uses words and actions to make boilers according to calculations so that boiler explosions will be less likely, how the words and actions of student and teacher allow the former to become adept at applying a mathematical formula (Wittgenstein 1968, pt. 1, sec. 2, 3e, sec. 466, 133e, sec. 131, 59e). And the relations between the elements of these diverse language games are not sign-to-sign relations on a structuralist or poststructuralist model. Words and actions do not form a system of differences. They are functioning components of social processes, both of which are constantly undergoing change. Nevertheless, because Wittgenstein is so focused on the specific dynamics of each language game, he offers very little in the way of direct insight into the politics and struggles that cut across the various language games.

The Politics of Language Games

It is V. N. Vološinov who allows us to bring out the politics of language games. Until quite recently, Vološinov was an obscure figure, both within the marxist tradition and among philosophers of language.⁷ His unorthodox approach to his object of study made him a target of Stalinist censorship and repression and his principal work, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language* (1973), was only translated into English more than forty years after its publication in Russian. A Russian marxist writing during the 1920s, Vološinov was ignorant of Wittgenstein's post-*Tractatus* writings. His work nevertheless can be read as an extension of Wittgensteinian philosophy into social and political domains. Vološinov takes as his starting point for a marxist philosophy of language the "utterance."⁸ The utterance, in Wittgensteinian terms, might be called a "move" in a language game. It is an act that is part of a social process. Just as a move has a purpose in a language game, an utterance has a purpose in a dialogue (Vološinov 1973, 110–2). There are many different social contexts in which dialogue occurs. The various dialogical forms associated with different social contexts are called "genres." Like Wittgenstein's language games, genres are social processes where people do things with words and actions. And just as the concept of the language game is used to show how ordinary language actually works, so Vološinov's concept of the "behavioral genre" is used to show the generative power

7. It is well known that Vološinov was part of the 1920s Russian intellectual milieu that influenced M. M. Bakhtin. Vološinov participated in what later became known as the "Bakhtin circle," whose work, until recently, was thought to be entirely the product of M. M. Bakhtin. Among the philosophers profoundly influenced by Vološinov after his publication in English is Raymond Williams, who countered the "system" approach to language found in some forms of structuralist marxism with Vološinov's "social process" approach (1977, 35–8).

8. "Marxist philosophy of language should and must stand squarely on the utterance as the real phenomenon of language-speech and as a socioideological structure" (Vološinov 1973, 97).

of “real-life utterances” (96). There are distinctly effective ways of dialoguing within various social processes:

casual causerie of the drawing room where everyone “feels at home” . . . Here we find devised special forms of insinuation, half-sayings, allusions to little tales of an intentionally nonserious character, and so on . . . conversation between husband and wife, brother and sister, etc. . . . a random assortment of people . . . waiting in a line or conducting some business . . . Village sewing circles, urban carouses, workers’ lunchtime chats, etc. . . . The behavioral genre fits everywhere into the channel of social intercourse assigned to it . . .

The production processes of labour and the processes of commerce know different forms for constructing utterances. (97)

It is clear that the forms of effective dialogue, appropriate to their respective genres, are as diverse and untotalizable as Wittgenstein’s language games. Nevertheless, according to Vološinov, they do form a “unified whole” (18). Vološinov is not saying that the various genres are unified by “the disjunction of all their common properties.” He is not “playing with words” in the Wittgensteinian sense. He is not saying the common element running through the thread is the continuous overlapping of fibers but rather, is pointing to an actual thread that connects all the diverse elements. Speech genres form a unified whole because their diverse contexts are all formed by interactions between “socially organized persons” (21). The basis for this claim is actually implicit in Wittgenstein. As Anthony Kenny has shown, the post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein came “to believe that the datum on which language rests, the framework into which it fits, is given . . . by a shifting pattern of forms of life grafted on to a basic common human nature” (1973, 224). For philosophers like Jean-François Lyotard (1993, 21), Wittgenstein’s “anthropological assumption” constitutes a “humanist obstacle” to be overcome,⁹ but it is precisely this humanist perspective that allows Vološinov to claim that speech genres “are entirely determined by production relations and the sociopolitical order” (21).

This contradicts Wittgenstein’s assertion that there is no one thing common to all the diverse activities that we call “games,” but it does not do so by playing with words. Rather than pointing to the disjunction of all the common properties of the various games, Vološinov points to *the common humanity of those people (speakers and addressees) who are implicated in the various games*. Wittgenstein also contradicts *himself* this way.¹⁰ This contradiction can, of course, be resolved in an *antihumanist* fashion. We find the postmodern form of this resolution in Lyotard (1993), and the

9. By replacing Wittgenstein’s “anthropological assumption” that “people make use of language” with the antihumanist assumption that language makes use of people, Lyotard (1993, 21) effectively removes all extralinguistic elements from his Wittgensteinian- and Bakhtinian-influenced analysis of language games.

10. “The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language” (Wittgenstein 1968, pt. 1, sec. 206, 82e). One kind of common behavior is “pain behavior,” which sets grammatical limits on how we use the word “pain” (pt. 1, sec. 293, 295, 303, 304, 100e–2e).

“postmodern materialist” form in Diskin and Sandler (1993).¹¹ Diskin and Sandler’s resolution is of particular interest, since they offer criticisms of Laclau and Mouffe that problematize the postmarxists’ failure to apply Wittgensteinian method to the economic sphere. Their critique is similar to my own insofar as it implies that the reification of equivalence and difference as equality and liberty creates blind spots in postmarxism that are endemic to bourgeois political economy, but the postmodern materialist perspective differs from mine in its rejection of the humanist elements of Wittgenstein. For postmodern materialism, Wittgenstein is *right* to argue that games have no one thing in common. Laclau and Mouffe are therefore criticized for their failure to include class as one of the many fibers that come together to form the thread of the social totality (Diskin and Sandler 1993, 38–9). I, however, will go further, arguing that in capitalist societies class exploitation occupies a strategic centrality in the organization of the very activities that make us human. Thus, in the present context, class constitutes a common element that runs through the thread of the social whole.

This form of class centrality is inspired by Vološinov. For Vološinov, utterances are made by various speakers and are received by various addressees within a “sign community” (1973, 23). Speakers and addressees all have their own respective “orientations” in terms of “social interest.” The cacophony of dialogue within the diverse speech genres is where “differently oriented social interests” intersect (23). Differently oriented social interests are thought primarily (but not exclusively) in terms of class opposition. Within the various sign communities, utterances will be spoken and heard differently, with differing “accents,” depending on the social orientation of the speaker or addressee. It is this “multiaccentuality” that makes the sign itself “an arena of the class struggle” (23).

Vološinov does not say *why* he thinks of orientation to social interest primarily in terms of class, but he does single out the behavioral genres found in “production processes of labour and the processes of commerce.”¹² These behavioral genres are central to the organization of other dialogical forms. Genres of surplus extraction are somehow more “basic.” But how can we differentiate between more and less “basic” genres of discourse?

The most “basic” dialogical processes will be those processes that are of the greatest strategic importance in the organization of what Len Doyal and Roger Harris (1983, 65) call “constitutive activities.” In class-divided societies, surplus extraction has a central role in organizing these activities. Constitutive activities are subdialogical in the sense that they are a “translation bridgehead . . . [between radically different cultures] which is not language-dependent”:

11. The term “postmodern materialism” comes from Antonio Callari and David Ruccio (1996). The broader epistemological implications of postmodern materialist, antihumanist Wittgensteinianism are developed by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (1987).

12. Vološinov lists a whole series of behavioral genres in a lengthy paragraph (1973, 96–7), followed by a one-sentence paragraph: “The production processes of labour and the processes of commerce know different forms for constructing utterances” (97).

[I]t will be recognized that any form of human life will require them [constitutive activities] in some way or another for physical survival. For example . . . both translator and aliens will share a certain measure of understanding of the distinctively human and social ways of doing a variety of different sorts of things (e.g., eating, sleeping, agricultural production, reproducing, construction, sheltering, healing, playing, etc.) None of these can be done in just any old way. (65).

Doyal and Harris's analyses of constitutive activities are an unpacking of Wittgenstein's pregnant statement: "The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (1968, pt. 1, sec. 206, 82e).

The common behavior of constitutive activities brings us to the really *foundational* material limitations on human social interaction. We must *always* eat, sleep, produce, and reproduce in "distinctively human and social ways." While recognizing these material limitations is important, there is a sense in which they are uninteresting. They do not present us with choices. We must always do these things, whatever dialogical practices we engage in. Things become interesting only when we consider how constitutive practices are organized in dialogical practice. We must always engage in constitutive activities, but we can do so in a multitude of ways. Nevertheless, these choices are not simply a series of potentialities laid out before us. They are structured by more or less basic dialogical processes. Developments at the level of the most basic dialogical processes will have consequences that extend throughout the cacophony of discursive genres. The most basic dialogical processes in class-divided societies are the genres of surplus extraction. Since the organization of surplus extraction has such a wide range of consequences for the organization of constitutive activities, it profoundly structures the very building blocks that other dialogical processes have to work with. Of course, other dialogical processes structure constitutive activities and therefore have a reciprocal effect on the organization of surplus extraction, but the reciprocal relation is not a symmetrical one.

The asymmetry of the relation between the process of surplus extraction and other dialogical processes is most economically expressed in the following formulation: nonclass genres of discourse that hierarchically organize speakers and addressees are both functional and dysfunctional to surplus extraction, but they are *necessarily dysfunctional* to a working-class project with the aim of replacing capitalist surplus extraction with the self-organization of direct producers. Movements to challenge nonclass forms of hierarchy can exploit the dysfunctional contradictions of their respective hierarchies with surplus extraction, thus can use the power of capital to advance their respective causes. A working-class movement cannot advance the struggle to overcome surplus extraction by using the power of nonclass hierarchies because those hierarchies are necessarily antithetical to the goal. Thus, the dialogical processes of surplus extraction organize speakers and addressees in such a way that a radical transformation of all social hierarchies demands the continual affirmation, from all fronts, of a working-class project in opposition to capital.

In capitalist society, with the important exception of capitalists, each of us must at least partially accept the “role” of “worker.” We must speak and be spoken to as workers. We must enter into “equal exchanges” of labor-power for wages. We must accept this role in order to be human in the most basic sense: in order to survive. But this “equal exchange” is synonymous with exploitation. One of the partners in the exchange extracts a surplus while the other must be content with mere survival. In fact, at a macrolevel, this game must continually produce surplus extraction. Each individual capitalist is constrained by competition such that survival as capital depends on capital accumulation. On the other hand, the fact that the continual accumulation of capital can only continue through the production of mere survival for its human component, constitutes the very contradiction that makes the sign an arena of class struggle.¹³ Whether workers are organized or unorganized, politicized or “apolitical,” there will always be contradictions between the uniaxential capitalist category of “wage-labor” and the multiaxential dialogue of people who are constrained in such a way that they must perform it.

Although the process of capital accumulation has a “structural indifference” to “extra-economic identities” (Wood 1995, 267) and, in principle, works just as well with black, white, male, or female wage-labor, it is nevertheless functionally integrated with nonclass hierarchies such as sexism and racism. Sexism and racism also structure constitutive activities. For instance, in patriarchal societies, human beings are generally constrained such that they must take up some gender position on a “heterosexual matrix.”¹⁴ People must speak and be spoken to as gender roles. These gender roles structure our eating, sleeping, production, and reproduction. These gender roles have been functionally integrated with capital accumulation. For instance, predominantly female labor in the household allows capital to externalize some of the costs of reproduction of labor-power, and predominantly female work ghettos function as a method of distribution of “shit work” with a built-in legitimation mechanism that also divides the working class against itself. Moreover, when women experience exploitation, they always experience it *as women*. Sexist exploitation is not simply “economic” surplus extraction with sexism “added on.” And part of the reason sexism is so effective in dividing the working class against itself is that male workers derive *material benefit* from sexist exploitation even while being exploited themselves.

13. This is the contradiction expressed in volume 1 of *Capital* as Marx makes the transition from the sphere of circulation (equal exchange) to the sphere of production (exploitation): “He who was previously the money-owner now strides out in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like someone who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning” (1977, 280).

14. I am using Judith Butler’s (1990, 151 n. 6) term here in the way that she explicitly defines it. The heterosexual matrix designates “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.” The assumption made here is “that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.”

There are all kinds of reasons women and men should organize to subvert the heterosexual matrix. Just as workers must constantly engage in dialogical struggles that pit their multiaccultural aspirations against capital's insistence that they accept their given role of "wage-labor," so must gendered human beings struggle to subvert their assigned gender roles within the heterosexual matrix. The thesis that the sign is an arena of class contradiction is repeated in feminist theory by Judith Butler, when she argues: "The injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (1990, 145). As they are currently constituted, gender roles constrain how we eat, sleep, produce, and reproduce in ways that are clearly undesirable for those not on the "top" of the male/female, straight/gay divisions. *One* of the many reasons for subverting gender roles is that the working class should be able to confront its exploiters with a greater degree of solidarity if it is less divided along gender lines. But the subversion of the heterosexual matrix is not synonymous with the subversion of capitalist exploitation.

If gender struggles are not integrated into a working-class project, there is no reason to expect capitalist exploitation to be challenged. At best, capitalist exploitation could be reformed such that it is no longer functionally integrated with the heterosexual reproductive matrix. State-funded day care, for instance, could replace some of the "externalities" of predominantly female household labor. "Shit work" could be distributed along racist and/or "meritocratic"¹⁵ lines and no longer distributed along sexist ones. In other words, the basic fact that some people must sell their labor-power to survive would remain. What would change would be *the way* that this exploitation occurs. Women might experience exploitation, or even racist exploitation, but would no longer experience sexist exploitation. The unprecedented successes of the women's movement during the past centuries of expansion of capitalist surplus extraction speak to the possibility of potential advances in this direction.

Reformism along these lines is possible, at least in part, because the functional integration of surplus extraction and the heterosexual matrix is not without contradiction. There are also ways in which sexism is *dysfunctional* to surplus extraction. As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, "the development of capitalism has created ideological pressures *against* such [extra-economic] inequalities and differences to a degree with no precedent in pre-capitalist societies" (1995, 267). It can, of course, be argued that working-class struggles that fail to integrate themselves with a feminist project might successfully challenge capitalist exploitation but would leave patriarchy intact. Structurally, however, it is much more difficult for an anticapitalist workers' struggle to ignore sexism than it is for an antipatriarchal feminist struggle to ignore surplus extraction. Because of the functional integration of the heterosexual matrix and surplus extraction, which includes the internal divi-

15. "Meritocracy," in this context, simply means discrimination on the basis of access to education and whatever "natural advantages" people are lucky enough to inherit.

sion of the working class, for those who seek to overthrow capitalism there is a strategic advantage to putting the heterosexual matrix on the agenda. And the dysfunctional contradictions between the heterosexual matrix and capitalist surplus extraction do not manifest themselves in forms that allow patriarchal power to be used for the achievement of socialism (although it might be useful for resisting certain forms of commodification while leaving the basic structure of capitalist exploitation intact). Yet, the subversion of the heterosexual matrix does not necessarily achieve a strategic advantage in the fight to put anticapitalism on the agenda. This is what gives such force to liberal feminism.

It is quite possible for feminists to seek to split apart the functional integration of sexism and surplus extraction by exploiting the contradictions of the relation between the two, such that the considerable material power accumulated in the form of capital is actually used to *undermine* sexism. It can be and is argued that the distribution of “shit work” along gender lines is illegitimate (and therefore undermines the legitimacy of capitalism) and inefficient (and therefore undermines the viability of capitalism). The externalization of costs associated with the reproduction of labor-power can be argued against in a similar fashion. There are other ways for capital to get its “dirty work” done and there may, in fact, be considerable advantages for long-term capital accumulation to be gleaned from an evolution from sexist distribution of “shit work” to racist and meritocratic distribution.

It is much more difficult for workers seeking to challenge capitalist surplus extraction to use the power of patriarchy to these ends. Obviously this does not mean that a workers’ movement cannot be sexist. But a workers’ movement that ignores the heterosexual matrix and the benefits that straight, male workers derive from it does itself a strategic disservice insofar as its objective is the challenging of surplus extraction. A workers’ movement that is not anticapitalist, but merely seeks to improve the relative position of some of its members, can strategically use straight male privilege to achieve its ends, but these ends *obfuscate* rather than express the contradiction between the role of “wage-labor” and those constrained in such a way that they must perform it. Failure to challenge the *sexist* aspect of sexist exploitation is a strategic mistake here, not merely because it perpetuates divisions within the working class but also because the continued acceptance by straight male workers of the benefits they derive from the heterosexual matrix that does the “dirty work” of capitalism serves as an ideological support for surplus extraction itself. Sexism is an investment that straight male workers have in a system that nevertheless exploits them.

Socialists, of course, can and do make strategic mistakes, but it should be clear that sexism is dysfunctional to working-class struggles in a way that surplus extraction is not with respect to feminist struggles. In fact, nonpatriarchal capitalism is constantly being imagined in the form of a gender role “parody” that creates subjects that are misfits in the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990, 142–9). These misfits cannot properly speak or be spoken to in the heterosexual matrix, yet somehow fit into the roles of speakers and addressees engaged in the equal exchanges that consti-

tute surplus extraction.¹⁶ One can “play” with gender roles in a way that one cannot play with class roles. A penis is little more than a “prop” in a very powerful theater piece, but those who possess the means of production hold the *material* means of working-class survival. Of course, it is often the case that women are materially dependent on men for their survival, but there is a qualitative difference between this instance which is *often* the case and the instance of working-class dependence which is *always and necessarily* the case. A butch/femme lesbian couple can subvert the norms of the heterosexual matrix very well without a penis. Workers can challenge the norms of the capital genre by satirizing the capitalist, but the expropriators must be *physically* expropriated before the real impact of their “parody” can be felt. This expropriation demands a unity that can only be achieved by overcoming the divisions in the working class bred by sexism and racism.

Integrating feminist struggles with the working-class struggle is not a simple, harmonious process. For instance, it means female workers confronting male workers with their complicity in sexist exploitation while demanding that all workers struggle together to end all forms of exploitation. This is what it means to struggle against a *sexist exploitation* that is more than “economic” exploitation with sexism “added on.” Nevertheless, capital accumulation and exploitation can continue without sexist forms of exploitation. All that is required for capital accumulation is wage-labor and, if feminist struggles limit themselves to equality for “extraeconomic” gender identities, then capital is effectively let off the hook.

I have abstracted here from the concrete, lived experience of exploitation that is always sexist and racist, and have abstracted from feminist, antiracist, and anticapitalist struggles that are historically inseparable, not in the interest of separating struggles that work best when they are united. These abstractions are useful because they clarify the specific role played by the dialogical processes of surplus extraction. By making these abstractions, we are able to see that the dialogical processes of surplus extraction organize speakers and addressees as workers and capitalists whose very survival depends on their continual dialogical engagement in these roles. Furthermore, gender and race roles can be functionally integrated with this social hierarchy, but they can also be challenged without endangering the capitalist/worker hierarchy. An anticapitalist working-class project, however, is structurally antithetical to all forms of hierarchy. It is thus the working-class project that has the capacity to

16. The functional integration of surplus extraction and the heterosexual matrix often means that options for where sexual misfits can fit into equal exchanges will be severely limited. Gayle Rubin has suggestively characterized this as a blockage of what Marx identified as “the great civilizing influence of capital” (1971, 94). Rubin argues that “[k]eeping sex from realizing the positive effects of the market economy hardly makes it socialist” (1993, 20). She is arguing that legislation against prostitutes’ right to sell their services in a safe environment or against the sale of sexually “deviant” porn, whether it is defended from a religious fundamentalist perspective or a feminist perspective, reinforces oppressive sexual codes. While this does not mean that purchase and sale of sexual commodities will make people free, it would give capitalism a sorely needed push in the direction that Marx and Engels thought it was clearly moving when they argued that “[d]ifferences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class” (1978, 479). Obviously there are other struggles that are needed to bridge “extraeconomic” divisions, and all of these together must be part of socialist struggle.

act as a unifying principle for various multiaccental, dialogical engagements. It is in this sense that the dialogical processes other than those of surplus extraction structure constitutive activities and have a reciprocal effect on the organization of surplus extraction without decentering it.

Grammatical Peculiarities of the Class Struggle “Language Game”

If dialogical processes of surplus extraction have a certain primacy by virtue of their *organizing function* with respect to other forms of social intercourse, then we can link up Vološinov’s philosophy of language with Marx’s social analysis in volume 3 of *Capital*, where he argues for the centrality of surplus extraction.

The specific form, in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship between rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determined element . . . It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relations of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding form of the state. (1984, 791–2)

Just as the process of surplus extraction forms the basis for the “relationship of rulers and ruled,” “relations of sovereignty and dependence,” and “the state,” it forms the basis for a diverse range of behavioral genres.

This is not an argument for economic determinism. Processes of surplus extraction are not “economic” events that are “reflected” in the superstructural spheres of politics and ideology. Processes of surplus extraction are *dialogical* processes, simultaneously economic, political, and ideological. The priority of these particular dialogical processes is derived not from their location in the ontologically privileged realm of the “economy,” but from the peculiar way in which they organize constitutive activities and relate to other dialogical processes.

The surplus-extraction genre constantly overflows its boundaries. We find the class-struggle language game in all the other diverse language games. Even though the class-struggle language game is “ordinary language” in the sense that it is part of everyday life, it is not a language game like the others because of its function in the organization of the other language games or, to put it differently, because of the class struggle’s centrality to the organization of social life.

All kinds of utterances are therefore accented and reaccented by class opposition. This oppositional accentuation is obvious when statements are directly implicated in the class struggle. For instance, a newspaper may report a conflict between an “automobile producer” and a “union” or between a “corporation” and its “workers.” In the first case, the bourgeoisie—the “producers”—are accented with productivity: they are the productive half of the class-struggle couplet. In the second case, it is clearly

the “workers” who are doing the work.¹⁷ Oppositional accentuation is less obvious when statements are only indirectly implicated in the class struggle. For instance, a counselor may advise a young person to pursue postsecondary education as an “investment” in the future or as a path to future “maturation.” In the first instance, there is an implied instrumental value to learning that pays off in the form of greater remuneration when alienating one’s labor-power. In the second case, learning is presented as a growth process with a value in itself, outside the circuits of the capitalist economy. Of course, this noninstrumental value can be fully realized only when capitalism is transcended by political struggle.

Since surplus extraction involves workers and bosses who have roles assigned to them in the heterosexual gender matrix, and surplus extraction and gender role-playing occur simultaneously, class opposition will also be articulated with the hierarchical opposition of gender. For instance, someone may ask me, “What does Jenny do?” I can respond that Jenny is a “working girl” or that she is a “clerical worker.” If I call Jenny a “working girl” with no sense of irony, then I am simultaneously affirming the norms of the heterosexual matrix and the capital genre. I am implying that domestic labor, because it is not integrated into the circuits of capitalist production, is valueless—it is not “work.” Thus, I am also valorizing the work done within the circuits of capitalist production and legitimating the capitalist organization of that form of labor. Furthermore, by using the term “girl,” I am suggesting that once this young woman develops more fully, she should hope to find a male partner who will help her fill her proper role in the household. Until that time, however, she is not betraying her femininity by working in her pink-collar ghetto, since she is not usurping the male role by taking a “real” job. The term “girl” modifies Jenny’s “working” in such a way that it is recognized to be less than male work. If I call Jenny a “clerical worker,” however, I am recognizing her membership and the membership of other workers in her pink-collar ghetto, in the class of people called “workers.” Furthermore, the capitalist exploitation of these workers is not accented with legitimacy. These are just a few examples.

There are countless examples we can observe in our everyday life. The grammar of the processes by which the class struggle genre invades our ordinary language remains to be analyzed. Wittgenstein and Vološinov provide us with the conceptual tools to undertake this project.

Postmarxism shares some surface similarities with Vološinov’s approach. Because they are “pluralistic,” democratic struggles could perhaps be described as “multi-accentual.” “Democratic struggles” are not, however, conceived as operating within a context of social processes organized around surplus extraction. Democratic oppositions are based on autonomous chains of equivalence with no necessary class character. Laclau and Mouffe do not recognize how liberal democracy is accented by class power. To them, it is simply an arena for pluralistic struggles. To Vološinov, the processes that constitute liberal democracy and, therefore, liberal democracy itself, are shot through with class contradictions.

17. Although the implications are obvious to us in this context, the bourgeois accentuation usually passes for truth in the mainstream media. This example is taken from Wood (1995, 157).

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