



Marxism after postmodernism: Rethinking the emancipatory political subject

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Abstract

The concept of a historical-social and political emancipatory subject, central in Marxism, has been rebuked by postmodern theories. In this article the authors examine the encounter between Marxist and postmodernist theories and ponder whether and how to conceive of an emancipatory political subject. The article identifies the questions posed by worldwide protests in the context of the global economic crisis and outlines a typology of the different responses of Marxist thinkers to the postmodernist challenge. The authors distinguish between ‘total rejection’ (anti-postmodern Marxism) and ‘total acceptance’ (post-Marxism), and between ‘rejection in part’ (Marxist postmodernism) and ‘acceptance in part’ (synthetic Marxist postmodernism). Based on this typology, the authors discuss the different approaches to the question of the emancipatory subject. Anti-postmodern Marxists have made relatively small adaptations to the contention that class constitutes the central explanatory concept. Marxist postmodernists retain the major Marxist categories, but they conceptualize also new struggles and new political subjectivities. Synthetic Marxist postmodernists view political subjectivity as a combination of classical Marxist categories and identity and cultural categories. Post-Marxists deconstruct the concept of class and propose new collective subjectivities. Finally, the article discusses the limitations of each of the approaches in addressing the identity of the emancipatory subject.

Keywords

Class, Marxism, post-Marxism, postmodernism, subject

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Introduction: Marxism, postmodernism, and the zeitgeist since the 1980s

Is there a concept of emancipatory subject that is relevant for the structural conditions of contemporary society and to the main theoretical approaches to understand the latter? While much of postmodern social thinking denies the legitimacy or the relevance of the question, we claim that the question itself is still valid. The emergence of a wave of democratic and anti-neoliberal protest movements worldwide – from the Arab world through Europe and the US to Latin America – attests to its validity. This wave emphasizes the need to think in terms of collective emancipatory action (understanding emancipation not as the achievement of a perfect, final goal, but as the ongoing development of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*). This is not the Subject with capital letter, both the agent of history and the source of ‘true knowledge’, but the subject as a collective agent.

In Marxist theory the working class is the historical-social and political subject, the class where objective interest and subjective consciousness come together to move history forward toward emancipation.¹ Yet it is difficult to imagine such a subject in the context of postmodernity and post-Fordism. Postmodernity proclaims the death of the (social) subject, the end of (emancipatory) history, and the demise of (representative) politics. In the present article we examine the meeting between Marxist and postmodernist theories that has raged since the 1980s and ponder whether and how to conceive of an emancipatory political subject.

Marxist theory regained relevance within western intellectual circles in 1968, after having been relegated to the fringes in the height of the Cold War (between the 1950s and the 1960s). Yet this re-emergence was disrupted during the 1980s, when the ‘new right’ came to power in major western states (e.g. Reagan in the US, Thatcher in the UK, and Kohl in Germany). The zeitgeist in the so-called North turned toward neoliberal political economy and postmodernist cultural theory. Even in cases where left-to-center parties returned to power (e.g. Clinton in the US from 1993 to 2001, Blair in the UK from 1997 to 2007, and Mitterrand in France from 1981 to 1995), it was clear that their electoral success depended in practice upon their concurrence with neoliberal hegemony.

The demise of the Soviet Union in 1989 was another blow to the status of Marxist theory (regardless of the fact that in western thought such theory was disconnected from that regime, or even opposed to it). The historical victory of the US in the Cold War seemed to hammer the last nail in the coffin of socialist regimes and of Marxist theories associated with them. The thesis about the (capitalist) ‘end of history’ marked the zeitgeist of the 1990s (Fukuyama, 1992).

Nonetheless, triumphant capitalism was shocked and challenged in the beginning of the following decade with the al-Qaida attack on the US. The zeitgeist of the first decade of the third millennium was thus marked by the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis (Huntington, 1993). Yet again, Marxism, with its inherent disregard for ethnicity or nationalism and its materialist-progressive attitude, was not exactly promising as a vantage point for the analysis of this alleged clash.

Several other structural processes linked to post-Fordism also contributed to what seemed to be a final crisis of Marxist theory (Amin, 1994; Boyer, 2000; Hall, 1991; Hirsh, 1988; Jessop, 2002). These were the decline of the industrial proletariat in western

countries, the emergence of new forms of sociopolitical action (the so-called new social movements), and feminist and post-structuralist critiques both of class as the only relevant social subject and of Marxist teleology. Under these conditions, some left-wing thinkers despaired of Marxism altogether and declared it irrelevant, others clung unyieldingly to their former Marxist positions, and others tried to steer midway by combining Marxist and postmodernist theories in new and creative manners.

In 1988 the *Marxism Today* journal heralded the arrival of ‘New Times’ defined as a ‘qualitative change’ in social and cultural life, and pointed to ‘post-Fordism’ as the root cause. The journal’s editorial warned old leftists and Marxists that they were deploying ‘cavalry against the tanks’ (Hall and Jacques, 1989). Postmodernism, or more specifically post-structuralism as the philosophy of postmodernity, was a vital component of the New Times.² It challenged all the basic tenets of both modernism and Marxism (which now came to be considered as an offshoot of the former): the belief in progress and the rationality of history, in the ‘subject’ as an autonomous agent, and in the knowability of some mere or bare facts. Instead, postmodernity spawned a belief in historical ruptures that undo every teleology or progress, in multiple and fluid positionalities that prevent the consolidation of solid collective identities, and in epistemological relativity, which does not allow for any ‘grand theory’ (Lyotard, 1979).

Charges against modernism and Marxism proliferated, including foundationalism, reductionism, objectivism, universalism, teleologism, instrumentalism, Eurocentrism, phallogentrism, and essentialism (e.g. Aronson, 1995). A major shift took place in the ideological and intellectual climate. Until then the main frontline in social theory had divided leftists (and Marxist) from liberals (and modernists). From the 1980s on, by contrast, these foes of yesteryear found themselves fighting shoulder to shoulder against postmodernists to defend progress, humanism, and objectivity.

Ironically, while in the 1950s Marxism was cast out of western academia because it was deemed too subversive by conservatives, in the 1980s it lost popularity once again because it was considered too conservative by radicals. This change was felt across the humanities and social sciences. The following quote from a depiction of the Middle Eastern studies field illustrates this atmosphere:

Marxian and political economy approaches came to be seen by many in the 1980s as too narrow in their insistence on the centrality of class as a category, too essentialist in their commitment to social structural causation, and too teleological in their positing of large-scale and long-term historical trajectories. They also seemed to ignore, or at least marginalize, discourse, culture, or more broadly questions of meaning, which were the key focus of the new work on representation. (Lockman, 2009: 211)

The same situation was replicated across disciplines and in all spheres of academic and intellectual work.

Given this background, in the present article we address the following interconnected questions:

1. In light of the questions posed by worldwide protests against the global economic crisis; and considering that present-day class structure is less dichotomic, new

sites of struggle have emerged, and a teleological view of history is not conceivable; is it possible to conceptualize the formation of an emancipatory political subject? Does the encounter between Marxism and postmodernism help us in answering this question? In our attempt to cope with this question we will ask:

2. How did Marxist theoreticians respond to the challenge of the postmodernist approach?
3. In particular, how did they approach the concept of an ‘emancipatory political subject’?

Part I: Marxist responses to postmodernism

In the first part of this article we outline a typology of the different responses of Marxist thinkers to postmodernist theory (and to post-Fordist reality). Obviously, each of types is an ‘ideal type’ in the Weberian sense: it includes core characteristics and elements, yet it does not correspond to all of the possible characteristics of any one particular case, so that many actual theoretical instances do not neatly fit into the proposed typology. Nevertheless, our typology contributes to the systemization of the field, by highlighting the main variances of the intricate interface between Marxism and postmodernism.

Two previous attempts to classify these interfaces have been offered by Pauline Rosenau (1992) and Stuart Sim (2000). Rosenau classifies the Marxist reaction to postmodernism into three approaches: orthodox Marxists, who reject postmodernism; neo-Marxists, who ‘maintain their essential identity and primary affiliation with a Hegelian form of Marxism, but ... look to postmodernism for inspiration to reinvigorate, revive and expand Marxism’ (Rosenau, 1992: 160–161) and are reluctant to abandon class analysis; and post-Marxists, who ‘adjust their Marxist perspective so that it conforms to a post-modern frame of reference’ (Rosenau, 1992: 160), while abandoning principles central to Marxism, as class analysis and the special role of the working class. Sim refers to two groups: *post-Marxism* and *post-Marxism*, while implying without mentioning the existence of a third group, that which remains loyal to Marxism’s main tenets. For Sim *post-Marxists* are those thinkers that coming from a Marxist view regretfully reject ‘their Marxist past’ (Sim, 2000: 1), while *post-Marxists* do not reject Marxism but attempt to go beyond it, reformulating it in order to encompass postmodernism.

These two studies are most fruitful. Yet, despite their contribution to clarify the interfaces between Marxism and postmodernism, we find both classifications problematic. Rosenau’s, since her understanding of neo-Marxism as Hegelian Marxism is far from encompassing the broadness of neo-Marxism, makes her miss the fact that, as we will show below, many neo-Marxists reject postmodernism. Sim’s, since his emphasis on the different forms of post-Marxism makes him skip the more nuanced forms in which scholars coming from Marxist approaches try to cope with the challenges of postmodernism. Our typology is both broader and more nuanced.

Our typology results from combining the answers to two major questions. The first one is whether the thinkers under discussion *reject* or *accept* postmodern theory. The second is whether this rejection or acceptance is *total* or *partial*. The intersection of the answers to both questions yields four stances, which are represented in Table 1. Marxist thinkers who reject or accept postmodern theory *in full* make a strict choice between

Table 1. The relationship of Marxist thought to postmodernist theory.

	Rejection	Acceptance
In full	Anti-postmodern Marxism	Post-Marxism
In part	Marxist postmodernism	Synthetic Marxist postmodernism

Marxism and postmodernism, thus creating ‘pure’ positions. We call total rejection *anti-postmodern Marxism*, and total acceptance *post-Marxism*. Marxist thinkers who reject or accept postmodern theory *in part* (or in some sense, but not altogether) offer some form of a combined stance. We call rejection in part *Marxist postmodernism*, and acceptance in part *synthetic Marxist postmodernism* (Table 1).³

Anti-postmodern Marxism

Marxist thinkers who fully reject postmodernist theory, such as Samir Amin, Leo Panitch, Eric Olin Wright, or Ellen Wood, are representatives of *anti-postmodern Marxism*. Their Marxist resistance to postmodernism is essential and comprehensive. On a philosophical level, they reject postmodernism because it substitutes an idealist perspective for the Marxist materialist foundations. They claim that postmodernists deal with words, representations, discourse, and the arts and confuse this level of secondary symbolic reality with primary socioeconomic reality. Postmodernism is faulted for turning upside down the most basic understanding of causality in Marxism – the determination of the superstructure by the material infrastructure. In other words, it is charged with disregarding objective conditions and overrating subjective reactions to such conditions as if the latter were autonomous from the former.

This type of Marxist thinkers cherish precisely those ‘modernist’ assumptions that postmodernists repudiate, namely, the material/ideal and the objective/subjective dichotomies and hierarchies. What is more, they suspect the sources and motivations of postmodernist thought. Postmodernist talk about post-capitalism and post-class society is perceived as an expression of the ‘yuppie’ fraction of the bourgeoisie, which actually deals with the manipulation of signs – whether financial or artistic – and confuses its own middle-class position with social reality at large.

Marxist postmodernism

Marxist thinkers in this quadrant reject postmodernist theory in part. Conspicuous examples of this position are Frederic Jameson and David Harvey. To reject ‘in part’ means that they reject postmodernism’s view of itself as a new epistemology or philosophy, while accepting it as a depiction of some main features of the culture and consciousness of contemporary capitalism. In other words, they recognize some contemporary social features as postmodern but do not view postmodernism as an explanatory theory for these features. Postmodernism does not recognize objectivity, but Marxist thinkers of this type regard postmodernism itself as an objective expression of present-day capitalism. In this way, not only do they not deny the base–superstructure determinism by

admitting the existence of postmodernism, but see the latter as reaffirming and bestowing new relevance on Marxist analyses of capitalism.

One can surmise the nature of this approach even from the book titles, which are by now familiar and well known. For Jameson, postmodernism is ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’, and for David Harvey late capitalism is the ‘condition’ of postmodernity. Both of them incorporate postmodernity into the Marxist materialist logic. Different phases and types of capitalism produce different cultural forms. A unified economic system may bring about kaleidoscopic cultural expressions. Late capitalist economy produces postmodern multicultural diversity. Ultimately, therefore, Marxism explains and encompasses postmodernism.

Synthetic Marxist postmodernism

The third type of Marxist response to postmodernity characterized here is that of Marxists who accept and adopt postmodern theory ‘in part’ to produce what we call *synthetic Marxist postmodernism*. A case in point is Nancy Fraser.

These authors espouse a ‘dual perspective’ that recognizes the simultaneous workings of two heuristically separate chains of hierarchy, namely, a hierarchy of classes and a hierarchy of identities. The first one creates material exploitation and inequality; the second one, symbolic underestimation or disrespect. The main point is that material and cultural inequalities cannot be reduced to each other, even if in real-life situations they are always intermingled.

Post-Marxism

Finally, the mirror image of anti-postmodern Marxism is *post-Marxism*, which is represented by those Marxist thinkers who accept the main assumptions of postmodernist theory. Among the leading names here are the early Baudrillard, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière. In spite of deep theoretical differences between them, they have in common their critique of Marxist theory as sociologically anachronistic and philosophically dogmatic. They call for a deep, comprehensive revision of Marxism that in fact entirely transcends it. From this perspective, the Marxist view of history and society is too functionalist and teleologic, in the spirit of evolutionist naturalist theory and progressive liberal theory. No place is left in it for historical contingency and societal agency and Marxism and liberalism are considered twin modernist brothers.

Part II: Marxist perspectives on the emancipatory subject

In classical Marxism the emancipatory subject is the proletariat, even though the concrete analysis of specific struggles required auxiliary concepts and perspectives that mediated between the ‘class’ (as a locus in the production process) and the actual collective subjects of those struggles (such as Marx’s development of the idea of class fraction in the ‘18th Brumaire’, Lenin’s understanding of the party as the avant-garde of the proletariat, or Gramsci’s ‘historical bloc’). However, both the characteristics of the globalized post-Fordist/neoliberal society and the theoretical decentering of modern

subjects by post-structuralist critique force one to rethink the ‘emancipatory subject’. While in all the protests against the economic crisis we can discern the importance of class factors, the protests are not an expression of the working class that became subject. It is difficult today to maintain the idea of the working class (or of any other class, for that matter) in the classic Marxist sense, i.e. as defined by its position in the system of production, as the sole or primary political subject. It is hard to claim that class position entails objective interests, and that this position will eventually lead to a certain ‘pertinent’ class consciousness. This conundrum is not new, but what we would like to show here is how it is tackled in the four types of Marxist responses to the postmodernist challenge.

Anti-postmodern Marxism has made relatively small adaptations to the analysis of capitalist society as based on class exploitation or to the contention that class constitutes the central explanatory concept in this society. Wright’s analysis of class exemplifies this approach.

Marxist postmodernists, in turn, have retained the major Marxist categories and the Marxist approach to the relationship between accumulation processes and the emergence of collective subjectivities. They conceptualize new struggles and new political subjectivities from this standpoint. David Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession illustrates this perspective.

Synthetic Marxist postmodernists view political subjectivity as a combination of classical Marxist socioeconomic categories, and identity and cultural categories. A case in point is Nancy Fraser’s ‘perspectival dualism’.

Finally, while *post-Marxists* start with a critique of Marxist assumptions, they end up entirely deconstructing the concept of class and proposing new collective subjectivities, such as Laclau’s notion of ‘the people’, since among post-Marxists he has dedicated the greatest effort to discuss the topic of the political subject.

Let us discuss these four positions in greater detail.

Anti-postmodern Marxism is exemplified by the work of Eric Wright. Wright remains faithful to what he considers the two main tenets of Marxist theory, namely, the idea that an exploitation-centered concept of class is pivotal to explaining the social, and a commitment to radical egalitarianism (Wright, 2005). The first one implies that social groups formed in the field of production provide the main framework for the constitution of collective subjects. Wright explicitly rejects what he calls the ‘multiple oppressions’ depiction of society (Wright, 1985). The second one means that the analysis of capitalist societies and their subjects must be guided by a critical, emancipatory approach.

Wright understands classes in the orthodox way as a form of relations of production – as a specific position in the capitalist production process. Class relations exist ‘when the rights and powers of people over productive resources are unequally distributed – when some people have greater rights/powers with respect to specific kinds of productive resources than ... others’ (Wright, 2005: 10). He also retains the classic Marxist claim that in capitalism the central class relation is the capital/labor relation. At the same time, he is aware of the fact that students of contemporary societies must address the complexities and ramifications of the social structure according to the ways in which ‘rights and powers are broken down, distributed and recombined’ (Wright, 2005: 13). He thus introduces complexity within the binary model in order to reflect concrete relations

of production in the post-Fordist world more accurately and to better explain the constitution of sociopolitical subjects beyond the shop floor. His renowned idea of contradictory locations within a mode of production and between modes of production (Wright, 1985) serves to depict complexities stemming from the following facts: that people occupy multiple class locations simultaneously, that there is a temporal dimension to location (careers vs. slots), that locations are stratified (small and big capitalists, skilled and unskilled workers), and that the family structure interacts with class relations.

The hallmark of *Marxist postmodernism* is an acceptance of postmodern theory as a partial description of contemporary society that preserves the Marxist explanation for these developments. This position is exemplified by the work of David Harvey (1982, 2003, 2005 and also Aronowitz, 2004). He suggests that the complexities of political subjectivity in contemporary societies result from changes in the patterns of accumulation and, in particular, in the interrelationship between territorial space and capitalist accumulation. Since patterns of resource accumulation and appropriation are the main social processes, class plays a key role as an explanatory category and as a collective subject.

The novelty of Harvey's position lies in the argument that spatial competition, or the characteristics of accumulation by dispossession, may explain the emergence of a more complex range of collective subjectivities. Consequently, spatial competition between 'localities, cities, regions and nations' promotes the development of communal or national solidarities 'as means to defend the various factional and class interests' (Harvey, 1982: 221). Harvey thus recognizes the significance of non-class collective identities, though as we can appreciate from the quote, these identities are attributed to class interests. In Harvey's view, for example, many middle-class groups took to the defense of territory, nation, and tradition as a way to mobilize against predatory neoliberal capitalism. Racism and nationalism, which had once bound together nation-state and empire, re-emerge among the petty bourgeoisie and the working class as a weapon to organize against the cosmopolitanism of finance capital. Notions of community or national solidarity stem from 'objective material conditions' and 'global class struggle ... dissolves into a variety of territorially based conflicts which support, sustain and in some cases even reconstitute all manner of local prejudices and encrusted traditions' (Harvey, 1982: 420). Nationalism and the strengthening of ethnic identities are, therefore, a reaction to global capitalism.

Put more broadly, the postmodernist principles of contemporary global capitalism are explainable based on Harvey's theory of *accumulation by dispossession*. Capitalist accumulation nowadays occurs not only through expanded reproduction but also by dispossessing social groups of their assets or their rights. For example, the expulsion of peasant populations from their lands in order to privatize them; appropriation of the commons (nowadays taking the form of privatization of public resources and of the welfare state); suppression of alternative (non-capitalist or non-commodified) forms of production; colonial or imperial processes of asset appropriation; new (child and sexual) slavery; financialization; and property rights or the patenting of genetic material.

Accumulation by dispossession interacts with local communities, subordinate ethnic groups or nations, kinship structures, and family and household arrangements (Harvey, 2003). The different modes of interaction (suppression, cooptation, or resistance) lay the foundations for the emergence of different types of collective subjectivities and a great

variety of struggles. Many of these oppositional movements are ‘very different from ... worker-based movements’. They eschew ‘traditional forms of labor organization’ and often build ‘autonomous forms of social organization’ – a variety of ‘local, dispersed and highly differentiated social movements’ (Harvey, 2003: 189). This view even takes into account the potential for collective social subjects to emerge as a result of exclusively political struggles, such as the opposition to the curtailment of civil liberties (Harvey, 2003).

In sum, Harvey recognizes the existence of non-class collective political subjects, as well as the fact that there is no ‘simple conception of class to which we can appeal as the primary (let alone exclusive) agent of historical transformation.’ (Harvey, 2005: 202). His idea of two main modes of capital accumulation explains the appearance of movements opposing exploitation based on expanded reproduction (wage labor and conditions defining social wage) along with others opposing accumulation by dispossession (opposition to the displacement of peasant populations from their land, to the privatization of the welfare state, and to finance capital practices). This analytical framework allows for a more complex explanation of the emergence of political subjects than the classic Marxist opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat (even in the more qualified and complex analysis provided by Wright).

By theorizing autonomous non-class origins of political subjects, the *synthetic Marxist-postmodernist* approach, in turn, takes us one step farther from traditional Marxism. While both Wright and Harvey consider class as the primary collective social subject and class struggle as the key form of social conflict, Nancy Fraser adopts what she calls a ‘perspectival dualism’ whereby class and identity subjectivities play parallel and combined roles.

In Fraser’s view, social conflicts are not organized around a single issue – class struggles or cultural/status struggles – but around two different, interwoven central themes: the redistribution of material resources and the recognition of the value of one’s identity or culture. She considers that ‘the demise of communism, the surge of free-market ideology, the rise of “identity politics” in ... its fundamentalist and progressive forms ... have conspired to decenter ... claims for egalitarian redistribution’ (Fraser, 2003: 8, in Fraser and Honneth, 2003). According to Fraser’s ‘perspectival dualism’, class politics and identity politics are not separate but rather intermingled modes of collective subject constitution (in Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

Fraser’s dualism is closer to the deconstructive perspective typical of postmodernist approaches. It does not consider class and identity as homogeneous constructions but as subjectivities always penetrated by both claims for redistribution and claims for recognition. Moreover, conflicts do not stem only from exploitation (the redistribution issue) or disrespect (the recognition issue), but also from processes that involve injustices in terms of redistribution *and* recognition. Thus, while class is the paradigmatic example of the redistribution problem, it is not the only one: ‘also included are racialized groups of immigrants or ethnic minorities that can be economically defined ... women are included here too – as the gender burdened with the lion’s share of unwaged carework’ (Fraser, 2003: 14, in Fraser and Honneth, 2003).⁴

The synthesis of Marxism and postmodernism adopted by Fraser views class and sexual preference as ideal types of redistribution and recognition respectively, and

considers that in real life categories are indeed 'two-dimensional'. Gender and race are clearly at the crossroads between the redistribution and the recognition perspectives, since women and subordinate ethnic groups 'suffer both maldistribution and misrecognition'. Yet even class should be considered two-dimensional, for status harms that originated as a by-product of the economic structure 'may have since developed a life of their own' (Fraser, 2003: 57, in Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

In sum, to theorize the relationship between class structure and status order in late modern globalizing capitalism, we must see class and status as mutually irreducible yet strongly entwined categories. Fraser even comes close to positing a subject comprising a plurality of subject positions (an idea, as we shall see, central to post-Marxism) when she argues that 'individuals are nodes of convergence for multiple, cross-cutting axes of subordination' (Fraser, 2003: 57, in Fraser and Honneth, 2003). To put it in the terms of our present discussion, Fraser's synthetic Marxist postmodernism has two complementary advantages over the previous positions. First, it recognizes a non-economic, status-related source of emancipatory political struggles, namely, misrecognition. Second, it acknowledges the intersection of such a source with the economic, class-related origin of emancipatory political struggles, namely, inequality.

Finally, let us look at *post-Marxism*. Its critique of Marxist theory leads to the rejection of this theory and its replacement with one version or other of 'discursive identity' as the basis for the new political subject. In this view, subjects, or more aptly social agents, are not grounded in an 'objective' social structure, and their boundaries are rather fuzzy or fluid. At this post-Marxist end of the spectrum we find thinkers as varied as Holloway, Rancière, or Hindess and Hirst. Nonetheless, this position is associated above all with Laclau and Mouffe, the first to be referred to as post-Marxists, and those who dedicate much of their thinking to the question of the political subject. Laclau's conceptualization of the people as the subject of hegemonic struggle in contemporary society appears the most elaborated idea of a political collective agent within the post-Marxist currents.⁵

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) reject the idea of class as an 'a priori subject'. This rejection has two different facets. First, they dismiss the claim that every political subject is necessarily (or truly) a class subject. Second, they refute the idea that there is a social domain (the field of production) where classes pre-exist (in themselves, objectively, and so on). For these authors, any social subject (classes as well as gender or ethnic groups) exists only as the outcome of (an always already) political action. Neither individuals nor groups define themselves as subjects based on some pre-political determination. We are all made up of a plurality of 'subject positions' hierarchically organized as the result of a political – hegemonic – struggle. Hegemony, indeed, is the partial (always threatened) stabilization of the different subject positions in a way that privileges or emphasizes some of them. There are certain (one or a few) antagonisms around which collective subjects are constituted.

In his recent book on populism Laclau (2005) further explores this conceptualization of the collective political subject. Laclau considers 'the people' as the relevant contemporary political subject or the main form of political subjectivity in contemporary societies. In fact, for Laclau the idea of 'the people' came to be an alternative to the concept of social class as a way to conceive of the creation of social identities (Laclau, 2006).

Laclau sees 'social demand' as the starting point in the process whereby political subjects are constituted. Social demands are claims that appear in every society as a result of social interaction. Demands that remain distinct from each other are democratic, and the approach that addresses and meets these isolated demands is 'differential'. When demands are not satisfied, a chain of equivalences may be built around them in such a way that an internal frontier is drawn within the political community, a frontier separating the people from power. These demands, which Laclau calls 'popular', give rise to 'a broader social subjectivity' through their equivalential articulation (Laclau, 2005: 74). It should be noted, however, that there is nothing 'objective' about these demands that facilitates their connection within a chain of equivalences. They are connected only by their opposition to power. The lack of a 'positive', 'objective' link external to the political struggle means that popular demands can only be linked symbolically by a political struggle that, as mentioned above, builds the chain of equivalences (Laclau, 2006).

The people is constituted as a collective political subject when 'a frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps'. It emerges when the articulation of several heterogeneous demands takes place in such a way that one or two of them, related to a certain subject position, symbolize the whole. The people as a collective subject appears as a result of a hegemonic struggle in which the new subject claims to be considered 'the only legitimate totality' (Laclau, 2005: 81). Since signifiers are ultimately empty, universality can express itself only in a certain particularity. Hegemony is the process whereby a certain particularity gives name to universality.

Part III: Can we still think of an emancipatory subject?

The four theoretical approaches reviewed above cope in different ways with the challenges posed to the Marxist conception of the emancipatory subject by the combination of sociological processes and theoretical developments associated with postmodernity. However, while they all address these challenges, none can overcome internal contradictions and limitations.

Wright's anti-postmodern Marxism does improve class analysis by taking into consideration the complexities of post-Fordist social stratification. Yet it still overlooks the intersection of class with other, non-economic categories around which society is structured. Wright addresses the mediations between class positions and class consciousness and practices in isolation from other aspects of the social structure. In addition, he does not specify if class is the determining factor or just one among others; and if the latter is the case, how it relates to other determinants of collective political subjects. Consequently, we believe that despite its great improvements over orthodox class analysis, Wright's position does not quite meet the challenge of post-Fordist conditions and postmodernist theory. He does not, therefore, provide a proper theorization of the emancipatory subject. It seems that for anti-postmodern Marxists there is still a determining base and additional, undertheorized factors.

The Marxist postmodernism of David Harvey, in turn, regards class struggle as necessary and unavoidable, both epistemologically (as an explanatory mechanism) and normatively (as the origin of the emancipatory subject). However, while this author's analytical framework is explicative when tackling the 'structural' socioeconomic dimension, it

becomes derivative when dealing with the cultural and political dimensions. He acknowledges the political presence of 'cultural' or 'identity-centered' collective subjects but cannot analyze them in relatively autonomous terms. He thus maintains that society is full of complexities 'that arise out of race, gender, and ethnic distinctions that are closely interwoven with class identities' but does not account for this interweaving. This shortcoming is clear, for example, in his treatment of identities, which is derivative and reverts back to material interests. Harvey finds it difficult to explain feminist struggles, or the persistency of ethnic or nationalist struggles in cases where dispossession is not relevant. 'Emancipatory subjects' that are not 'classes' are recognized empirically but not theoretically, at least not as independent entities.

In the synthesis between Marxism and postmodernism offered by Nancy Fraser, the terms 'class and status' are employed to denote 'socially entrenched orders of subordination'. It should be noted, however, that Fraser addresses the interrelationship between class and status mostly as a source of injustice, and devotes much less attention to conceptualizing the sociopolitical ways in which collective subjects are constituted in opposition to injustice. Thus, although this author does tackle the foundations of society when discussing class and status, she analyzes political agency from the perspective of deliberative democracy, whereby parties (guided by political philosophies) put forward claims for justice. Politics is thus reduced to advancing claims for redressing injustices or, as Fraser asserts in a more recent paper, to the stage where 'struggles over distribution and recognition are played out' (Fraser, 2008: 278). Her disregard of politics as the conflicting interplay of power and interests makes it difficult to ponder the conditions for the emergence of emancipatory political subjects. Moreover, limiting emancipation to 'parity of participation' means replacing the goal of radical egalitarianism with the much less ambitious one of deliberative democracy. This vision, in turn, is reinforced by Fraser's understanding of the political as the 'dimension of politics concerned chiefly with representation' (Fraser, 2008: 278).

Finally, Laclau's post-Marxist approach (as that of other scholars, such as Gibson-Graham, Wolff, and Resnick) parts ways almost completely with Marxist analysis. Some of Laclau's critics even claim that he has rephrased liberal democratic themes in a post-structuralist language. The main problem with Laclau's conceptualization of the constitution of the political subject is that it is hyper-political. In this sense, this author's approach may be ironically called pre- rather than post-Marxist; it presents a voluntaristic and cultural notion of political subjects. At best, one can say that 'power', and the objections to it, is the objective basis of politics, but this is a rather circular explanation – politics explains politics.

In Laclau's view, every combination of political claims is possible. The people as a collective subject is solely the result of political struggles that build chains of equivalences while positing one particular claim as representing the universality that cannot appear as such (hence the hegemonic nature of the struggle). Besides being a-materialistic (or anti-economic), Laclau's theoretical framework does not fully account for the limitations imposed on the constitution of political subjects by the historical 'sedimentation' of certain practices and ways of conceiving the social (religion, nationalism). In Laclau and Mouffe's book *Hegemony*, they do recognize that while signifiers float, there are certain nodes (Lacan's *points de capiton*) which represent more stable signs (more

probable combinations of signifiers and signifieds). However, they do not develop theoretical concepts that allow us to explain in which way past practices translate into or contribute to explain the specific characteristics of those *points de capiton*. In his seminal ‘Why do empty signifiers matter to politics?’ Laclau quite explicitly states that there is nothing in past history that can make a certain signified or claim more probable as the one which incarnates negation. Laclau asks ‘what ... determines that one signifier rather than other assumes in different circumstances that signifying function?’ (Laclau, 1996: 40). His answer is that it is the hegemonic struggle, but this is a struggle in which ‘between ... negation and the body through which it expresses itself there is no necessary relation – nothing predetermines that one particular body should be the one predestined to incarnate negation as such’ (Laclau, 1996: 41). It could be claimed that Laclau only negates the possibility of determination a priori, since he specifically states that ‘not any position in society, not any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents in a nodal point that becomes an empty signifier’ (Laclay, 1996: 43). But this remains as a mere statement, since he does not provide the theoretical tools that will help us to identify which are those nodal points and how ‘the historical effectivity of the logic of differential structural locations takes place’ (Laclau, 1996: 43), and his initial questions are only answered by punctual examples.

Consequently, Laclau’s explanation of the creation of an emancipatory subject in post-structuralist terms is deficient. He cannot explain why certain claims can be addressed as particular demands within the logic of difference while others cannot be absorbed by the system and provide the basis for the construction of chains of equivalences that ultimately lead to the creation of the people as a collective subject.

Even more basically, Laclau cannot account for the appearance of demands in the first place. If political subjects are always already the result of a political struggle, who are the subjects who advance the basic social demands that will constitute the links of the chain of equivalences? We are faced here either with an infinite regression to more unitary basic social demands, or with the necessity to recognize that there is some kind of ‘social’, ‘pre-political’ link among human beings that justifies the emergence of these primary social demands. In the first case, we cannot really explain the emergence of political collective subjects. In the second, we are back to the ‘essentialism of the social’ of Marxist theory (as exemplified differently by Wright and Harvey) or to societal dualism (as illustrated by Fraser), which Laclau and Mouffe dismiss (Laclau, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). It turns out then, in our view, that post-Marxism’s flight from the Marxist base takes it too far – either toward unexplainable indeterminism or, alternatively, back toward the social determinism it set out to reject.

Given this foray into the theoretical terrain of the Marxist/postmodernist encounter, let us now return to the question we posed at the beginning: Is there a concept of emancipatory subject that is relevant for the structural conditions and theoretical orientation of contemporary society? We do not think that we are able to provide an answer to this question, only to propose some directions for further reflection. First, as we stated at the beginning, we think that the emergence of a wave of democratic and anti-neoliberal protest movements worldwide – from the Arab world through Europe and the US to Latin America – attests to the validity of the question. This wave emphasizes the need to think in terms of collective emancipatory action (understanding emancipation not as the

achievement of a perfect, final goal, but as the ongoing development of what Étienne Balibar calls *égaliberté*).

Second, we think that any attempt to cope with the question that draws from the powerful insights that Marxism provides, must include contributions from the four categories we have depicted in this article. Current protest movements underline the importance of class analysis. The analysis of the complex class structure of contemporary societies developed by Wright (and by other anti-postmodern Marxists) is invaluable to conceptualize and explain the emergence and characteristics of contemporary social movements, (his reconceptualization of the 'middle classes' as both exploiters and exploited is essential to understand the role played by certain fractions of these 'middle classes' in the protest). Harvey's Marxist postmodernist approach to spatial competition and accumulation by dispossession, in turn, allows us to understand not only the global dimension of protests (for example, the complexities of what has been denominated 'the Arab spring'), but also the role space plays in them (e.g. the occupation of public space and the fight for housing or against evictions).

Protests also show, however, that, as claimed by Fraser's synthetic postmodern Marxism, there are forms of oppression that are not reducible to class-based exploitation or economic dispossession. While these different forms of oppression interact with and over-determine each other, they cannot be reduced one to the other, as occurs in Marxist theory (even in its Marxist postmodernist form). The protest movements of 2010 and 2011 evince also that post-Marxists such as Laclau have a point when they argue that the constitution of subjects in general, and of potentially emancipatory subjects in particular, can be neither the 'reflection' of a social (i.e. economic, or class) situation nor the result of a generalization or abstraction. Rather, such constitution is the result of the political articulation of struggles related to the different social categories around which the distribution of power and resources is organized. As Laclau argues, the emergence of a collective political subject needs to build 'chains of equivalences' between different demands.

A quick look at the contemporary protest movements around the world reveals that they emerge as the articulation between different social groups and their struggles, in such a way that there is a political moment when Fraser's 'perspectival duality' undergoes partial and always threatened unification (Laclau and Mouffe's definition of hegemony). It also tells us that social struggles cannot be understood only in terms of 'redressing injustices'. Rather, they should also be analyzed in terms of the confrontation between opposing models of distribution of power and resources, models that conform to the interests of the different social groups (Wright and Harvey).

Nonetheless, these movements show that even if we agree that there are no pre-political social groups and that social subjects are always already political, movements do not emerge *ex novo* and freely and voluntarily constitute themselves by building chains of equivalences among various specific claims. Rather, they stem from the articulation of social groups; articulation that results, on one side, from the specific, historical ways in which resources and power are unequally distributed; and on the other, from the decantation of previous political struggles. In this sense, building on Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of social space, one might argue that current protest movements suggest that the collective subject as a political agent is constituted through political practices – the construction of chains of equivalences. Yet this construction is tied to the proximity

or distance between different social groups within the social space. Proximity and distance, in turn, are measured in relation to two principles of differentiation, namely, economic and cultural capital (which correlate with Fraser's concepts of redistribution and recognition). Nonetheless, and here we part with Bourdieu to some extent, such distinct forms of capital are not isolated dimensions. Nor are they pre-political or a-historic. As Fraser argues, they are constantly influencing each other and are always already the result of human action, a praxis that is always political.

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Notes

1. Although Althusser posed a Marxism without a Subject with capital S, Althusserianism did not deny the emancipatory role of the working class and the centrality of class struggle. The relationship between Althusserian Marxism and postmodernism is a complex one, and analyzing it thoroughly exceeds the limits of this article. We can appreciate the complexity of this relationship in the fact that we can find Althusserians who belong to the Marxist anti-postmodernist category, such as Poulantzas (2008), who modifies the concept of class in order to free it from economist reductionism, but without abandoning its centrality as subject of emancipation; Marxist postmodernists as Harnecker (2010), who adds to class struggles other collective subjects such as 'social movements'; synthetic Marxist post-modernists such as Balibar; and post-Marxists such as Rancière or Resnik, Wolff and Gibson-Graham. The latter reject the possibility of establishing a 'preordained hierarchy of causes' and a 'definitive hierarchy of interpretations' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2001: 5). In rejecting Marxism's claim to provide an explanation of society as a whole and considering it as a theory of class that interprets social conflicts from an (obligatorily limited) class perspective (where class is 'a feature of the particular analysis rather than a given of the social order' [Gibson-Graham et al., 2001: 5]); they abandon most of Marxism's explanatory claims and aspirations.
2. The term *postmodernism* encloses a plurality of theories and practices, very different one from the other. However, from the perspective of the present article, they all share some central common characteristics: mistrust of grand narratives, criticism of the modern conception of history as progress, and the centrality of a unified (even if collective) subject.
3. It should be noted that our typology deals with an intellectual phenomenon – the interface between Marxism and postmodernism – that originates in the so-called North. However, we think that it can be useful also to clarify the reactions of Southern Marxists to postmodernism. We can find anti-postmodern Marxists such as Atilio Boron, who rejects the 'vagueness and sterility' of post-Marxism and considers that Marxism has 'what it takes to emerge successfully from the present crisis' (Boron, 2000: 75), or Vivek Chibber (2003, 2013), who criticizes postcolonial theories from a Marxist perspective. There are Marxist postmodernists such as de Ipola and Portantiero in their late period (1981), who remain within a Marxist perspective but relate to other categories such as 'people'; or Enrique Dussel, who attempts to build a 'philosophy of liberation' originating from the locus of the oppressed, the 'subject of history': the proletarian class, but also the women's movement and the 'culturally oppressed people' (Dussel, 1983: 32). Synthetic Marxist postmodernists such as Anibal Quijano (1995, 2004), who remains within the classical Marxist categories, analyze the central tendencies of capitalism and the changing role of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, while arguing that in Latin

America, because of the heterogeneity of intersubjective relationships and of the modes of production of meaning, there are processes of reidentification such as race, ethnicity or people that cannot be explained in terms of the relations between capital and labor. Finally, there are Southern post-Marxists, such as the scholars from the Subaltern Studies group, who evolving from Marxist and Gramscian frameworks developed post-Marxist, post-colonial theoretical approaches; or Roberto Mangabeira Unger (1987), who developed an original social, legal, and economic corpus of theory drawing on Marx but fiercely criticizing his main concepts. We should not forget either that even though Laclau developed his post-Marxist approach in the UK, his whole conceptualization is strongly influenced by his coming of age, both theoretically and politically, in Argentina.

4. Fraser's analysis is in line with those western Marxists who attempt to integrate Weberian themes into Marxism. Fraser's definition of class is more Weberian than Marxist. For her, 'to say that a society has a class structure is to say that it institutionalizes economic mechanisms that systematically deny some of its members the means and opportunities they need in order to participate on a par with others in social life' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 49). In her definition class depends on market-based life chances rather than on its relation to the means of production.
5. Antonio Negri (Negri and Hardt, 2000) has proposed the multitude as the contemporary emancipatory subject. It could be claimed that he belongs to the post-Marxist category in our typology, since he emphasizes the decentered and plural character of the multitude, and he incorporates in his analysis concepts such as biopolitics, which has been central in the critique of the Marxist conceptualization of power. We did not include Negri as an example, though, not only because of space limitations, but because we think that a more thorough analysis of the concept shows that in fact it is very similar to the way Marx and classical Marxism conceptualize the proletariat. Despite his claim of the multitude as plural, Negri specifically argues that it 'produces itself as a singularity' and that it is 'the singular power of a new city', without providing a thorough theoretical elaboration of how a subject can be both a singularity and irreducibly plural (in Fumagalli et al., 2010). Moreover, the multitude constitutes itself in the sphere of production, depicted as 'biopolitical production', and in the struggle against rent capital.

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Résumé

Le concept central marxiste de sujet de l'histoire sociale et de l'émancipation politique a été réfuté par les théories postmodernes. Nous examinons dans cet article la confrontation entre les théories marxistes et postmodernes et nous réfléchissons à la possibilité et à la manière de concevoir un sujet politique de l'émancipation. Ce travail identifie des questions soulevées par la vague mondiale de protestations survenue dans le contexte de la crise économique et ébauche une typologie des différentes réponses apportées par les penseurs marxistes aux défis du postmodernisme. Nous distinguons entre un « rejet total » (marxisme anti-postmoderne) et une « acceptation totale » (postmarxisme) et entre un « rejet partiel » (marxisme postmoderne) et une « acceptation partielle » (synthèse marxiste postmoderne). À partir de cette typologie,

nous examinons les différentes approches de la question du sujet de l'émancipation. Les marxistes anti-postmodernes ont proposé des adaptations relativement mineures à l'affirmation selon laquelle la classe constitue le concept central de l'explication. Les marxistes postmodernes conservent les principales catégories marxistes mais conceptualisent également les nouveaux conflits et subjectivités politiques. La synthèse marxiste postmoderne considère la subjectivité politique comme une combinaison de catégories classiques du marxisme et de catégories culturelles et identitaires. Les postmarxistes déconstruisent le concept de classe et proposent de nouvelles subjectivités collectives. Pour finir, cet article examine les limitations de chacune de ces approches de l'identité du sujet de l'émancipation.

Mots-clés

Postmodernisme, marxisme, postmarxisme, sujet, classe

Resumen

El concepto de un sujeto sociohistórico y político emancipador, central en el marxismo, ha sido criticado por las teorías posmodernas. En este trabajo se analiza el encuentro entre la teoría marxista y las posmodernistas y reflexiona si y cómo concebir un sujeto político emancipador. El artículo identifica las preguntas planteadas por las protestas en todo el mundo en el contexto de la crisis económica mundial y esboza una tipología de las diferentes respuestas de los pensadores marxistas al desafío posmodernista. Se distingue entre "rechazo total" (marxismo anti-postmoderno) y "aceptación plena" (post-marxismo); y entre "el rechazo de parte" (posmodernismo marxista), y "aceptación parcial" (posmodernismo marxista sintético). A partir de esta tipología, se discuten los diferentes abordajes a la cuestión del sujeto emancipador. Los marxistas antipostmodernos han hecho relativamente pequeñas adaptaciones a la afirmación de que la clase constituye el concepto explicativo central. Los posmodernos marxistas conservan las principales categorías marxistas, pero también conceptualizan nuevas luchas y nuevas subjetividades políticas. Los posmodernos marxistas sintéticos consideran la subjetividad política como una combinación de las categorías marxistas clásicas y la identidad y categorías culturales. Los postmarxistas deconstruyen el concepto de clase y proponen nuevas subjetividades colectivas. Por último, el documento analiza las limitaciones de cada uno de los enfoques para abordar la identidad del sujeto emancipatorio.

Palabras clave

Posmodernismo, marxismo, postmarxismo, sujeto, clase