

THE ISSUE OF UNDECIDABILITY WITHIN THE DEBATE BETWEEN
ERNESTO LACLAU AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

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MEHMET GÖKHAN UZUNER

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Approval of the Graduate School of Social Sciences

Prof. Dr. Sencer Ayata
Director

I certify that this thesis satisfies all the requirements as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science.

Prof. Dr. Raşit Kaya
Head of Department

This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Science.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mehmet Okyayuz
Supervisor

Examining Committee Members

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mehmet Okyayuz (METU, ADM) _____

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Necmi Erdoğan (METU, ADM) _____

Assist. Prof. Dr. Erdoğan Yıldırım (METU, SOC) _____

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

First name, Last name: Mehmet Gökhan Uzuner

Signature:

ABSTRACT

THE ISSUE OF UNDECIDABILITY WITHIN THE DEBATE BETWEEN ERNESTO LACLAU AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Uzuner, Mehmet Gökhan

M.S. Department of Political Science and Public Administration

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mehmet OKYAYUZ

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The philosophical problem of the tension between liberty and order has dominated the agenda of western philosophy and science since the beginning of the history of thought, and it is a leading issue nowadays, too. The problem of the act of decision is particularly one of the significant themes of contemporary political thought. Instead of the classical poles of both voluntarism and determinism prioritising either the subject or the structure, what should be employed is a much deeper analysis of the relation between undecidability and the act of decision. In this respect, the discussion between Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek is considerably illuminating. But there are also theoretical shortcomings shared by these thinkers. That is, despite the informativeness of this debate, there is an overwhelming necessity to critically assess this dialogue with a particular emphasis on the conceptual issues. In this regard, an overall scrutiny and critical assessment of this debate constitute the main body of this thesis.

Keywords: act, decision, Derrida, impossibility, Kant, Lacan, Laclau, necessity, psychoanalysis, the subject, undecidability, Žižek

ÖZ

ERNESTO LACLAU VE SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK ARASINDAKİ TARTIŞMA BAĞLAMINDA KARAR VERİLEMEZLİK MESELESİ

Uzuner, Mehmet Gökhan

Yüksek Lisans, Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

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Özgürlük ve düzen arasındaki gerilim, düşünce tarihinin başlangıcından beri batı felsefesinin ve biliminin gündemini işgal etmiştir ve günümüzde de önde gelen meselelerden biridir. Bilhassa, karar verme eylemi sorunsalı çağdaş siyasal düşüncenin en önemli konularından birini oluşturmaktadır. Ya özneye ya da yapıya öncelik tanıyan iradecilik ve belirlenimcilik gibi klasik kutuplar yerine karar verme eylemi ve karar verilemezlik arasındaki ilişki çok daha derin bir analizle incelenmelidir. Bu bağlamda Ernesto Laclau ve Slavoj Žižek arasındaki tartışma oldukça aydınlatıcıdır. Ama bu iki düşünür tarafından paylaşılan kuramsal eksiklikler de vardır. Başka bir deyişle, tartışmanın aydınlatıcılığına rağmen, bu diyalogu - özellikle kavramsal sorunları vurgulayarak - eleştirel bir şekilde incelemek karşı konulamaz bir zorunluluktur. Bu bakımdan bu tartışmanın genel bir çözümlemesi ve eleştirel bir ele alınışı bu tezin ana gövdesini oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Derrida, eylem, imkansızlık, Kant, karar, karar-verilemezlik, Lacan, Laclau, psikanaliz, özne, Žižek, zorunluluk

To the lovely memory of Mehmet Uzuner

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AF	<i>The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World</i>
CHU	<i>Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left</i>
DSST	<i>Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion</i>
EYS	<i>Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out</i>
FA	<i>The Fragile Absolute – Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?</i>
FRT	<i>The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory</i>
FTKN	<i>For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor</i>
IDLC	<i>In Defense of Lost Causes</i>
IR	<i>The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters</i>
MI	<i>Mapping Ideology</i>
OB	<i>On Belief</i>
OWB	<i>Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences</i>
RG	<i>Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917: V. I. Lenin</i>
SOI	<i>The Sublime Object of Ideology</i>
TN	<i>Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology</i>
TS	<i>The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology</i>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The philosophical problem of liberty and order seems to have dominated western philosophy and science since the beginning of the history of thought; it is a leading theme nowadays, too. Particularly due to the enlightenment process and the rise of the social sciences in the last two centuries, this classical question has turned into a more specific but complicated issue, namely the conflictual relationship between the individual and society. As is easily seen, the side of liberty has corresponded to the party of the individual, whereas the aspects related with order have been linked to the realm of society. In consequence, the philosophical issue of freedom and determinism was transferred to the study area of sociology in the early nineteenth century.

If we translate this dualism into the language of the social sciences, we come across the tension between the individual (on the side of freedom) and society (on the side of determinism). Initially, this ostensibly dichotomous relationship between the individual and society has been handled by approaches constituting two poles, which are still valid and effective today: voluntarism (or intentionalism) and determinism (or structuralism). As I have mentioned, these perspectives form two poles, because they claim that one side of the relationship determines the other. To be clearer, the voluntaristic account says that it is the individual that shapes the structure by acting consciously and intentionally, while the structuralists assert that individual action is not free from a context which is provided by the social structure; in other words, determinants of structure mould the preferences of the individual to a large extent.

To come to the core idea of this thesis, the issue of the decision of the individual was explained by referring to either totally external circumstances (like structure, society, discourse and so on) or entirely internal conditions (such as Cartesian rationality or instrumental-technical rationality, as believed in the

Enlightenment era). However, the common point of these two leading positions was that both analysed the decision act in a completely deterministic manner. More concretely speaking, although these intellectual poles sought the possible sources of the decision-making mechanism in considerably different spheres, both attempted to account for the process of decision making in a deterministic (as well as essentialist) way, by aid of a classical one-sided cause-and-effect relationship.

In this way, the debate about the decision question plays a crucial role in the agenda of the social sciences, of which a central problematic is nothing but an agent-structure relationship. Under which conditions does the agent act, to what extent do exterior circumstance matter, or to what extent does the supposedly rational subject decide freely? Which side becomes more effective in the act of decision, both or none? These questions, in my opinion, are critical because they address one of the most controversial issues of both the social sciences and political philosophy, namely the matter of the subject. And here lies the main issue for which I chose to study this concept: undecidability.

The notion of undecidability can be seen as an alternative answer to the question of the subject, particularly throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century. When we look at the intellectual scene of the twentieth century, we see two main lines of thought, psychoanalysis and Marxism.

Freudian psychoanalysis stressed the importance of the unconscious and other irrational factors like drives led by libido in the procedure of decision making. Lacan, reformulating Freudian psychoanalysis, highlighted the emergence of the self within language and claimed that the subject's act of decision is closely related to the (in)existence of the big Other in the symbolic. In other words, the role of the other (under titles like 'unconscious', 'drives', 'big Other', 'institutions of the symbolic' and so forth), rather than the allegedly self-determining subject, is privileged.

If we assess Western Marxist theory, we notice that there is an overt parallel between the Marxist theories of the subject and those of ideology. In this sense, Lukacs constitutes one of the most significant positions within Marxist theory. He associated the bourgeois ideology with the concept of false consciousness; on the other hand, Marxism was considered to be the ideological

claim of the proletariat. More precisely, he linked the individual choices to the dominant ideological setting that was understood with the help of the classic opposition taking place between two major classes, namely the proletariat and bourgeoisie.

On the other hand, Gramsci, another leading Marxist thinker, underlined the reciprocity between the base and the superstructure, and the unity between these two spheres was called the historical bloc. Under these circumstances, and through the leadership of organic intellectuals, classes become hegemonic, or holders of power. In this process, construction of the general will is accomplished with ideological elements like law, folklore, religion and so on. As is easily seen, the Gramscian theory of the subject goes beyond classical Marxist class analysis, insisting that we are subjects of collective will.

The last and foremost figure contributing to Marxist scrutiny of the subject is Althusser. He originally benefitted from French thought, psychoanalysis and the philosophy of Spinoza by aid of concepts like the epistemological break, overdetermination, symptomatic reading borrowed from these schools of thought and strong emphasis on the notion of holism, as well as the systemic/structural element. He reversed the classical hierarchy between the base and the superstructure, and he explained social formation as composed of three levels, economic, political and ideological, whose relationship is totally interactive. Those three levels have relative autonomy with respect to each other. Nevertheless, he argued that individuals turn into subjects insofar as they are interpellated by the ideological, whose main instrument is nothing other than ideological state apparatuses (for instance, education, legal systems, religious institutions, family and etc.). In doing so, existing relations of production are reproduced and the subject is constituted. As is clearly seen, Althusser utilised a seemingly deterministic and essentialist approach in the issue of the subject as the deciding agent under the circumstances determined by the dominant ideology.

Clearly, the dichotomous relationship between liberty and order appears to be one of the most significant – and this is still valid – components of the political agenda. In my opinion, the dualism of freedom and order, or, as it is described in this thesis, the tension between the moments of the decision act and undecidability,

constitutes one of the most critical issues. The reason is that both alternatives, structuralism and agent-centric liberalism, can never present a well-established account for resolving this tension.

Moreover, as it is often formulated, we live in a postmodern age, and the most decisive characteristic of this epoch is nothing but the overriding tendency to challenge almost all conceptual frameworks. Under these circumstances, the notion of the free subject turns out to be one of the hottest problematisations occupying the contemporary agenda of the social sciences in general, and political science in particular.

However, this is not solely an academic issue; rather, the issue of to what extent we act freely also has important reflections on practical politics. Social movements fighting against various forms of inequalities stemming from the prevailing social system are an especially good example of a study area in which the interconnection between undecidability and the decision act can be investigated.

In the twenty-first century, we can not talk about merely one type of inequality; instead, as the complexity of social life has deepened, the fields of tensions due to unequal conditions have multiplied. This situation further complicates the category of the subject, as well. In that context, to examine the degree of the subjective freedom of act within such a sophisticated picture might be a critical contribution to the current agenda of political science.

In light of these issues, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek emerge as principal figures discontent with contemporary Marxism's analysis of the deciding subject; they endeavour to go beyond the classical assumption of Marxism (as well as classical liberalism and neo-liberalism) by associating it with fundamental findings presented by psychoanalytic thought, particularly Lacan's work.

The factor motivating me to focus on these thinkers is the critical dialogue taking place between them, illustrating one of the most vivid examples of theoretical dual conflicting positions in terms of the tension between freedom and determinism. In this conflicting exchange, one of the most important elements constituting the liberty and order dichotomy is discussed: the issue of the free decision of the subject. To what extent can we, as free subjects, decide on our and

others' fates? This question occupies a significant place in the works of Laclau and Žižek. Since both are unsatisfied with the structuralist and agent-centric classical liberal alternative, they, in fairly different ways, engage this issue of subjective freedom of act in a more complicated manner. In this sense, the concept of undecidability flourishes and is employed by these two theoreticians as a key answer to the question of how the subject acts.

At that point, I must underline that I am aware of the fact that the issue of the subject is too large to deal with in a narrow-scaled thesis. Owing to this, I will limit myself to the tension between the categories of the decision act and undecidability, and the reflections of this tension on actual politics. In this sense, there is also the risk of presenting a purely abstract scrutiny of the freedom of the subject without touching upon the real conditions. Hence, I will try to concretise this problem by directly referring to the key duality between the act of decision performed by the subject and the state of undecidability.

Before turning to a brief summary of the relatively distinct stances of Laclau and Žižek and my assessment of the critical dialogue between them, which constitutes the skeleton of the thesis, I will first introduce the concept of undecidability by highlighting the inventor of this concept, Jacques Derrida.

Derrida uses the conceptualisation of undecidability in understanding terms that do not fit smoothly into either of the two poles of a binary opposition. To explain undecidability more clearly, he uses the example of a spectre appearing neither present nor absent.

An undecidable entity is both present and absent simultaneously. To put it more blatantly, under the conditions of undecidability, for Derrida, all texts go beyond the original meaning expressed by the author. In this way, any process of writing uncovers the repressed and violates the existing binary oppositions determining the intention of the author. In this respect, Derrida conceives the supplement as a perfect case of the undecidable:

[The supplement] is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence, or whether the supplement supplements ... adds only to replace ... represents and makes an image ... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness (1976: 144).

In this light, the field of undecidability constitutes the very core of the text, and it reconfigures the text in each and every attempt of rewriting any notion.¹ As a result, we do not have any level of assumed purity of the original term. Within this process, origins remain open to their outside context, which is underscored by a deconstructive reading.

In the later phases of his career, Derrida exposed the undecidability concept by means of his theory of decision. At that point of analysis, he incorporated the scrutiny of undecidability into his political theory by involving the decision concept. In light of a deconstructive reading, he argues, decisions are undecidable insofar as they are structured by the law of undecidability.² Here, by the decision concept, he means decisions that engage ethical and political responsibility. A decision to be truly decisive is taken irrespective of external conditions. By claiming so, Derrida topples the classical account of decision, perceiving it by aid of a deterministic cause-and-effect relationship. As Niall Lucy correctly suggests:

If decisions were entirely calculable, they would not be decisions. For something to be a decision, it has to risk being wrong. This is why Derrida says that every decision, in order to be decision, has to pass through what he calls the ‘experience and experiment of the undecidable’. In order to be made, every decision (in this responsible, Derridean sense) has to be unprogrammable (2004: 149).

In other words, Derrida regards any sort of decision as a responsible act which remains a contradictory experience vulnerable to failure. The result of the act of decision can not be anticipated, because it is structured by the ‘undecidable oscillation’ between distinctive and incompatible circumstances. Nonetheless, Derrida insists that undecidability has nothing to do with a situation of total indeterminacy or some kind of paralysis preventing any decision from being made. In the words of Derrida:

¹ Jeffrey T. Nealon (1992: 1266-1279) presents a brilliant analysis of Derrida’s approach to the ‘textual undecidability’ and explains how significant the concept of undecidability is for the execution of deconstruction within the Derridean framework.

² Jack Reynolds (2002: 449-466) addresses the discussion taking place between Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida especially in terms of the issue of the undecidability. In his words, Merleau-Ponty’s early philosophy emphasizes the body-subject’s tendency to seek an equilibrium with the world (by acquiring skills and establishing what he refers to as ‘intentional arcs’), and towards deciding in an embodied and habitual manner that minimizes any confrontation with what might be termed a decision-making aporia. On the other hand, in his later writings, Derrida frequently points towards a constitutive ‘undecidability’ involved in decision-making (2002: 449).

Undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities ... these possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations ... They are pragmatically determined ... I say ‘undecidability’ rather than ‘indeterminacy’ because I am interested in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilised through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and speech) (1988: 148).

In more crude terms, undecidability does not inhibit the decision-making process; conversely, it constitutes the main condition of the decision act.³ In this sense, Derrida asserts that a decision must be allowed to pass through a struggle entitled ‘trial’ or ‘ordeal’ within the temporal and spatial limitations, which can not be known entirely. The possibility of any decision being otherwise is the basic precondition of being a decision.⁴ Hence, each and every decision is singular, because any decision remains an undecidable result of the complicated oscillation of opposites. In this sense, undecidability never stops, as Derrida points out; “the ordeal of undecidability” does not reach a limit, come to an end or get overcome when a decision is made, which is why it is referred to as “the ghost of the undecidable”, which haunts every decision, preventing it from coming into presence or being seen as self-authorised and inviolable, as though it could never have been otherwise (1992: 24). Another significant condition of decision is the dual state of not knowing and being obliged to decide. That is to say, a decision proper is not only necessary but also impossible. In this way, Derrida follows Kierkegaard, claiming that “the moment of decision is nothing other than the moment of madness”. Such an irrational but obligatory character is inherent to each act of decision, because otherwise we can not talk about the decision act, but rather only behaviour determined by both the external context and internal instrumental rationality.

³ Pursuing Derrida’s line of thought, Margrit Shildrick also highlights the productive power of undecidability and asserts that the irreducible pivots of paradox and undecidability emerge as the very elements that mobilize ethical response, in this sense it is precisely in the context of the undecidable that the decision must be made (2003: 188).

⁴ For more discussion on Derrida’s analysis of the decision particularly in terms of his studies on justice, see William W. Sokoloff who presents an elaborate outline of the debate on Derridean outlook of the undecidability issue (2005: 341-342, 346-347).

Having dealt with the concept of undecidability by referring to Derrida, originator of this notion, I will now elaborate on how Laclau and Žižek engage this term, which constitutes the basis of this thesis.

The second chapter analyses Laclau's involvement with the undecidability conceptualisation. In this sense, Laclau's line of argumentation will be divided into three stages, under the titles of *Introduction of Post-structuralism*, *Introduction of Psychoanalysis* and *Introduction of Deconstruction*. I am aware that such a categorisation is so crude that it surely can not be associated with the exact development of Laclau's work, but for simply analytic reasons this kind of classification will be pursued.

In the section entitled *Introduction of Post-structuralism*, the main focus point is Laclau's magnum opus, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in which he (together with Chantal Mouffe) attacks the classical Marxist analyses by means of post-structuralist themes which outline their theory of hegemony. By doing so, he sowed the seeds of his later use of the undecidability concept in a hypothetical manner. In this sense, basic conceptual instruments like articulation, overdetermination and the subject will be exposed. With the help of such a conceptual background, Laclau and Mouffe made significant and radical openings, liberating it from the cage of Marxist class analysis. Secondly, the main fields of application of such theoretical background will be explained. These are antagonism and hegemony. In this section, the functioning of conceptual tools (explained in the first part) within the scene of *realpolitik* will be addressed.

In the second major section of the second chapter, dealing with psychoanalysis, we come across the exact use of the undecidability notion by aid of the Lacanian emphasis on the constitutive outside, leading to subjectivisation. The emergent subject's most fundamental characteristic is nothing but lack. Coming to the issue of the subject, this section will attempt to present the undecidable nature of signifiers, hegemony, structure and lastly the subject, one by one. In examining the undecidability of the signifier, Laclau's claims on the indeterminate relation of signified and signifier are important. Criticising Saussurean signification analysis, he utilises the concept of floating signifiers, which are filled by the specific content (around a nodal point) as a result of the

undecidable hegemonic struggle. Moreover, Laclau underlines that, similar to the case of the signifier, any hegemony is open to new alternatives of hegemony and that this is the constitutive precondition of being hegemonic. The main reason for this is that any hegemonic project suffers from a constitutive category of lack. In a related manner, the structural conjuncture of any hegemony is also undecidable. In this way, a contingent and undecidable structure (or ‘constitutive outside,’ in Lacanian vocabulary) is seen as sedimentation, in which power relationships take place in excluding certain alternatives for the sake of specifically hegemonic ones. Lastly, the undecidability of the subject will be touched upon in this section. In this way, Laclau clarifies the subject formation process. Again the category of lack is taken as constitutive for the subject, which is constructed under the undecidable (and accidental) conditions of identification.

In the last part of the chapter on Laclau, I will elaborate on the mature understanding of undecidability as employed by Laclau, referring to Derrida as the original inventor of the term. First, Laclau’s philosophical analysis of ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ will be mentioned. As Laclau explains, the category of universal is ‘filled’ by a specific particular as a consequence of the hegemonic struggle. In this sense, each hegemonic project composes its own universality. In parallel, Laclau coins another significant concept, the empty signifier. By doing so, he highlights the undecidable nature of the signification process, through which an empty signifier corresponds to a particular, signified in accordance with the dominance of the existing hegemony. Another fundamental part of this section is the radical differentiation made between undecidability and indeterminacy. It is argued that the act of decision is not exercised in a totally chaotic context; instead, the laws of undecidability structure any decision. Nevertheless, we have no classical cause-and-effect relationship between undecidability and decision, but the undecidability is a source of both the possibility and impossibility of the decision. The final part of this section and chapter is related to the undecidable nature of the subject. Through association of Derridean deconstruction with hegemonic politics, it will be noted that the moment of decision is also the moment of the subject. In Laclau’s words, the subject is the distance between the structural undecidability and the decision itself.

The third chapter of this thesis works on a Žižekian understanding of undecidability within his theory of the act. Even though he does not employ the concept of undecidability directly, his implicit emphasis on undecidability moulds his analyses of subjectivisation and political change. In that sense, Žižek uses ‘act’ and ‘act of decision’ interchangeably. That is to say, any sort of act involves the act of decision, as well. This chapter classifies the development of Žižek’s engagement of undecidability on the basis of three basic sources enriching the Žižekian analysis of the act: Marx, German Idealism and Lacan. In this sense, Žižek has more direct connections with Benjamin (with respect to Marxian inspiration), Schelling (in terms of the influence of German Idealism) and Badiou (with regard to Žižek’s association with Lacanianism).

The first section of this chapter deals with Žižek’s concern with *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In this way, Žižek shares Benjamin’s understanding of history as the redemption of the repressed revolutionary potential of the past. With the introduction of Lacanian terms, Žižek puts forward the claim that the suspension of time generates moments of discontinuity and rupture which can be characterised as undecidable. In this sense, he criticises historicism, which tends to contextualise each and every event in an overall succession of cause-and-effect relationships. As opposed to such a historicist standpoint, he introduces the concept of historicity, which is considered to be ahistorical, ‘non-symbolisable’ and ‘traumatic’. By doing so, Žižek explains that the act is the main initiator of historical change structured by the antagonistic nature of the Real. In addition, Žižek relates his concept of the act of decision to the vanishing mediator notion by utilising the Hegelian proposition of ‘negation of negation’. In this way, he suggests that the vanishing mediator seen as the motor of the simultaneity of the opposites, within the dialectical method, involves a certain moment of undecidability in disclosing events; such a moment of undecidability makes every reality possible. In light of such an analysis, a famous example of Žižek’s, the Antigone tragedy, will be the last part of this section dealing with Žižek’s involvement with Benjamin.

The second section of this chapter is concerned with Žižek’s reading of Schelling. First of all, the specificity of Schelling will be stressed. In this sense,

materialist transcendental theory of the Real is central for Žižekian political ontology of the act decision to a certain extent. Schellingian analysis of Ground as groundless constitutes another fundamental point inspiring Žižekian scrutiny of the undecidable decision act. Moreover, Schelling's account of Rotary Motion of the Drives allows Žižek to combine Schellingian philosophy with Freudian psychoanalysis. In terms of the centrality of the drives, the subject is regarded as a result of an undecidable linkage between cycles of contraction and expansion. In light of this analysis, the main features of the act of decision will be explained: the act is identified as being unconscious, primordial and atemporal. Furthermore, the complex relationship between freedom and the decision act will be emphasised. By aid of Schellingian political ontology, Žižek addresses the centrality of the action of decision in the process of subjectivisation. The last part of this section on Schelling touches upon his analysis of the subject and its influence on Žižekian theory of the subject as a free actor of decision. Schelling's study of the materially-genetically emergent transcendental subject is understood as a consequence of groundless ground. At that point of analysis, Žižek associates the Schellingian ground with the Lacanian Real. The cracked and antagonistic nature of the Real and the encounter of the act with the Real are connected to Schelling's theory of the subject in particular.

The third subsection of this chapter is related to Žižek's concern with Alain Badiou in terms of Lacanian intersections. In the first of three parts of this section, I will present the basic points shared by Žižek and Badiou in terms of undecidability of the subject, with particular attention paid to Badiou's concept of the truth-event. The subject becomes subject insofar as it demonstrates fidelity to the truth-event freely. In this way, history remains as a rupture, interrupted permanently by the event. Throughout this process, the act of decision plays a crucial role in subjectivisation. That is, Žižek agrees with Badiou in respect to analysis of decisionist fidelity to the truth-event. What is more, the consequent undecidable nature of the event constitutes another common point of Žižek's and Badiou's theories of the subject. Besides these agreements between Žižek and Badiou, there are also significant divergences between them, and these points constitute the second part of this section. Žižek finds Badiou insufficiently

revolutionary. Also, he accuses Badiou of being unable to explain the subject prior to its fidelity to the truth-event. In this sense, Žižek considers Badiou perfectly Kantian; due to the Kantian understanding of duty and Badiou's understanding of the necessity of involving fidelity with the truth-event. The last part of this section will be devoted to Žižek's more direct association with the Lacanian act, with a particular emphasis on the issue of undecidability. The centrality of the Freudian concept of the death drive and the Lacanian notion of *passage à l'acte* make Žižek, repeating Lacan; declare that the only successful act is suicide. By claiming so, he identifies his concept of the act with undecidability. In this sense, he even opens some room for a militarist alternative of action, as well. And lastly, the undecidably constructed Lacanian subject will be correlated with the Žižekian analysis of the act of decision.

The final section of this chapter scrutinises Žižekian synthesis under the light of an analysis of three main sources of influence moulding his theory of the act. To begin, the Žižekian act will be defined. At that point of analysis, the act is seen as an encounter with the Real, interrupting the symbolic with the aim of transforming not only the symbolic but also the Real. In this sense, the act of decision is associated with the radical break of the existing power structure, instituting a new symbolic order, as well. It also transforms the subject. But since it takes place under the conditions of the Real, it, by definition, works undecidably. Briefly put, Žižek's act of decision is regarded as non-intentional, non-strategic, non-pragmatic, pure, negative, risky, authentic, outside the symbolic order, impossible, unpredictable and, most importantly, undecidable.

The fourth chapter of the thesis debates the critical assessment of the tension between Laclau and Žižek on the issue of the undecidability. First of all, critical dialogues taking place between Laclau and Žižek throughout *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* will be examined. Their readings of Lacan and Hegel form a particularly fundamental line differentiating their stances on the decision and the subject. Although Laclau blames Žižek for privileging the necessity at the expense of the contingency, Žižek, following Hegelian dialectics, underlines the immanent simultaneity between the necessity and contingency.

On the other hand, while Žižek accuses Laclau of theorising a neutral theory of hegemony having no critical stance against capitalism, Laclau notes that Žižek reproduces the classical, outmoded deterministic and essentialist Marxist analysis of class, considering class as the main actor of history and class struggle as the basic motor of historical change. Under those circumstances, Žižek employs a systematic, totalising universality (under the heavy influence of German Idealism), whereas Laclau conceives universality as an interaction between particularities (within the deconstructive outlook). Besides, Žižek insists that Laclau suffers from hidden Kantianism, particularly in terms of his analysis of the necessary but impossible decision.

The last allegation raised against Laclau by Žižek can also be directed towards Žižek himself. At that point, my central hypothesis comes to the foreground, and I argue that even though Laclau and Žižek seem to differ in significant terms when they handle the issue of undecidability, they agree on the central tenets shaping their outlooks on this question. In that sense, they end up with an irrational decisionist viewpoint in explaining both subjectivisation and political change.

In this sense, a striking analogy can be found between Carl Schmitt's existential decisionism and some sort of irrational decisionist inclination shared by Laclau and Žižek.⁵ The common point grounding this agreement consists of nothing other than the Kantian tendency followed by both thinkers. When we come to a later section of the fourth chapter, we will see the major points of this agreement between Laclau and Žižek, especially with respect to the Kantianism shared by both.

First of all, they both consider the act of decision as necessary and impossible. At that point, we will see that their prioritisation of Kantian (mathematical) antinomy leads to such a conclusion. In doing so, they try to understand and explain the paradoxical relation between the decision act and

⁵ Another striking similarity can be found between Schmitt's decisionism and Derridean understanding of the decision and this similarity allows us to comprehend decisionist leanings of Laclau and Žižek in a deeper manner. For a common ground underlying Schmittian decisionism and Derrida's theory of the decision, see Matthias Fritsch, 'Antagonism and Democratic Citizenship (Schmitt, Mouffe, Derrida)', (2008: 188); Camil Ungureanu, 'Derrida on Free Decision: Between Habermas' Discursivism and Schmitt's Decisionism', (2008: 304-308, 308-312).

undecidability, making the subject both possible and impossible simultaneously. Here, the impossibility of the subject (as also developed by Lacanian psychoanalysis) embraced by Laclau and Žižek shows how they accept Kant's emphasis on negativity, particularly with respect to the formation of the subject.

In pursuing the Kantian understanding of 'void', Laclau and Žižek highlight the undecidable emptiness of subjectivity, which can never be filled by any attempt of the decision act. Consequently, like Lacan, Laclau and Žižek endorse the Kantian theory of self-alienated/split subjectivity. One of the main sources of this self-alienation is claimed to be self-ignorance, as stressed by Kant's epistemology, which is also supported by Laclau and Žižek.

Such an understanding of self-ignorant subjectivity leads Laclau and Žižek to argue that there is a constitutive crack within the subjectivity between a so-called conscious subject and the subject-in-itself (which can not be known). That kind of cracked and finite character is also the case for the Kantian distinction made between phenomena (the epistemological) and noumena (the ontological). In prioritising the latter, Laclau and Žižek aim at theorising the subjectivisation and political order establishment by means of a (Kantian) transcendentalist framework.

Furthermore, they attempt to overcome the problem of universal-particular by constructing a new concept of concrete universal (which is an originally Hegelian notion) with the help of Kant's view on aesthetic (reflexive) judgement. Last and most importantly, following Kantian ethical-political philosophy, Laclau and Žižek suggest that the antinomic relation between the moments of the decision act and undecidability constitutes the determining factor making both identification and (re)generation of the political order possible and partial.

The common ground of all these points is that they illustrate that Laclau and Žižek concur on the issue of undecidability, through utilising the governing principles of the Kantian approach. In brief, both argue that the tension between the moments of the decision act and undecidability both necessitates the category of the subject and prevents it from achieving fullness. In this sense, Laclau and Žižek attribute a decisive role to the undecidability in the incomplete (and susceptible) formation of the subject and the imperfect (and vulnerable) institutionalisation of any political order.

As a last remark, to return to my hypothesis, even though they use different conceptual-theoretical frameworks, terminologies and starting points, Laclau and Žižek arrive at a very similar conclusion on the undecidability question, and the basis of this agreement is the Kantian legacy shared by both. This common conclusion can be expressed as some sort of decisionism stimulated by subjective irrationality.⁶

⁶ Emphasis on the irrational character of the identification process shared by Laclau and Žižek can be claimed to be stemmed from Lacanian psychoanalysis. This point is highlighted by A. Kiarina Kordela as follows: “Lacan introduces the materialist idea that the subject’s identification with a certain meaning ... [that is] informed by irrational sensual enjoyment, the bodily reaction to any meaning” (1999: 808).

CHAPTER II

ERNESTO LACLAU AND HIS USE OF THE CONCEPT OF UNDECIDABILITY

2.1. Introduction of Post-Structuralism

In this section, the preliminary theoretical points on the adventure of the conceptualisation of undecidability within the career of Ernesto Laclau will be primarily dealt with. In this sense, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (HSS)*, the magnum opus co-authored by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, constitutes the fundamental source of analysis for this section. The reason for this is that this work can be regarded as a turning point in Laclau's discourse analysis. In *HSS*, with the help of Mouffe, he implicitly seeds his later scrutiny of the subject by the aid of the concept of undecidability, even though they do not expound a clearly theoretical account of this notion or locate its place within their overall theory.⁷

Therefore, this first section of the second chapter will engage the preliminary conceptual tools and their application fields⁸ utilised by Laclau and Mouffe, which will then form the theoretical background of the usage of undecidability as utilised by Laclau throughout the 1990s.⁹

To be more specific, the basic conceptual tools of 'articulation', 'overdetermination', and 'the subject' will be the content of this part, but besides

⁷ Particularly the third chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 'Beyond the Positivity of the Social: Antagonisms and Hegemony', in which Laclau and Mouffe try to give details about their theory of discourse and hegemonic formation, will constitute the main reference point for this section of the chapter.

⁸ By application fields, I mean fundamental aspects of the sphere of the political where political struggles based on power relations take place, and more importantly where theoretical apparatuses supplied by discourse theory, namely articulation, overdetermination and the subject, can be implemented in the real life of the politics.

⁹ After *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we see a clear theoretical separation between Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: Laclau devoted his efforts to consolidating his theory of hegemony and discourse analysis, essentially with the enrichments associating himself with stances occupied by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean Deconstruction, whereas Mouffe started work on the area of political philosophy with a particular interest in the issue of radical democracy.

this, as mentioned above, the main application fields of these conceptual instruments will also be elaborated on. These are nothing other than ‘antagonism’ and ‘hegemony’. By application fields, I mean the main fields of concrete political phenomena where such a conceptual background can be actualised. The foremost aim of this section is to present an initial picture of Laclau’s theoretical stance, which helps us to incarnate his employment of the undecidability notion in his later analyses. I will start with major conceptual means used by Laclau and Mouffe in *HSS*¹⁰, which has had a path-breaking effect in the contemporary political thought.

2.1.1. Basic Conceptual Tools

2.1.1.1. Articulation

Having severely criticised the economically deterministic and essentialist trend in Marxism in the first two chapters of *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe present their own theory of hegemony under the influence of a considerably rich theoretical and philosophical background ranging from Saussurean linguistics to Lacanian psychoanalysis, from Derridean deconstructive thought to Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language, from Althusserian use of the overdetermination notion to Foucaultian theory of discourse, or from Gramsci’s ideas on hegemony to Husserlian phenomenology.

First of all, they rescue the ideologies from ‘class belonging’, and instead ideologies are assumed to be inclusive of all members of different groups of people having a distinctive equivalence that has nothing to do with economic factors. At that point, Laclau and Mouffe, as opposed to their Marxist antecedents and the following Gramsci, embrace the ‘logic of contingency’ at the expense of the ‘logic of necessity’. By the aid of viewpoints of linguist and psychoanalyst

¹⁰ Robert Miklitsch (1995: 167-196) touches upon the originality of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. In this sense, he gives a deeper analysis of Laclau and Mouffe’s scrutiny of hegemony by means of addressing the Gramscian and Althusserian backgrounds which influence the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe to a certain extent.

forerunners, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that the meaning of any signifier can not be fixed; rather, it is reformulated in each and every language game. This is also valid for identities which are considered to be permanently unstable; that is why different groupings could form hegemony in different times. This situation also makes the hegemony non-fixed, entirely dynamic and susceptible to the changes of historical context. But how can such distinctive social groups generate hegemony?

On the basis of theoretical openings inspired by the various theoretical and philosophical predecessors enlisted above, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 105) regard the idea of ‘articulation’ as the core of the hegemony formation process. By the concept of articulation, they mean a type of discursive practice that turns diverse ‘elements’ into ‘moments’ in a discursive totality whose identities thus get modified. Putting it more bluntly, signifiers, like identities, are relationally entrenched within the discourse and open to change forever. The mere fixation of a particular signifier or identity to a particular discourse can be just partial, as in the case of ‘nodal points’ as used in Lacan’s analysis of signification.¹¹

During the articulatory practice, the articulator and the articulated are not the same; in other words, they are “mutually contradictory discursive surfaces” which can create hegemony in solely one way: “negotiation”. As a result, the end point of each and every articulation is exclusively contingent and external to the parties initiating the articulation itself. This further implies that connections between articulations by no means produce a totality; rather, the constitutive lieu of those practices, i.e., ‘the social’, is almost self-destructively open to new changes and such a contingent situation underlies the negative essence of the existence within any discourse.

In closing this review of the concept of articulation, let me reveal three concluding remarks highlighted by Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 96): first, not only the relations among articulations, but also the possible linkages among articulations themselves can only be described as contingent; second, as a

¹¹ In fact, the conceptualisation of ‘nodal points’ refers to Lacan’s notion of *point de capiton*. Lacan, following Saussure, claims that within a linguistic system in which identity is constructed, all signification operations are related to each other, but the existence of the *point de capiton* prevents this situation from turning into a chaotic vicious cycle. In his words, the *point de capiton* is the signifier which “stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification” (Lacan, 1977: 303).

consequence of this, every identity and signifier in general has nothing but a precarious character which is unable to be fixed; and third, the mere substance of articulations, in more exact terms, exists in a fragmented and dispersed manner, so there is no authentic or *sui generis* association between them.

2.1.1.2. Overdetermination

The conceptual instrument of ‘overdetermination’ is utilised by Laclau and Mouffe to explain the most dynamic process of meaning generation, which can be identified as the “symbolic type of fusion” in the words of Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 97). This conceptualisation was first formulated by Sigmund Freud, who used it in his analysis of dreams.¹² Then Althusser employed this term with the sense of the ‘condensation’ of the symbolic with a plurality of meanings and identities (Tormey & Townshend, 2006: 96).

From such a usage, Laclau and Mouffe enlarge the account of overdetermination by implementing this concept in order to understand social relations in general. In this respect, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that social relations are overdetermined in the sense that they lack an “ultimate literality” (1985: 98). Consequently, we have no absolute fixation at the end of any articulation; rather, every discursive practice brings about nothing other than a relative and precarious fixation. Hence, by the help of the overdetermination idea, Laclau and Mouffe affirm the open, incomplete and politically negotiable character of every identity; that is why making an effort to construct a historical subject (or actor of history), as in the case of Marxism, is a completely fruitless activity which is condemned to fail.

Another related and fundamental notion, borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis and emphasising the imperfect nature of any overdetermination, is

¹² Freud makes use of the idea of overdetermination in his endeavour to decipher the underlying meaning of dreams. Epistemologically speaking, he employed a hermeneutical approach in interpreting dreams and reached the conclusion that a single remembered image or event may be underlaid by a series of different meanings. He exemplifies this situation in which dreams, having overdetermined characteristics, allow us to interpret them diversely, in his master piece, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume IV): 277-278.

‘suture’.¹³ As its name clearly implies, a primordial lack due to traumatic separation from the mother in early childhood can be filled only to a certain extent, but not ultimately. In other words, there will be always some scarring from previous wounds. In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, the transformation of elements into moments in any articulation practice is incomplete; the absolute suture of a discursive totality is impossible (1985: 106). For this reason, both relations and identities have no necessary character, unlike the premises of different “schools” of Marxism.

Similarly, within the theoretical framework presented by Laclau and Mouffe, neither total interiority nor total exteriority is possible. Instead, discourse is constructed only as a product of the partial fixation of surplus of meaning; the whole process takes place within the field of discursivity. That is to say, any discourse is an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, but as can be easily guessed, that kind of attempt is condemned to be unsuccessful. Thereby, presupposing a fixed, positive, objective, transparent and closed order of meaning is just an imagination which has nothing to do with the theory of discourse formulated by Laclau and Mouffe. Simply referring to theoretical openings made by Laclau and Mouffe in *HSS*, the overdetermined character of any signifier results in the ambiguity inherent to the nature of that signifier. In this sense, any particular signifier can not be totally fixed to any particular signified. That is why Laclau and Mouffe make use of the concept of ‘floating signifiers’ when they talk about any signifier in general. More plainly, we have a proliferation of the signifieds signified by the same signifier, and this is the case for each and every discursive formation. The end result, namely the partial fixation of meaning due to the practice of articulation, is termed by Laclau and Mouffe as ‘nodal points’. By such conceptualisation, the contingent and open character of the social is assured, and the possibility of the total ambiguity or contingency that can be attributed to discursive formations is renounced.

¹³ As a medical term, *suture* means closure and the process of stitching a wound; on the other hand, Lacan defines his own concept of suture as “a conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic” (1988: 118). To put it more clearly, the moment of suture constitutes the relationship between the subject and the whole sphere of discursivity. The subject, in the moment of suture, tries to fill its constitutive lack and accomplish a perfect closure, but as in the case of medicine, the moment of suture can not be completed properly and there is always a propensity to fail in this procedure.

2.1.1.3. The Subject

Perhaps the most central conceptual tool employed by Laclau and Mouffe enabling us to figure out the theoretical background of the undecidability notion is nothing other than the subject. The essentially post-structuralist analysis of the subject made in *HSS* gives us some significant preliminary remarks on how much the context of subject formation is undecidable. To be more specific, in opposition to the classically determinist structuralist outlook, Laclau and Mouffe note that there are various subject positions within the discursive structure (1985: 115). In other words, discourses prepare some positions to be filled by people to become the subjects.

Hence, we see an implicit type of a relatively structuralist viewpoint endorsed by Laclau and Mouffe, who suggest that the subject formation process and the subjects themselves are determined by the discourses to a certain extent. But this is not end of the story; unlike structuralism's subjectless analysis of the subject, Laclau and Mouffe underline that those subject positions vary according to different discourses. That is to say, the subject is assigned a variety of positions by diverse discourses.

Abandoning the truly deterministic and essentialist understanding of Althusserian structuralism, Laclau and Mouffe suppose that the individual is interpellated in various as well as distinctive subject positions simultaneously, because there is no discourse having an overwhelming dominance over the social. Rather, there is always a series of discourses, competing to get control of the social and activating different subject positions at the same time. Therefore, each and every subject position is a discursive position.

Going beyond Saussurean linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe make use of the concept of the 'floating signifier' to explain subject formations. Due to a constantly changing discursive formation based on contingent articulatory practices, subject positions are never fixed ultimately, but are open to change. Moreover, the differential relationality among divergent subject positions themselves builds the meaning of the subject positions within the particular discourse (1985: 113). In the words of Laclau and Mouffe, the subject is

overdetermined. In other words, the individual is positioned by numerous discourses concurrently, and since those discursive formations are contingent and there is a chaotic type of relations among the subject positions within any discourse, we will have no determinate logic standing behind the identity formation.¹⁴

Similar to Saussure's understanding of the sign, Laclau and Mouffe highlight that the meaning of any subject position is arbitrary. Sometimes subject positions can be seen as natural, but this is related to the degree of the hegemony entailed by the dominant discourse within the sphere of the social. Since no discursive formation is invincible or unrivalled, each and every subject position remains vulnerable to any challenge. However, such an analysis does not end up with total chaos with respect to the identity formation.

Even though Laclau and Mouffe admit that differential relations among subject positions are constitutive for their own construction, some of these differential relations are more influential than others. Consequently, in a given discursive conjuncture, a particular subject position may be privileged at the expense of other subject positions, and that is why other subject positions become meaningful to the extent that they enter into relations with that privileged subject position. Inspired by the Lacanian conception of *point de capiton*, Laclau and Mouffe call this privileged position the nodal point. Within their theoretical structure, each nodal point performs the role of a distinct discursive centre among the others (1985: 112).

2.1.2. Basic Application Fields

2.1.2.1. Antagonism

Antagonism is the leading underlying mechanism providing the dynamic structure of each discursive formation as well as identity construction. But what is

¹⁴ As Lacan puts it, reality is constructed by means of language based on endless and unstable sequences of significations. This is also the case for the process of the subject formation, which presupposes a constant lack.

the source of such a centrality? To answer that question, it is necessary to examine the concept of 'subversion'. In a nutshell, this notion indicates "the presence of the contingent in the necessary". At first glance, this phrase may seem mere wordplay, but with a deeper look, we find out how key of a role is played by this conceptualisation. Laclau and Mouffe argue (1985: 114):

... [Subversion] manifests itself as symbolisation, metaphorisation, paradox which deform and question the literal character of every necessity. Necessity, therefore, exists not under the form of an underlying principle, of a ground, but as an effort of literalisation which fixes the differences of a relational system. The necessity of the social is the necessity proper to purely relational identities-as in the linguistic principle of value – not natural 'necessity' or the necessity of an analytical judgement. 'Necessity', in this sense, is simply equivalent to a 'system of differential positions in a sutured space'.

In simpler terms, subversion reveals the necessity of contingency within the discursive formation. The main resource of such contingency is nothing other than the characteristically antagonistic nature of the relations amongst articulatory practices. We should then make a closer analysis of antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe define the term as "a form of precise discursive presence belonging to experience of the limit of all objectivity" (1985: 122-124). Since antagonistic relations include at least two conflicting parties, the existence of the 'other' is an obstacle for a totally fixed identity construction. Indeed, the impossibility of formation of any totality brings about the antagonism. As mentioned in its definition, antagonism constitutes the limits of any objectivity, and that is why partial and precarious objectification is the case for each and every discursive structure. To put it more clearly, antagonisms represent the limits of the social and society; thus, they are external to society. Particularly, they limit the society in constituting itself fully, so antagonisms supply the guarantee for "the impossibility of final suture". In light of such an antagonistic scrutiny of identity formation, Laclau and Mouffe conclude that identity is purely negative, because it can only be represented indirectly through equivalence between its differential moments. At that point of analysis, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 128) give the formula of antagonism: "ultimate precariousness of all difference will show itself in a relation

of total equivalence”. The relation of antagonism requires the existence of conflicting facades which become meaningful within themselves by the help of some sort of equivalence. The necessity of such a constructed equivalence provides the negativity with real existence as such. The reason for this is that any equivalence is described by means of the negatively situated other side of the antagonism. Accordingly, the mechanism of antagonism makes the social be penetrated by negativity. This situation allows no transparency status to be attributed to the society. Nevertheless, I must mention that it is completely impossible to have conditions of both total equivalence and total difference in terms of objectivity. The possibility of total equivalence means the possibility of an absolutely transparent society, while the condition of total differential objectivity makes the antagonism, and thus any discursive formation, unthinkable. In simpler terms, when the existence of unstable social relations is the case, then it is impossible for any system of difference to succeed in suturing the social and, as a consequence, more and more points of antagonism will proliferate in due course. This process assures the impossibility of the society to exist as a fully fixed and transparent entity; rather, it succumbs to any change originated by the mechanism of antagonism. And so, the contingent nature of the social and the subject is ensured by the dynamism led by the centrality of antagonistic relations among different moments grouped by relative equivalence.

2.1.2.2. Hegemony

The incomplete and open nature of the social is presumed by hegemony. As long as there is no determinant and natural linkage between elements and moments, we see the emergence of hegemony. Hence, the permanence of articulatory practices produces the hegemony. But the web of articulations within a discursive formation must also be accompanied by the antagonistic relationality within the social. Ironically, the circumstance allowing any hegemony to survive is the existence of challenging contra-hegemonic forces. As in the case of antagonism, hegemony assumes an environment in which the phenomena of equivalence and differential objectivities hold meaning.

In this light, Laclau and Mouffe present two conditions of hegemonic articulation: (i) the presence of antagonistic forces; and (ii) the instability of the frontiers which separate those forces (1985: 136). Thus, hegemony, as a political practice or in more general terms as a form of politics, has no determinable locus within the topography of the social. Rather, it is intrinsically unstable and constantly open to being challenged and losing its dominance to other conflicting hegemonic forces. It has nothing to do with any type of centrality within the so-called hierarchy of the society; in other words, we never have a single hegemony remaining eternally unopposed. Instead, it is possible to see the existence of various hegemonic nodal points simultaneously, some of which might be exceedingly overdetermined; as a consequence, they comprise points of condensation of some social relations but do not form the core of the social. For that reason, the social is irreducibly plural and in that respect the spheres and struggles within the social are utterly autonomous.

There could be no hierarchical analysis of the social or the concept of epiphenomenon in comparison to pseudo-central mechanisms, actors or processes within the theoretical framework offered by Laclau and Mouffe. Under those circumstances, any hegemonic formation can not be referred to as the specific logic of a single social force; in other words, the openness of the social is the prerequisite for any hegemonic formation in general and any hegemonic articulation in particular. Hence, hegemony is plural and democratic by nature; otherwise, for instance in the cases of ultimate subordination or full-fledged systems of differences, we can not talk about the possibility of hegemonic forms of politics. In this sense, hegemonic articulations generate autonomy, or to put it differently, the autonomy is nothing but a hegemonic construction. Furthermore, autonomy constitutes an internal and indispensable moment of the wider hegemonic formation. Moreover, as emphasised by Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 141), hegemony is metonymical because its effects always emerge from a surplus of meaning which results from an operation of displacement, and so the moment of dislocation is essential to any hegemonic practice. In other words, we talk about hegemony to the extent that it is able to be defeated and replaced by other hegemonic forces in a totally unstable manner.

2.2. Introduction of Psychoanalysis

Having presented the theoretical remarks that shed light on the pre-1990s works of Ernesto Laclau, essentially *HSS*, which are relatively dominated by the premises of post-structuralist thought based on conceptualisations such as articulation, antagonism or overdetermination, it is now time to engage perhaps one of the most important turning points experienced by Laclau, which shapes his later involvement with the conception of undecidability, namely his “Lacanian turn” (Smith, 1998: 81).

Particularly motivated by the criticisms raised by Slavoj Žižek against his analysis of subject formation in *HSS*, Laclau starts to make use of the theoretical outputs of Lacanian psychoanalysis in a much more intensified way. Such a landmark shift allows Laclau to refrain from subjectless post-structuralism, seeing the subjects as side-effects of external antagonist relations. This standpoint dominating *HSS* can also be blamed for having a structuralist tendency implicitly, because it does not suggest any theoretical opening with regard to the subject formation itself. Rather, this process is considered to be just a repercussion led by the exterior discursive articulations among antagonistic moments.

Noticing such shortcomings, Laclau makes significant theoretical expansions in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), and his formulations on the conception of undecidability particularly determine his later theoretical and philosophical route to a certain extent.¹⁵ Under these circumstances, I am going to elaborate on this work with special attention to his analysis of undecidability. But before beginning, let me outline this section briefly. The main four conceptualisations and their relatively inherent association with undecidability will constitute this section: the signifier, hegemony, structure and subject. In other words, in these pages I will deal with the fundamental four levels of undecidability, which will represent vital clues for Laclau’s later theoretical destination, as well.

¹⁵ The book entitled *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* consists of a very long essay with the same title; other significant writings of Laclau in this work are “The Impossibility of Society”, “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” and “Post-Marxism without Apologies”, and here by *New Reflections*, I mean this book as a whole, including all four of these articles.

2.2.1. Undecidability of the Signifier

Criticising modernity and its obsession with transparency and totality, Laclau asserts that the modern myth related to the immediacy of the sign is in terrible difficulty. We can no longer talk about the smooth and unique coupling between the signifier and signified for each and every sign. Rather, the signified is even less closed within itself. This makes the context of any signification less well-defined, as well. Putting it more blatantly, the context is radically open to being challenged and altered, and that is why we have no intellectual mastery over the context itself. Laclau has given some details about his conceptualisation of floating signifiers in *HSS*, and moving on by means of such background; he further underlines the vagueness of the meaning of floating signifiers changing according to different contexts.

In the vocabulary of Laclau, to fix the meaning of the signifier around a nodal point requires us to hegemonise the content of that signifier (1990: 28). But as is easily guessed, it is exclusively impossible to manage any type of total fixity of the signifier. Therefore, every signifier is condemned to float from one signified to another in an entirely undecidable manner. This ensures the open and incomplete nature of the social.

To put it another way, particular floating signifiers enjoy distinctive meaning in accordance with the changes occurring on the side of contexts. Here, the influence of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is evident. As Jacob Torfing brilliantly notes, the relation of mutual negation and substitution between different signifieds that are attached to the same signifier is captured by Lacan's notion of "the sliding of the signifieds under the signifiers" (1999: 62). Such arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified is, of course, taken one step further than the analysis made by Saussure. But if this interaction between the signifier and the signified is fully open, then do we not come across an awfully chaotic scene with respect to the sphere of the political?

At that point of analysis, the concept of the nodal point, another notion invented under the influence of the Lacanian theory of psychoanalysis, arises as a central category. Any force that can be viewed as hegemonic interferes with this

process of the sliding of the signifieds and fixes the meaning of the floating signifier in line with a nodal point. Here, the specificity of that nodal point has to do with its degree of organising other signifiers, which constitutes the core of the discursive formation keeping the hegemonic force of the hegemony. Nonetheless, it is certain that such a partial fixation of the meaning of the signifier by the aid of a particular nodal point is far from being a total fixation, and so the incomplete as well as undecidable character of the signifier appears at that point.

As the meaning has been partly fixed by a hegemonic force, another hegemonic force challenging the current one may intervene in the process and lead to a different relative fixation of the signifier by the help of a distinct nodal point. In other words, every fixation of meaning is totally open to being altered by an intrusion led by another hegemonic force at any time, in any manner. Hence, it can be surely claimed that signifiers float undecidably, and this is one of the most fundamental guarantees of the openness of the social, as well as the possibility of the hegemonic kind of politics.

In addition to his analysis of floating signifiers in *New Reflections*, Laclau also makes theoretical openings in terms of the ambiguity of the signifier in his path-breaking essay entitled “Politics and the Limits of Modernity” (1989). In this study, Laclau maintains that the concept of the floating signifier indicates that radical ambivalence subverts the fixity of sign, and this provides the context with a drastic openness. He concludes that such an instability of the signifier results in three key consequences: first, the concept of discourse comes to be prior to the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic; second, the relational nature of the discourse permits the generalisation of the linguistic model within the ensemble of social relations; and third, the radical relationalism of social identities deepens their susceptibility to new (and undecidable, of course) relations and introduces within them the outcomes of haziness belonging to the signifier itself (1989: 71).

With the help of those points, it can be noted that the mainstream philosophical trend relying on the existence of totally fixed and transparent conceptions is just a myth that must be renounced. What is more, the conceptual foundations that are attributed to the historical eras, as though they have an overall

essence which is assumed to have been there since the beginning of history, must be rejected, as well. Another flawed belief that must be avoided is the issue of historical actors, which is assigned by the so-called mission of dominating the historical developments.

As opposed to the case of the classical version of Marxism which sees class as the sole historical actor making history progress, there is no such universal historical agent existing regardless of the specificity of time and space. On the other hand, within the framework pictured by Laclau, all identity is nothing but a floating signifier, too. Since there is no extra-discursive reality, all social reality, including social identities, is simply an arbitrary construction shaped by political arguments on the basis of the given hegemonic forces at that time. In other words, the undecidable character of the signifier embodies each and every signification grounding the spheres of both the social and the political.

2.2.2. Undecidability of Hegemony

The second level of undecidability is related to the issue of the hegemonic project. Similar to the case of signification, and governed by the undecidable nature of floating signifiers that are unfixated, incomplete and susceptible to new changes every time, each hegemonic project is totally open to confrontations led by new challengers. In Laclau's words, "the incomplete and contingent nature of the totality would spring not only from the fact that no hegemonic system can be fully imposed, but also from the intrinsic ambiguities of the hegemonic project itself" (1990: 28).

Thus, if there is complete control and imposition of a political power, then we can not talk about the hegemonic politics in that example, because one of the most distinguishing features of hegemonic forces is their fragility owing to their inherent undecidable character. Here we have radical historicity led by the contingent social relations. Hence, each and every hegemonic project is historical and can not be held autonomous from the limitations of temporality and spatiality. Total determination and total autonomy are just equivalents, and the possibility of both must be denied. Since any factor of the discursive formation is relational,

believing in the possibility of a total autonomy with respect to the hegemonic project would be naïve. Consequently, autonomy is always relative. Each hegemonic project is open to interference initiated by contra-hegemonic forces, and so the autonomy of the hegemonic project is determined to the extent that it is vulnerable to defiance from its rivals. If there were no opponent, then we could not even imagine the issue of autonomy. Therefore, the conception of autonomy comes to be meaningful as long as there are those antagonists threatening the autonomy. As a result, each experience of autonomy has to be relative, by definition.

Such a line of thought is also valid for the hegemonic project. As implied above, we can not even think about a hegemony having no contestant, because otherwise there would be no hegemonic politics by nature. This kind of radical exposure stems from the intrinsic undecidable nature of each hegemonic project. As mentioned above, the totally rational and progressive essence ascribed to historicity in general, and any historical change in particular, is just a myth that must be abandoned.

At that point of analysis, Laclau also raises objections against his Marxist predecessors who see history as a succession of modes of production with an end point that can be named as a classless communist society throughout the entire world. Not only Marxist but also the mainstream understanding of history has such a philosophical propensity, embracing the ideas of (rational as well as logical) causality, progress and telos.

Conversely, this supposedly rational succession of historical eras is always disrupted by nothing other than contingency. In this sense, the philosophy of history endorsed by Marxism, which can surely be viewed as a member of the modernist front, and its logical categories remains inadequate in grasping this contingency. As Laclau reveals, the so-called causal and progressive historical succession is interrupted by hegemonic projects; what is achieved by the hegemonic form of politics is the suturing of the relationship between task and agent (1990: 95-96). This suture, he continues, is produced in the field of

insurmountable relations of dislocation¹⁶ and we can only attribute a character of inscription to the suture (1990: 95-96). To put it more clearly, in each and every hegemonic project, the signification process gets renewed, and in this regard the social identities and all other products of floating signifiers come to be redefined in accordance with the new nodal points held by that hegemonic project.

But this procedure of redefinition is condemned to fail, because no hegemonic project has the ability to engage in total fixation; rather, due to their intrinsically undecidable characters, they are open to attacks from adversaries. For this reason, hegemony solely sutures the relationship between act and actor, nothing beyond that. This partial and temporal fixation is valid until the inevitable dislocation of the current hegemonic project in due time.

Here, the point of departure for Laclau is another crucial Lacanian conception: 'lack'. Each hegemonic project suffers from this constitutive category of lack, and this category of lack makes it hegemonic, because otherwise we have a completely successful and absolute fixation of meaning and related type of politics, but this would have nothing to do with hegemonic politics.

Openness and vulnerability of hegemonies emanate from the constitutive category of lack which can not be filled.¹⁷ So, the base does not determine the last instance, as opposed to the classical Marxist approach of history. Rather, we have, as Laclau declares, relative efficacy of each sphere depending on the unstable relation of antagonistic forces penetrating the social; in parallel, the interests of historical actors are also precarious, and so all historical products are subjected to dissolution and redefinition in an undecidable manner (1990: 115-118).

Hegemonic projects as an outcome of historical change are not an exception, and from its establishment, any hegemonic project is exposed to an undecidable restatement of meaning, owing to the fact that the core of any hegemonic project bears a constitutive lack waiting to be filled but condemned to remain unfilled, which will lead to dislocation and replacement by another hegemonic force.

¹⁶ The issue of dislocation and its centrality in the procedure of the reproduction of hegemonic politics in an undecidable manner will be handled in subsequent sections, particularly those on the undecidability of structure and undecidability of the subject, in detail.

¹⁷ Similar to the Lacanian use of the term, the category of lack is viewed as an effect of the ineliminable power relations that are inherent to the origin of the subjectivity construction.

2.2.3. Undecidability of Structure

The third level of undecidability is closely associated with the undecidability of the hegemonic project, namely the structural context of hegemony. Similar to the case of hegemonic projects, structure suffers from an incomplete nature, but this is not an effect of an external factor. Instead, this situation is inherent to the character of the structure itself. Moreover, this undecidability of the structure is also one of the most significant sources of the undecidability of each and every hegemonic project. As implied above, hegemonic practice is a radical construction which has nothing to do with past experience, and in this respect the radical undecidability permeates any hegemonic act.

At this point, Laclau stresses that any decision made within a structural context is contingently made through one of the possibilities presented by this structure, so it seems to be external to structural context; but this is not the case, because the agent taking this contingent decision can not be considered a separate entity from the structure. Rather, it is in close linkage to the structure (1990: 30). The agent deciding is neither totally separate from the structure, nor totally internal to it. The reason for this is the fact that decisions made by relatively autonomous actors transform and subvert the structural context continually. As Laclau overtly puts it, this leads to three conclusions (1990: 30):

... (a) that the subject is nothing but this distance between the undecidable structure and the decision; (b) that ontologically speaking, the decision has the character of a ground which is as primary as the structure on which it is based, since it is not determined by the latter; and (c) that if the decision is one between structural undecidables, taking a decision can only mean repressing possible alternatives that are not carried out. In other words, that the 'objectivity' arising from a decision is formed, in its most fundamental sense, as a power relationship.

Another vital concept making us comprehend the undecidable nature of social reality is 'sedimentation', which is borrowed from Husserlian phenomenology.¹⁸ As soon as any hegemonic project achieves fixation of meaning

¹⁸ According to Husserl, in taking prior scientific findings for granted, each scientific discipline becomes routinised, and the original intuitions from which those scientific investigations originated are forgotten. At that point, the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl seeks to recover those

relatively successfully, the process of ‘forgetting the origins’ starts. To be more exact, as hegemonic projects manage to institute themselves effectively, they tend to deny the fact that they are just one among various equivalent alternatives and try to make the original contingency intrinsic to themselves disappear. In doing so, hegemonic projects disregard the radical undecidability of structural context and begin to act as if a mere objective presence. Laclau calls this process sedimentation (1990: 34). Sedimentation obscures the fact that any objectivity is based on exclusion of equally possible alternatives, thus involving a power relationship.

However, the existence of the possible alternatives is eternal, and another originally Lacanian conceptualisation is employed to understand this issue: ‘the constitutive outside’. The undecidable character of the structural context, as well as the hegemonic project, is rooted in the existence of this constitutive (and radical) outside (more specifically speaking, contra-hegemonic forces), which has the capability of threatening and overthrowing the available hegemonic project. Social reality exists in such an irreducible dialectic between the hegemonic project, tending to sediment the meaning, and the radical exteriority, being ready to dislocate that hegemonic project. The concept of dislocation comes to the scene, allowing us to comprehend social transformation in a deeper way. Every piece of social reality survives in a dialectical relationship: “it is dislocated insofar as it depends on the outside which both denies it and provides its condition of possibility at the same time” (Laclau, 1990: 39). This seemingly contradictory character of dislocatory articulations is also underlined by Yannis Stavrakakis:

... [T]his moment of dislocation is exactly what causes the articulation of new social constructions that attempt to suture the lack created by dislocation. Since dislocation denotes the failure and subversion of a system of representation (be it imaginary or symbolic) by not being representable, since dislocation creates a lack in the place of a discursive order, dislocation can be conceived as an encounter with the real in Lacanian sense of the word. The lack, however, created by dislocation produces the need (rather the desire in our Lacanian vocabulary) for its filling (1999: 68).

original insights. As Husserl explains, the routinisation and forgetting of the origins is *sedimentation*, whilst the recovery of the constitutive activity of thought is *reactivation* (Laclau, 1990: 34).

The effects of dislocatory relations are characteristically contradictory; they constitute the mere source of the possibility of social identity as well as the sole threat preventing those identities from being totally established.

Apart from such a paradoxical nature of dislocatory articulations, Laclau highlights three effects of the dislocation mechanism also leading to new possibilities of historical action:

- (i) An increased pace of social transformation and permanent rearticulatory interferences provoke a higher degree of awareness of historicity;
- (ii) As mentioned above, the subject is merely the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision; and
- (iii) Power relations remain uneven, because a dislocated structure has no centre; it is constitutively decentred (1990: 39-40).

In fact, if we talk about dislocation, there must be multiple power centres having uneven levels of power. Structure is decentred by means of antagonistic relations among diverse power centres. When we come to the other side of the dialectic, each dislocation ends up with recentralisation, because the dislocation itself enjoys the possibility of a new fixation around a new ensemble of nodal points. In Laclau's terms: "dislocation is both the condition of possibility and impossibility of a centre at the same time" (1990: 40).

The undecidability attached to the structural context can be ascertained by the aid of three chief dimensions of dislocation (Laclau, 1990: 41-42).

First, dislocation is a *form of temporality*. Structural undecidability has nothing to do with repetition, which is associated with the category of space. Indeed, any teleological conception of historical change is spatial, because it implies a physical end point of history and implies the uni-linearity of history. That is to say, we can not talk about any structural law of succession based on space and thus telos. Rather, the inextricable failure of ultimate fixation (or, we could say, hegemonisation) connotes that the Lacanian category of the Real (interestingly including the physical sphere) is temporal.

Second, dislocation is a *form of possibility*. There is no overall, universal governing rule shaping historical change. Instead there were, are and will always be other alternatives equally possible in comparison with actualised alternatives. In

this sense, any dislocation leads to new possibilities of unstable and indeterminate (also undecidable) rearticulations.

Third, dislocation is a *form of freedom*. By the concept of freedom, here Laclau means the ‘absence of determination’. If any social identity is free, the existence of a non-determined context is the main pre-condition for that. The structural context is unable to determine the subject or the decision-making process of the subject. In other terms, the subject is free not because it has a *sui generis* freedom, but because it has a failed structural identity. Therefore, the subject is both partially and relatively self-determined. As a last remark, these three dimensions are closely interrelated and mutually involved in terms of underlying the intrinsic undecidable nature of the structural context.

2.2.4. Undecidability of the Subject

The last and perhaps most fundamental level of undecidability is involved with the category of the subject, because there is a very close linkage between the process of subject formation and decision-making mechanisms. Here we see the most drastic degree of Lacanian influence over Laclau.

As stated above, one of the most dramatic theoretical shortcomings of *HSS* is its weak and relatively (post)structuralist analysis of the subject, and this fact is emphasised by Žižek. The point is that in *HSS*, the subject formation is assumed to be determined by external antagonist articulations among moments, and the selection of subject positions is decided on the basis of structural dynamics. On the other hand, as Žižek underlines, internal self-blocking plays a key role in the analysis of the subject. Having realised this inadequacy, Laclau makes significant reformulations in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* in his theory of the subject, particularly under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and in this regard, the undecidability conceptualisation occupies a critical position.

As stated before, identities are regarded as relational, differential and unable to be fully constituted. Undecidable accidents leading to contingent changes become an indispensable part of the identity construction procedure. Since we have no closed system of relations, any relationality opens a new and undecidable

page and thus guarantees the contingency of conditions of existence. At that point of analysis, there is a dialectical relationship between necessity and contingency: “as identity depends entirely on conditions of existence which are contingent, its relationship with them is absolutely necessary” (1990: 21). In other words, the category of contingency both blocks and affirms the identity, and thus it introduces radical undecidability into the structure of objectivity.¹⁹ As a consequence, all categories of social analysis are historicised, and we see the radical contextualisation of any social object.

Theoretical categories of antagonism and negativity play a crucial role in this respect. By means of antagonistic relations, each identity is partially threatened as well as partially constituted (and those partialities are radically undecidable); Laclau’s use of the ‘negativity’ concept also allows us to comprehend the contingent nature of all objectivity. The centrality of the negativity stems from the duality in which any objectivity is relatively constituted by the help of its difference from the radical outside, and that antagonistic outside also threatens any objectivity and prevents it from being fully fixed.

Nonetheless, different from the earlier analyses of Laclau on the subject, it is now suggested that the category of lack is constitutive for the subject. As Jacques Lacan, forerunner of the trend that can be named as ‘return to Freud’ within psychoanalysis, asserts, in the childhood process where we experience the mirror stage and Oedipus complex, the child starts to suffer from a phallic lack, which comes to be a central and constitutive lack remaining unfilled even if the subject seeks to fill it throughout his life. Hence, each identity is split, incomplete and fragmented by nature since the very beginning of the identity construction process.

But equally importantly, despite such a partial and imperfect character, the subject seeks the lacking part but can not find it; that is why we can not talk about a fully fixed and present identity. Rather, we have nothing but a lifelong and necessarily unsuccessful, as well as unstable, process of identification.

¹⁹ Simon Critchley criticises Laclau’s ‘ethical’ analysis of the undecidability in various points: most significantly he argues that justice is undeconstructable and this precedes the passage from the ethical to the political and for Critchley this point is neglected by Laclau (Critchley, 1998: 807).

Another vital issue about the undecidability of the subject is dislocation. Dislocation, Laclau notes, is a source of freedom of a structural fault which can only construct identity through acts of decision (or identification); these acts of decision are based on radical undecidability, so any decision presupposes an act of power, but power is the sole trace of contingency (1990: 60-61).²⁰

Before ending this section, we should elaborate on Laclau's scrutiny of the dimensions of the antithetical relationship between subject and structure, in order to engage in a deeper analysis of the undecidability of the subject (1990: 61-64).

First of all, "any subject is a mythical subject". Laclau defines the category of myth as a "principle of reading of a given situation, whose terms are external to what is representable in the objective spatiality constituted by the given structure". The prerequisite for the flourish of a myth is nothing other than mere structural dislocation. After dislocation, a newly emergent myth constitutes a new space of representation, and by doing so it sutures the dislocated space; therefore, myths function hegemonically.

Second, "the subject is constitutively metaphor". Mythical space constituted by the subject is opposed to the so-called fully logical form of dominant structural space. In this respect, criticising the current hegemonic project, mythical space proposes a new order with its own structurality and spatiality. In other words, mythical space deconstructs the dominant structural space. Then, why is the category of metaphor used in understanding the subject? Because the concrete content of myth represents something different from itself, and myth springs as a metaphor from a ground dominated by the dialectical relationship between the absence of structure (or dislocation) and presence (or identification with unachieved fullness). This undecidable dialectic is the space of nothing but the subject.

Third, "the subject's forms of identification function as surfaces of inscription". As noted above, the subject is a metaphor of absent fullness, and in

²⁰ Besides this, as Lacan reminds us, the constitutive lack can be observed as a trace of the *ex nihilo* decision denoting the absence of certain possibilities or psychic states (for instance, the imaginary relation with the mother) and the formation of new ones. Furthermore, the subject can only survive as the subject by accepting the laws of the symbolic, and so it becomes an effect of the signifier. In this case, there is an ultimate subordination, exercise of power, which constitutes the mere pre-condition of the possibility for construction of the subjectivity (Stavrakakis, 1999: 20).

spite of suffering the constitutive lack, it pretends to represent this fullness. Such a metaphorical nature of the subject denotes the indetermination of myth. This unstable (and undecidable) myth is viewed as a surface on which dislocations and social demands can be inscribed, but as is easily guessed, this inscription remains incomplete and unsuccessful.

Lastly, “the incomplete character of the mythical surfaces of inscription is the condition of possibility for the constitution of social imaginaries”. By the category of imaginary, Laclau means the absolute limit structuring a field of intelligibility and imaginary constitutes of condition of possibility for the emergence of any subject. In social imaginaries, the relationship between the surface of inscription and what is inscribed is unstable or undecidable. Additionally, dislocation is inscribed on the imaginary horizon. In this regard, by transferring the embodying function to the concrete and objective content, we see the hegemonic imposition of a new social order and overdetermination of the mythical space. However, similar to other cases, such overdetermination is also a source of weakness, vulnerability, incompleteness and, most importantly, the undecidable nature of any mythical space. As a natural result, the relation between the structural context and the subject remains undecidable.

2.3. Introduction of Deconstruction

In this last section of the second chapter, I will elaborate on a series of the most philosophical as well as sophisticated refinements made by Laclau since *HSS*. More specifically, after *New Reflections* Laclau tends to focus on strengthening the philosophical background of his theory, and in this respect he makes significant and more detailed enhancements to some crucial conceptualisations. As a result, we see fundamental theoretical expansions in his use of undecidability, especially by the aid of philosophical conclusions raised by deconstructive thinking. Therefore, in order to have a well-established theory of the subject in particular, Laclau manages, to a certain extent, to put the findings of Lacanian psychoanalysis and arguments of deconstructive thought together. Those

relatively distinctive approaches are employed to achieve a deeper analysis of the hegemonic type of politics and identification scrutiny.

Under these circumstances, the conceptualisation of undecidability gets radicalised more and more by the help of deconstruction; its constitutive role in the process of identification is stressed more powerfully. Here, the influence of Jacques Derrida plays a crucial role in Laclau's association with deconstructionist thinking. In this respect, we should remember that the embrace of a thinking motivated by deconstruction does not mean that Laclau relinquishes his earlier analyses, particularly those made in light of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

On the contrary, as mentioned above, Laclau searches for a complicated synthesis of Lacan's theory of the subject and Derrida's deconstructive thought; he tries to utilise this uneasy synthesis so as to explain hegemonic politics and the hegemonic subject, which are based on undecidability, in a far more thorough manner. Before concluding this introductory part, I must present the outline of this last section of the chapter in short. First, the rough linkage between the ideas of the universal and the particular will be addressed. Second, I will attempt to cope with the analysis of another related and equally important theoretical point, 'the empty signifier'. Third, the interconnection between notions of undecidability and indeterminacy will be elaborated on. And lastly, I plan to finalise this chapter with a crucial discussion of the issue of subjectivity, with particular attention on its relationship with undecidability.

2.3.1. Universal-Particular

Following Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, Laclau questions the whole history of western metaphysics, especially its conscious consolidation of the superiority of the universal over the particular. In this sense, what must be done is nothing but the total deconstruction of western philosophy; essentially, the so-called hierarchy assumed between the universal and the particular, which privileges the former at the expense of the latter, must be rejected.

We start our discussion with a central question raised by Laclau: Is the frontier between universality and particularity universal or particular? If it is

particular, then universality can only be a piece of particularity defining itself in terms of a limitless exclusion; on the other hand, if it is universal, then the particular becomes part of the universal, and the dividing line between these two is again blurred (Laclau, 1992: 85). To be precise, the anachronistic division made between the universal and the particular on the basis of the clear-cut distinctiveness between these two categories must be denied. In other words, theoretical instruments provided by western metaphysics remain insufficient to handle the universal-particular issue; rather, they tend to comprehend one side of this binary opposition (namely, the particular) by pre-supposing the supremacy of the other side, the universal.

Having underlined those diagnoses on the flawed analysis of the universal-particular problem, Laclau notes that the gap between the universal and the particular is unbridgeable. Total and absolutist comprehension of both the universal and the particular is impossible. In other words, we can not qualify any phenomenon as definitely universal or particular. This case of the universal-particular is similar to the relationship between equivalence, or interiority, and difference, or exteriority, preventing us from supposing those categories as total, complete and closed. In this respect, accepting pure particularism as an alternative to modernist universalism is not a proper solution, because such an understanding of particularism is as essentialist as its universalist correspondent. The reason for this is that pure particularism canonises and crystallises the category of difference and leaves no room for any possibility of equivalence constituting the unique grounds for each party of the hegemonic politics.

As Laclau warns, contemporary political and social struggles are particular, and none of them can achieve a fullness of community; thus, particularity can not be constructed through pure politics of difference. It still has to appeal to universal principles (1995a: 150). But what kind of universal principles are implied? To clarify this question, Laclau employs the concept of 'strategic essentialism', meaning the assertion of constitution through contingent limits (1995a: 150). Such an approach requires the full recognition of the fragmented and limited character of historical actors. That is to say, there is no truth or value independent of the

context; in other words, the validity of each and every piece of objectivity, including the universal, is contextually determined.²¹

At that point of analysis, the centrality of undecidability enters the scene. As strategic essentialism reveals, context is defined by means of its limits; limits are meanwhile defined by pointing out what is beyond them, namely the other differences beyond those limits (here the category of constitutive outside is referenced).

In that regard, undecidability guarantees that it is impossible to establish whether new differences are internal or external to the context. It is quite visible that the context defines itself through the act of exclusion, but this act of determining those differences as external to the context is entirely undecidable. Thus, there is no doubt about the existence of universal principles, but the ambiguous part of the story is the content of those universal principles.

For Laclau, three consequences of undecidability based on radical otherness must be emphasised (1995a: 152-153). First of all, antagonism and exclusion are constitutive of all identity. We have nothing but power relations in each phase of the identification process. In addition, on the basis of power relations, “relative universalisation through equivalence logics” determines the meaning of every piece of social objectivity.

Second, only exclusion can constitute the system; it thereby makes identities possible and subverts them constantly as well as undecidably. As a consequence, all differential identity is constitutively split. Again, radical undecidability is introduced here; society shows itself from the presence of absence.²²

Third, any level of representation will be constitutively inadequate. The particularity of any particular demand is subverted by the function of representing the universal, because all particular demands gain a universal dimension when

²¹ This argument invokes the famous motto of Jacques Derrida: “There is nothing *outside the text*”.

²² Moving on the path opened by Martin Heidegger, Derrida assures us that the presence of every being necessitates a projection of itself towards an end that is yet to come and is thus absent. Therefore, the absence must be rethought beyond its opposition to the presence, or it must be regarded as a type of *quasi-presence* that is essential to being. Moreover, it is obligatory to think of the absence as a force that dislocates or dispenses being, or which provides any being with a sense of its own presence or identity (Lucy, 2004: 77).

they are represented, to a certain extent. As long as the particular fulfils this function, it comes to play a hegemonic role.

Hence, universality results from the incompleteness of all differential identities, and it also needs to be incarnated in something essentially incommensurable with the category of particularity. This situation is the source of the tension and ambivalence surrounding all universal principles, and so it denotes the susceptible, dynamic and undecidable nature of the universal itself. In Laclau's vocabulary, "the universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining it, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity" (1992: 89).

As a final and summarising remark, Laclau underlines the necessity of universal principles to involve themselves with hegemonic politics, but declines the modernist understanding of an absolutely substantive universality. Rather, the category of the universal is constituted by the lack of content, and this lack is filled by the particular particularity to the extent that this particularity overthrows its rivals throughout the hegemonic struggle.

2.3.2. The Empty Signifier

Another significant notion, which is closely related to the analysis of the universal, is the empty signifier.²³ In the conceptualisation of the empty signifier, it seems to me that Laclau tries to gather the Lacanian use of the constitutive category of lack with a Derridean deconstructive emphasis upon the difference. By doing so, he refrains from an implicitly structuralist employment of floating signifiers in comprehending the undecidability of the signification process.

²³ At this point, I must briefly differentiate empty signifiers from Laclau's earlier analysis of floating signifiers. In the case of floating signifiers, a signifier has a particular group of various signifieds sliding around it. At the end of the hegemonic struggle among these antagonistic signifieds, one of them fixes the meaning, but only partially. Nevertheless, the empty signifier has no signified at all. In that sense, any signified can fill the empty signifier after winning the hegemonic struggle, and unlike the floating signifier, once a particular signified fills the empty signifier to a certain extent, it pretends to be universal. But again, such a fixation is partial and vulnerable to attacks from rival signifieds. As a result, the universality itself also suffers from that kind of fragility.

But what does the 'empty signifier' mean? Laclau defines the empty signifier as a signifier without a signified (1995b: 305). In this sense, an empty signifier can be taken like an empty bottle shaping the substance filling it, regardless of the state of that material.

The source of the existence of empty signifiers is the structural impossibility in the signification process that can signify itself as an intrusion of the structure of the sign. In other words, the constitutive lack intrinsic to any signification leads to empty signifiers. Similar to the impossibility of assuming a well-established substantive universality, it is impossible to attain a totally closed, all-inclusive signification. Thus, there is always some sort of limits of signifying systems, and naturally those limits can not be signified; these limits constitute the interruptions preventing the signification process from completing itself. However, even if such limits preclude the signifying from completing itself, the existence of those edges of signification is the mere pre-condition of any signification, as well. Any particular procedure of signifying gains meaning by constituting its difference from the spheres beyond its borders. This kind of category of limit presumes exclusion, so it is authentic and antagonistic.

As pointed out by Laclau, such characteristics of the limits bring about three focal effects, as well (1995b: 306-307). First, since those limits are exclusionary, they both constitute the system of differences and create an essential ambivalence within it. For that reason, the identity of any element is constitutively split and vague, and due to the constant existence of limits defining the system, it can not have a positive ground of its own. This situation brings about the radical impossibility of any signification. The distinctiveness of the empty signifier lies in the fact that it is the signifier of pure annulment of all differences, because it has no content. Second, in order to be named as a constitutive outside, various excluded categories have to withdraw their differences by the aid of a formulating chain of equivalences. Third, the unconscious, which does not have the capability of being representable, can represent the subversion of signification by playing the role of radical otherness.

In light of this type of exclusionary limit analysis, Laclau enlists three main pre-conditions of any possible signifying process (1995b: 308). To begin with, in

any signification, the differential character of the signifying elements is subverted. Besides this, the signifiers tend to empty themselves of their attachment to particular signifieds. Lastly, the (empty) signifiers assume the role of representing the pure being of the system, owing to the fact that they enjoy no particular meaning of their own.

As a result, each unit of the signification process remains split, and this gap must be constructed by the differential system as an undecidable locus because it is equally possible for that unit to be included or excluded by the system. This situation constitutes the ontological ground of subversion of any element of signification. Through emptying its differential nature and privileging the dimension of equivalence, the system can signify itself as a totality. But such signification is condemned to fail sooner or later, because it always has to exclude some units forming the permanent threat preventing the signifying process from being eternally successful. In other words, all systematic outcomes result from an undecidable compromise between the logics of equivalence and difference. As a natural consequence of this overdetermination between the logics of equivalence and difference, structural locations remain uneven; to be more precise, this leads to the unevenness of the social itself. Such unevenness constitutes the starting point for us to consider the existence of differential positions to be universal functions.

As mentioned above, as a result of hegemonic struggle, a particular content becomes a signifier and pretends to represent universal fullness. But this practice is temporary. That is why the presence of empty signifiers is a fundamental prerequisite for hegemonic politics. As stated by Laclau, hegemonic operations are a presentation of the particularity of a certain social grouping as an incarnation of an empty signifier referring to communitarian order as a fulfilled (and so-called universal) social reality; in that respect, politics come to be possible since the constitutive impossibility of the society can solely represent itself through the production of the empty signifiers (1995b: 312).

Accordingly, hegemony is always unstable, vulnerable and open to being penetrated by constitutive undecidability. Thus, we have close linkages between deconstruction and hegemony in terms of the terrain presented by undecidability. Both condition each other in a considerably radical sense. For Laclau, hegemony

requires deconstruction, because without radical structural undecidability led by the deconstructive interference, diverse layers of social relations would be seen as linked by necessary logics, which leave no place for hegemonic acts. On the other hand, deconstruction requires hegemony (here hegemony is regarded as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain), because without a theory of decision, the distance between structural undecidability and actuality would remain unexplained (1996: 59-60).

2.3.3. Undecidability and Indeterminacy

To comprehend the conception of undecidability more deeply, some crucial remarks must be made, particularly with respect to a possible misunderstanding in seeing the terrain of undecidability and radical indeterminacy as the same. To start, I must refer to Derrida, creator of the undecidability notion. Brilliantly foreseeing such a mishandling of the concept of undecidability, he clearly distinguishes between undecidability and indeterminacy in the following way:

...undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of facts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations (for example discursive-syntactical or rhetorical – but also political, ethical, etc.). They are pragmatically determined ... I say ‘undecidability’ rather than ‘indeterminacy’ because I am interested in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilised through a decision of writing (in the broad sense I give to this word, which also includes political action and speech) (1988: 148).

As can be seen, conceptions of undecidability and indeterminacy are easily distinguished from each other. Structural regulations put into the terrain of the undecidability determine the decision itself. But this determination has nothing to do with the classical understanding of the decision-making mechanism in the Rational-Choice theory based on strategic and calculatory thinking, aiming at nothing but profit maximisation. Seemingly irrational (in terms of a mainstream grasp of rationality, as in the case of Rational-Choice theory) decisions are always made by individuals without any hesitancy.

But this does not mean that any decision is pre-determined by the rules imposed by undecidability. Possibilities presented by the terrain of the undecidability are appraised by the subject in accordance with the given power relations, by the aid of the subject's own pragmatic considerations. But here, we have a seemingly clear contradiction: the ability to make any decision relies directly on the undecidability itself. The reason for this is that, in an undecidable terrain, our actions are based on our own decisions; otherwise, in a pre-determined decidable context, what we do is merely obey the rules to satisfy the demands of the context, like the structure's bearers having no freedom. In this regard, Derrida uses the word 'freeplay' in the meaning of undecidability, and he continues to say that the "concept of undecidability, and thus freeplay, refers to a determinate openness. It refers to the structurality of the structure, to the field of discursivity which makes possible the formation of metaphysical hierarchies of minor structures in terms of concrete discourses" (1978: 155).

But the contradiction formulated above still remains, so how can it be resolved? The sole answer is that this contradiction can be resolved by the help of deconstruction. Undecidability is the only source of both the possibility and impossibility of decision. As its name implies, it has nothing to do with decidability; rather, it offers determined alternatives, but in doing so it cancels the determinate decidability and deals with the end results of this abandonment. At that point, deconstruction comes to the scene, as Aletta Norval indicates. A deconstructive political analysis attempting to locate moments of undecidability in a political discourse purports to locate these points within a discursive context, which is political determined, where there is a regulated interplay among discursive power relations (2004: 147).

Similar to the conclusion reached in the previous section, hegemonic politics requires deconstruction because hegemony can be realised only if decidability is given up. In other words, hegemony requires the structural openness supplied by the terrain of undecidability; otherwise, we can not talk about even the possibility of hegemonic politics. Under the light of such an analysis, when we turn to Laclau, we come across an analogous picture. He clearly differentiates structural (or

structured) undecidability from total undecidability and utilises the former in his theoretical framework.

In total undecidability, any decision would be valid; in this sense, we have a total absence of the structure and the decision would be made by the chooser in conditions of total omnipotence. In reality, rather, we always have structural undecidables and confront a partial deconstruction which makes the decision imperative (Laclau, 1996: 57).

The structure, having structural undecidability, has no capacity of being closed and transparent; instead it can accomplish some relative closure, but even this relative closure is reached by means of the constitutive outside through which structure distinguishes itself and so gains a unique meaning.

In this respect, deconstruction further radicalises and expands the terrain of undecidability to the whole sphere of social relations. As underlined by Laclau, by employing the conception of undecidability, deconstruction reactivates the moment of decision that underlies any sedimented set of social relations, and this situation enlarges the area of decision in advance (1995c: 93).

In “Minding the Gap: The Subject of Politics”, Laclau, with Lilian Zac, makes further clarifications about the issue of indeterminacy and its relationship with the undecidability notion.

In this study, they make use of a relatively different indeterminacy conception that we must not confuse with Derrida’s use of indeterminacy in opposition to undecidability, nor with Laclau’s analysis of total undecidability as clearly differentiated from structural undecidability.

Laclau and Zac consider indeterminacy to be the mere condition of freedom of subjectivity, but what do they mean by this relatively new conceptualisation of indeterminacy? For them, indeterminacy is ‘indeterminacy-for-the-determination’, and here, by determination, they imply nothing but hegemonic determination. Indeterminacy constitutes one of the internal moments of hegemonic determination (1999: 12-13).

In this respect, they evidently differentiate between two contrasting poles; on the one hand we have the indeterminate, subjective and ontological, and on the

other hand there are the determinate, objective and ontic. As is easily guessed, they privilege the former at the expense of the latter.

At least equally importantly, it is noted that the gap between indetermination and determination is unbridgeable, because within the terrain of undecidability, to fulfil any content totally for the subject suffering from a constitutive lack is ultimately impossible.

Consequently, each and every attempt will reproduce this inadequacy, and no identification has immunity against challenges coming from the outside or radical other. At this point of analysis, a revised employment of the overdetermination conception arises: overdetermination here means “subversion of rationality of the determinate” (Laclau & Zac, 1999: 16-17).

Throughout the dominance of western metaphysics, presencing is subordinated to presence. This conscious, so-called logical preference conceals the fact that being is the sole inception and almost whole career of Martin Heidegger, devoted to reversing this hierarchy and deconstructing the whole of western metaphysics in this manner.

Derrida, a follower of Heideggerian thought, tries to deconstruct the binary opposition between the presencing and the present, and he highlights the centrality of the former concept as allowing us to think about the latter. To associate this question with the Lacanian notion of lack, Laclau and Zac assert that presencing and what is present are irremediably split, because the present can never close itself (due to the category of constitutive lack), while presencing can only show itself through what is present (1999: 30).

Consequently, even though these two sides are split and the gap among them is unbridgeable, they are mutually dependent. More concretely, being and nothingness, or presence and absence, are mutually required factors constituting a ground constitutively split by the category of difference.

In light of such an analysis of determinate indeterminacy, Laclau and Zac elucidate the ontological ground of undecidability, and so the dialectical relationship between undecidability and decision, as well as the mutual dependence between them, is uncovered.

2.3.4. Undecidability and Subjectivity

The association between deconstruction and hegemonic politics becomes evident through the conception of undecidability. To be more exact, the end product, constructed by each dislocation, namely the sedimented sphere of social relations, comes to be theorised by means of the analysis of the terrain of undecidability. Moreover, the undecidability offers a series of alternatives for the subject to choose in order to actualise a new hegemony in due course.²⁴ Laclau notes:

Undecidability should be literally taken as that condition from which no course of action necessarily follows. This means that we should not make it the necessary source of *any* concrete decision in the ethical and political sphere ... The role of deconstruction is, from this perspective, to *reactivate* the moment of decision that underlies any *sedimented* set of social relations (1995c: 93).

Of course, such a terrain of undecidability is regulated by the structural context; therefore, the possibilities presented by the undecidability are determinate ones. However, besides this relatively deterministic side of the story, there is also a part of the decision taken as a result of the unstable power relations. The permanent existence of power relations is so central in the decision-making process that each and every attempt to decide in terms of a certain alternative excludes other equally possible alternatives. This results in the intrinsically fragmented character of each decision. Even though the alternatives are determined by the destructured field generated by the dislocation, nothing can determine the decision itself. Otherwise, we can not talk about the possibility of free decision making. Laclau describes the moment of decision in the following way:

... [A] true decision is something other and more than an effect derived from a calculating rule. A true decision escapes always what any rule can hope to subsume under itself ... the decision has to be grounded in itself,

²⁴ At that point, let me refer to discussion on Laclau's theory of the subject made by P.A. Hudson (2006: 299-312). There even though he endorses Laclau's viewpoint of the subjectivity to a certain extent, Hudson criticises Laclau as follows: "Laclau's conception [of the subject] is itself criticised on the ground that it excludes the subject's own contribution to its emergence – the subject can not be reduced to 'the distance from undecidability to the decision', but must also refer to the distance from antagonism to undecidability" (2006: 299).

in its own singularity. Now that singularity can not bring through the back door what it has excluded from the main entrance – i.e. the universality of the rule. It is simply left to its own singularity. It is because of that that, as Kierkegaard put it, the moment of the decision is the moment of madness (1996: 53).

In this sense, the moment of decision and the moment of the subject become synonymous. As mentioned above, Laclau defines the subject as the distance between the structural undecidability and the decision itself. He adds the Lacanian logic of lack to the deconstructionist tradition. Since no system can be surely safe in terms of having protection against challenges from the outside, the terrain of the undecidability of the boundaries of any structure comes up in each and every dislocatory event. Within such structurally undecidable systems, identities will themselves be constitutively dislocated sooner or later; the permanence of the possibility of dislocation is the main foundation of radical contingency inherent to the character of identification process.

Aletta Norval enlists three consequences related to the moment of the subject condemned to have nothing other than negative identity: (i) if the emergence of the subject is the outcome of a “collapse of objectivity”²⁵, it means that “any subject is, by definition political”; (ii) since the given structure is dislocated, any act of identification will be incomplete and partial; (iii) subsequently, the act of identification is a hegemonic act through which fullness of community is constructed in its absence, and in which an articulation among the universal and particular turns out to be possible (2004, p 144).

Although the moment of decision is not absolutely predetermined and requires the experience of undecidability, it is not product of a totally free act. Rather, the structural context is always there in each decision-making procedure. However, the structure pretending to be a perfect totality remains doomed to fail in carrying out this totality, and so the moments of both the decision and the subject can not be determined structurally in a total sense; instead, such a relative determination must be supplemented by undecidable interventions led by a contingency intrinsic to the nature of the subject and decision.

²⁵ Owing to the constant possibility of dislocation of the structure, no entity, including the category of the subject, has a positive as well as objective identity.

In this regard, the subject becomes the subject only via the moment of decision; in other words, the act of identification is an inherent aspect of the moment of decision. Under these circumstances, Laclau stresses the ontological centrality of the moment of decision: if the decision presumes “abyssal undecidability” and at the same time a decision has to be made, then what primarily matters is that there is a decision. Its actual content is secondarily important (1996: 56).²⁶ Here, the motor of the whole process is a constitutive lack enjoyed by the subject; this lack offers the possibility of making decisions freely as well as guarantees the self-grounding nature of any decision, because each and every attempt to decide on anything excludes other alternatives. Due to this fact, the (hegemonic) politics are internally split, even though it is ontologically primary. Each act of decision is an effort to resuture the dislocated field, but such an impossible mission makes the politics possible. Such a dialectics among possibility and impossibility is also the case in identification, because in each act of decision, throughout the endless procedure of identification, the subject, aiming to exist as a closed totality, which is impossible, comes to be possible as an ontological category.

2.4. Concluding Comments: Undecidability at Work

Before finishing this chapter on Laclau, it is valuable to touch upon the relationship between the concrete political phenomena and Laclau’s view of undecidability. In doing so, his analysis of undecidability and its reflections on practical politics will be evaluated. Moreover, in concluding this chapter, my critiques of his scrutiny of the undecidability and its application to politics will be mentioned in brief. This section can be outlined with four main subdivisions: undecidability and construction of ‘people’, undecidability and the discourse of nationalism, undecidability and new social movements and, lastly, undecidability and radical (plural) democracy.

²⁶ According to Laclau, subjectivity is rooted in voluntaristic choice of the subject, but opposing to this approach, Aletta J. Norval (2006: 229-255) maintains that identity emerges through a gradual process of aspect change. This critical discussion taking place between Laclau and Norval is addressed by Leonard Williams (2007: 109-126).

2.4.1. Construction of the ‘People’

Particularly with his deconstructive turn, Laclau refines his study of populism and makes more radical political projections with this concept. In his understanding of populism, and more precisely the discursive-political construction of the people, the moment of undecidability plays a crucial role.

As explained above, all identity is constituted by the antagonistic relationship taking place between the logics of equivalence and difference. This contingent as well as undecidable process is indispensable for the construction of the people as a totality.

But as is easily guessed, such so-called totality is imperfect and incomplete. The reason is that at the end of the undecidable struggle among rival particulars, the winner pretends to be universal and ‘represent’ the nature of the popular. In Laclau’s words, “the totalisation of the moment of fullness/emptiness – can take place only if a partial content takes up the representation of a universality with which it is incommensurable” (2005: 106).

In that kind of populist account, although it claims to be historicist, we can not have an overall development of the nature of any construction of the people. Instead, the history of the people turns to be full of ruptures, because there is no general gradualism maturing the character of that people.

The reason is that whole (re)construction of the people is an outcome of a totally undecidable struggle among equal particularisms. Within such a relativist understanding of populism, the demands of the people vary dramatically from time to time.

Additionally, if even one of the particulars gains the status of a universal, its position is so fragile that it can be challenged and toppled any time by any rival particular. This situation ends in nothing other than social chaos.

Under those circumstances, leading to the undecidable character of the people, talking about the possibility of radical plural revolution permeating all sects of the society is a naïve formulation with no chance of realisation.

2.4.2. Discourse(s) of Nationalism

The second realm in which Laclau's study on undecidability can be assessed is nationalism. Especially after the proliferation of the dynamics of globalisation, the problem of nationalism turns out to be one of the hottest questions waiting to be explained and comprehended by mankind. To respond to this need, Laclau relates his analysis of undecidability to the issue of nationalism. Similar to his account of the people, Laclau argues that the category of the nation suffers from a constitutive lack. Therefore, each nation has emptiness at its centre, which can not be filled.

In this sense, the contingent conflict among the particular national discourses governed by the principle of undecidability ends with the victory of one of them, and this victorious discourse has the ability to operate on behalf of the whole nation. Jacob Torfing notes that nationalism can be viewed as a certain articulation of the empty signifier of the nation, which itself becomes a nodal point in the political discourse of modern democracy and generally functions as a way of symbolising an absent communitarian fullness (1999: 192). At this point of analysis, I must underline the fact that Laclau sees communitarian fullness as an impossible category which can never be achieved completely. Hence, each form of nationalism has its weak points, making it vulnerable to the attacks of adversary forms of nationalist discourses.

In that analysis of (undecidable) nationalism, Laclau disregards the institutionalisation of the nation-state. He is correct in claiming that the process of nation formation is totally political. In that sense, there is almost nothing to do with primordial and ethnic elements. But when we look at the last two centuries, we realise that constitutions of both nations and nation-states have been actualised together. Throughout such procedures of nationalisation, state institutions function in terms of education, religion, law, media and so forth. Those nation-state establishments play a significant role in the creation of national consciousness among the members of that society.

The remnants of such an ideological project can not be eradicated easily as a result of the struggle between undecidably positioned opponent nationalisms.²⁷ Rather, a new form of national discourse can be dominant in so far as the sedimentation of the existing nationalism allows. More blatantly, the current form of nationalism ‘decides’ which nationalist discourse will be governing in the future.

2.4.3. ‘New Social Movements’

One of the most important practical-political areas in which Laclau’s analysis of the undecidability can be effective is ‘new social movements’. Especially by the end of the golden age of the welfare state in the West, new social movements have flourished as a new type of resistance platform rallying against the rising level of inequalities. But the fields of struggle in which those new social movements become active proliferate as the societies in which we live become more and more complicated.

The complication of social conditions diversifies the demands of the people. In that context, Laclau explains the composition of new social movements with the undecidable interconnection taking place between the logics of equivalence and difference. As the differences are absorbed by the help of a common denominator, some type of a totality of the social movement emerges. But Laclau insists that the so-called common factor is not common in a full sense; rather, it is susceptible to any other challenge that may alter the nature of the social movement drastically.

At that point, Laclau avoids regarding both differences and equivalences as complete. This defectiveness is both a source and result of the undecidable character attributed to the new social movements. In light of such an analysis, as underlined by Laclau, the agenda of contemporary politics provides numerous kinds of social movements with an appropriate environment.

²⁷ At that point of analysis, it is fruitful to mention the criticism raised by Glyn Daly against Laclau in terms of Laclau’s inadequate scrutiny on the issue of ideology. In that context, he claims that Laclau has tended to overlook the crucial psychoanalytic dimensions of fantasy and enjoyment which remain, in a certain sense, both before and beyond discourse (1999: 219).

Those social movements are positioned against various issues like sexism, racism, global warming, homophobia and so on. Furthermore, Laclau sees no hierarchy among these movements with respect to the importance of the problems they try to resolve. In this sense, social movements stemming from economic inequalities in capitalist relations of production (in classical terms, class struggle) constitute merely one of these new social movements. In that regard, there is no ontological privilege associated with class struggle.

What is more, Laclau rejects any possibility of linkage between the class location and sides of social movements. Rather, new social movements are actualised in accordance with undecidable correspondence between the subject positions of the members of those social movements. Despite such a messy picture, Laclau is still optimistic about the possibility that these new social movements can trigger the radical democratic revolution in one way or another. Due to this, he pays essential attention to the new social movements and considers them to be the main motor of socio-political change that can result in radical (plural) democracy.

The 'new social movements' analysis belonging to Laclau suffers from significant shortcomings in both theoretical and factual terms. First of all, those social movements situating against different problems further differentiate the people from each other and make them blind to the problems of others. In this sense, the variety of new social movements works in the opposite manner as formulated by Laclau. In other words, unlike Laclau's viewpoint, the existence and permanence of diversified social movements make any revolution diffusing all parts of the society impossible.

Historical facts also verify this argument, as since the 1980s, when the conception of social movements became fashionable, several types of social movements have turned out to be influential, but these situations remain partial and temporary. No equivalence can be accomplished among distinct social movements so as to fight for a common objective, e.g., radical democracy. More precisely, the undecidable character associated with the new social movements prevents them from being revolutionary. On the contrary, these social movements are condemned to solely initiate some partial reforms, nothing beyond that.

Hence, it may be claimed that Laclau can not present a satisfying account of how diverse social movements can be unified in order to accomplish radical democratic revolution. The basis of this difficulty is the undecidability attributed to both the formation processes and the character of the new social movements as theorised by Laclau.

2.4.4. Radical (Plural) Democracy

The last and most important issue in which undecidability seems to be of use, for Laclau, is radical (plural) democracy. As maintained by Laclau, democracy is an empty signifier open to being filled by any possible signified in accordance with the dominance discursive formation. In other words, there are distinctive meanings of democracy in different discourses.

Furthermore, even within each discourse, we have various conceptualisations of democracy existing simultaneously. Hence, the plural nature is inherent to the notion of democracy. As a consequence, each and every democracy is undecidable by definition.

Laclau's claim is stressed by Jacob Torfing; democracy should be radically pluralist in the sense that the plurality of different identities is not grounded in any transcendent or underlying positive ground. A radical plural democracy will, in this interpretation, involve the struggle for a maximum autonomisation of spheres of struggle on the basis of the generalisation of the "equivalential-egalitarian logic" (1999: 256). But the undecidable character of radical democracy leaves it open to external threats; that is why, Laclau insists, there is no end point in which radical (plural) democracy will be achieved in full sense.

As highlighted by Anna Marie Smith, for radical democratic pluralist theorists, we inhabit a world in which contingency always threatens to interrupt even the most institutionalised social order (1998: 61). In other words, even the most complete form of democracy suffers from a constitutive outside waiting to challenge it. Such an understanding of (undecidable) democracy echoes the Derridean concept 'democracy to come'.

Similarly, Derrida refrains from addressing any clear-cut explanation of democracy; he remains silent to the question of how democracy will be accomplished. We can see dramatic parallels between the stances of Laclau and Derrida with regard to their views on democracy by referring to Aletta J. Norval's description of the Derridean conception of 'democracy to come':

... [K]ey elements of Derrida's account of democracy to come: it is futural, it has the structure of a promise; and it is marked by an originary heterogeneity and constitutive incompleteness. This incompleteness marks both the project and subject of democracy: the in principle impossibility of closure suggests a conception of democracy, which is never to be achieved fully and which takes disagreement and critique, rather than the achieving of consensus, as its primary engagement (2004: 151-152).

In simpler terms, radical plural democracy is considered to be the incarnation of the moment of undecidability. Within the structure of the undecidable, the subject decides the certain form of the democratic embodiment at the expense of the other alternatives.

Accomplishment of the primacy of the political over the social is crucial for Laclau. An especially antagonistic, contingent and undecidable environment supplied by the sphere of the political is claimed to be the source of possibility for radical democratic revolution. This line of thinking is one-sided and the field of the social has a solely epiphenomenal status.

In my opinion, the sphere of the social provides the appropriate setting for any sort of revolution. But without a subject that has the ability to transform this background to a revolutionary moment, no possibility of revolution can be realised. In other words, both the fields of the political and social play a significant role in the achievement of revolution, and this is neglected by Laclau to a certain extent.

On the contrary, Laclau claims that any moment of revolution depends upon the undecidably complex interrelationship taking place among those political agents having capacity to decide in the face of such undecidability. However, Laclau offers no account of how those subjects come to the position from which they can decide for the creation of radical (plural) democracy. This process of politicisation of the subjects remains unexplained.

Rather, Laclau relies on the moment of undecidability as the mere initiator of radical democratic revolution. By doing so, he implicitly engages in the anthropomorphism of the undecidability, as if it determines when and how the democratic revolution will occur.

2.4.5. Decisionist Propensity of Laclau

In light of such an uneasy role of the undecidability moment in the actual politics, I will now present my overall evaluation of Laclau's utilisation of the undecidability concept. To begin with, even if he attributes a central role to the act of decision undertaken by the free subject, Laclau can not offer a satisfactory clarification of the question of how a decision is made by the subject.

In which conditions does the subject decide over the undecidability? What is the role of the undecidability moment during this process? Is it entirely structuring the decision act of the subject? If so, does this not mean that the so-called free subject is solely the passive outcome of the dynamics of the undecidability? What are the motives stimulating the subject to decide over the undecidable? If the subjectivity suffers from a central absence, what guarantees the subjective striving for more equality and liberty through accomplishment of radical democratic revolution? Those tremendously critical questions may be proliferated further; and in my opinion, Laclau has difficulty in answering them adequately.

Moreover, through consideration of the moment of madness as the mere factor triggering the free act of decision, Laclau undermines the rational elements effective in the procedure of decision-making. Conversely, Laclau regards those operations managed by the subject as unknowable, because the constitutive outside, which is undecidably active in this process of decision-making, is claimed to be totally out of the subjective control.

As J. Hillis Millers notes, the madness of decision is described as a 'blind spot' because the predominantly logical thinking of Laclau's argumentation can not command those moments of decision, rationalise them or illuminate them with the light of reason (in Critchley & Marchart, 2004: 220). Hence, in Laclau's line of thought, irrationalism is inherent to the moment of decision, but such reasoning

leads the decision-making process to be condemned to being a metaphysical and inaccessible act.

Lastly, and most importantly, Laclau assumes an unduly ambivalent interconnection formulated between the decision act and the undecidability. Although the moment of undecidability structures the decision, it makes decision impossible at the same time.

The reason for this is that, literally speaking, to decide in an undecidable sphere is impossible. But simultaneously, without the act of decision, the undecidability moment loses its meaning. Consequently, Laclau, by underlining this critical correspondence between decision and undecidability moment, overestimates the decision act which is undecidably taken.

Directly affected by the contingent, antagonistic and, most importantly, undecidable nature of the political, the decision is assumed to be the mere motor of political change as well as identification. Such a tendency dominant in Laclau's standpoint makes him fall into the trap of crude decisionism.

Such a viewpoint of Laclau's echoes Carl Schmitt's existential decisionism,²⁸ which renounces an established substantive moral code. Rather, both Laclau and Schmitt share the assumption that the decision act constitutes the sphere of the political. If we turn to the issue of undecidability, again we come across a remarkable analogy between Laclau and Schmitt.²⁹

As Sergei Prozorov notes, in the Schmittian stance, the friend-enemy distinction is the founding event of political community because it determines the borderline separating the political from the outside, so resulting in its formation (2007: 223).

²⁸ Richard Wolin (1990, 393-394, 398) and Charles E. Frye (1966) present a couple of brilliant discussions on the existential decisionism of Carl Schmitt.

²⁹ Another element linking Laclau's analysis of the undecidability with Schmittian political ontology is underscored by David Bates through touching upon a critical interconnection taking place between Schmitt's view of the political and Derridean deconstruction. For David Bates, "Schmitt was not a simple "decisionist" who thought that some arbitrary Hobbesian sovereign would (and should) simply make decisions when exceptions threatened the existing normative order. In *Political Theology* (1922), where he outlined his famous position on sovereignty ("Sovereign is he who decides on the exception"), his first goal was in a sense 'deconstructive'" (2005: 18).

At that point of analysis, Schmitt presumes that the friend-enemy distinction is a sovereign decision *par excellence*, an act that “emanates from nothingness” (1985: 32), and, as something “that can not be subsumed” under the universal and the general, can only come as an *exception* to any pre-existing norm (1985: 13).

For Schmitt, the absence of moral foundations is a mere prerequisite for the act of decision, and in this sense the subject’s decision can be preformed only in accordance with the governing principle of undecidability.³⁰

As a last remark, even though Laclau tries to formulate a balanced account elucidating the association taking place between the subjective decision act and the structural moment of the undecidability, he clandestinely privileges the former and attributes a central role to it. More blatantly, even if he can not explain the decision act and its relation with undecidability sufficiently, he ends up with a decisionist description of both the processes of subjectivisation and political change.

³⁰ Andreas Kalyvas (2004: 324) also underlines this parallelism taking place between Laclau and Schmitt. To be more exact, Schmitt’s understanding of sovereign decision, which is seen as originary, extralegal and groundless, and Laclau’s association of madness with the decision act share a common ground, both attributing a central role to the moment of undecidability.

CHAPTER III

ISSUE OF UNDECIDABILITY IN ŽIŽEKIAN THEORY OF THE ACT

3.1. Žižek on Benjamin: What's the Worth of Reading Marx?

3.1.1. Some Žižekian Preliminary Remarks on *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

If the scientific laws of dialectical materialism are realised and address the triumph of the proletariat, then why do we have an overwhelming level of exploitation on the basis of unequal class relations within the capitalist mode of production? Unable to answer this question in the early phases of his career, Slavoj Žižek turns to Benjamin's Marxism, which came to maturity under the influence of theology. For Benjamin, this seemingly contradictory situation can be explained by means of an underlying theological force that can be called an *act*. But how?

Žižek, particularly in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (SOI), makes use of Benjamin's messianic historical materialism in order to develop his own political ontology and make enhancements to the Marxist understanding of socio-political change by relying upon a relatively decisionist outlook of the subject. In this sense, Benjamin's work, namely *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, presents a series of openings for Žižek in his understanding of the act based on the principle of undecidability as well as revolutionary character.

According to Benjamin, 'victors' write the history, but similar to any original item, history itself has the capability of being reproduced by relying on the forgotten past of the defeated. Thus, in the Benjaminian philosophy of history, the past relativises the present. In other words, so as to understand and shape the present, the openness of the past must be accepted. We can comprehend the past in itself due to fact that the past is a result of the present. And quite similar to the

openness of the past, each and every moment of the present is subject to a further future reconstructing. As Rex Butler brilliantly puts it, the present is past and the present can know the past ‘in itself’ only in so far *both* are ‘open’, able to be rewritten for some point in the future. Therefore, we are always in history; that is to say, there is nothing outside of history, because the present is a direct continuance of the past in itself and this is also the case for the future, as well (2005: 73).

When we come to the issue of revolution, Benjamin utilises this method, since there is always another alternative of rewriting the present through a distinct relationality between the past and present which can not be seen at first glance. Benjamin describes this alternative reading of the past as redeeming the “repressed revolutionary potential of history”. Žižek underlines this issue as follows:

...the true aim of historical interpretation is to appropriate the past in itself in so far as it is ‘open’, in so far as the ‘yearning for redemption’ is already at work in it ... To accomplish the appropriation of this stifled dimension of the past in so far as it already contains the future – the future of our own revolutionary act which, by means of repetition, redeems retroactively the past (*SOI*: 138).

Žižek employs concepts used in psychoanalytic thought in carrying out Benjamin’s outlook on history. From Freud’s famous proposition that “the unconscious is located outside time”, Žižek means that this “filled-out time”, with which the revolutionary present is charged, proclaims the *compulsion to repeat*. Besides, Žižek finds a complicated parallel between the Benjaminian arrest of the historical movement as well as the suspension of the temporal continuity and Lacan’s transference situation characterised by the ‘short-circuit’ between present and past speech (*SOI*: 140).

Here, the term of ‘arrest’ is used to explain the act of seizing the concealed revolutionary potential in the case of some sort of intrusion of time. Blatantly speaking, opposed to the mainstream imagination of history, seeing it as a linear diachronic chain, the synchronic and immediate correlation between the past and present is the case which ends up with nothing but short-circuits in history in its each and every moment. By the help of such an analysis, an arrest and suspension

of time produces the “moment of discontinuity and rupture”, and as a result the repressed past succeeds in getting freedom.

At that point, Žižek again focuses his scrutiny on psychoanalytic conceptualisations, especially those associated with Lacanian theory. He finds interesting analogous points between the short-circuits between the past and present leading to synchronic relationality and the synchronisation at the level of the autonomy of the signifier. Similar to distinctively discontinuous moments of history, Žižek notes, we isolate the signifier by placing within parentheses the totality of signification (*SOI*: 141). Here Žižek also stresses that Benjamin himself benefits from the metaphor of the text in explaining the history.

Hence, like the impossibility of envisioning history as a diachronic linear line, any signification is vulnerable to rupture owing to its own constitutive lack. The main process disturbing the so-called diachrony of the history and presenting the possibility of revolutionary situation is the attempt to redeem the past unsuccessful attempts. Moreover, those failed efforts taking place in the past are redeemed solely by way of repeating themselves retroactively. Consequently, opposing the orthodox mechanical understanding of history embraced by Marxism, from a Benjaminian viewpoint, Žižek notes:

...revolution is not part of a continuous historical evolution but, on the contrary, a moment of ‘stasis’ when the continuity is broken, when the texture of previous history, that of the winners, is annihilated, and when, retroactively, through the success of the revolution, each abortive act, each slip, each past failed attempt which functioned in the reigning Text as an empty and meaningless trace, will be ‘redeemed’, will receive its signification. In this sense, revolution is strictly a creationist act (*SOI*: 143).

To put it more clearly, with the help of Benjamin’s philosophy of history, Žižek figures out any possibility of revolutionary situation through the act corresponding to the rupture of the history. Accordingly, the linear causality of history is abandoned in the moment of revolution; instead, the relatively contingent act of redemption of the repressed past, and to be more exact, the failed attempts of revolution taking place in the past, constitute the fundamental point triggering revolution.

3.1.2. Žižek against Historicism

In order to clarify Žižek's stance in terms of his understanding of the act and his association with Benjaminian historical materialism, it is useful to enlist the most vital points raised by Žižek in criticising historicism and mainstream historiography in general. In one of Žižek's most significant attacks against historicism, he argues that all historical content is relativised, made dependent on 'historical circumstances'; that is to say, historicism as opposed to *historicity* avoids encountering with the Real (*FTKN*: 101). By 'historicity', Žižek underlines the existence of an ahistorical motor working throughout the moments of history itself. In Žižek's vocabulary, historicity proper comes to the scene merely when history is grounded in the Real, which is characterised as universal and ahistorical.

The centrality attributed to the conceptualisation of the historicity proper is noted by Marcus Pound: Žižek claims that the political act requires an ahistorical kernel of historicity, which is outside the normal flow of historical succession that proves constitutive of authentic historical and political change (2008: 75). However, opposed to such a line of thought as employed by Žižek, historicism domesticates the historicity proper because it evades the explanation of the Real of historical representation. Conversely, historicism puts each moment of historicity into supposedly successive conjunctures, and by doing so it tries to show the existence of a diachronic linearity of history. Thus, historicism neglects the ahistorical, 'non-symbolisable' and 'traumatic' kernel of historical change, and so it is deprived of the historical dimension itself. Instead, by relativising the historicity proper, it legitimises each historical circumstance under the influence of ideological setting it maintains.

Criticising such pre-supposedly ideological tendencies of historicism, Žižek utilises historicity proper to understand the act seen as initiating historical change. As Vighi and Feldner emphasise, the historicity is the inherent antagonism of the Real which again and again sets in motion the movements of history, propelling it to new historicisations as well as symbolisations; in this regard, whilst historicism gentrifies the antagonism inherent to the Real, the notion of historicity proper fully appreciates its disruptive potential (2007: 27).

Due to this inability of historicism, Žižek asserts that historicism is self-defeating because, as opposed to its founding principles, it must situate itself as an ahistorical setting or treat itself as a fully contingent and finite construction. The reason for this is that, in historicising the occasions, it needs an overall principality which is independent of any historical epoch, or otherwise it remains in a fully chaotic position relativising each historical moment without any ahistorical core, which ends up with nothing other than the motto of ‘anything goes’. When we come to the issue of the act, we see that Žižek considers the act as the rupture in symbolic space:

[T]he act is a rupture after which ‘nothing remains the same’. Which is why, although History can always be explained, accounted for, afterward, we can never, as its agents, caught in its flow, foresee its course in advance: we can not do it insofar as it is not an ‘objective process’ but a process continuously interrupted by the scansion of acts. The new (the symbolic reality that emerges as the aftermath of an act) is always a ‘state that is essentially a by-product’, never the result of advance planning (*EYS*: 45-46).

In other words, the ahistorical nature of the act is also closely associated with its undecidable character because, as it remains ahistorical, it comes to be isolated from the historical sequence. As a result, both its source and results can not be discovered by the aid of historical circumstances; on the contrary, the act stays undecidable in terms of its relation with the sphere of the symbolic.

3.1.3. The Act as Vanishing Mediator

Another significant concept used by Žižek to elucidate his standpoint with respect to the act is the vanishing mediator. He has employed this notion since *For They Know Not What They Do*. Žižek borrows the concept of the vanishing mediator from Fredric Jameson’s famous article, “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller”.

In this essay, Jameson starts his analysis of Weber’s work underlining the existence of an elective affinity between Protestantism and capitalism. Jameson enhances Weber’s position within the Marxist theory, claiming that capitalism developed out of Protestantism in a dialectical movement. But he affirms that this

dialectic is driven by a vanishing mediator; here the vanishing mediator functions as the missing link between the two poles of the dialectic. At that point, Protestantism is regarded as the vanishing mediator between feudalism and capitalism, but ironically the advent of capitalism makes Protestantism useless (Jameson: 31). In simpler terms, a vanishing mediator mediates the transition between two opposed concepts and thereafter disappears. Žižek highlights that a vanishing mediator is produced by an asymmetry of content and form:

[T]he ‘vanishing mediator’ therefore emerges because of the way, in a dialectical process, form stays behind content: first the crucial shift occurs within the limits of the old form, even taking on the appearance of its renewed assertion; then once ‘the silent weaving of the spirit’ finishes its work, the old form can fall off. The double scansion of this process enables us to grasp in a concrete way the worn-out formula of the ‘negation of negation’: the first negation consists in the slow, underground, invisible change of substantial content which, paradoxically, takes place in the name of its own form; then once the form has lost its substantial right, it falls to pieces by itself – the very form of negation is negated, or, to use the classic Hegelian couple, the change which took place ‘in-itself’ becomes ‘for-itself’ (*FTKN*: 185-186).

In this process, Žižek reaches the third moment of the Hegelian speculative method, by aid of his own analysis addressing the linkage between the proposition of ‘negation of negation’ and the conception of the vanishing mediator. The first negation is the mutation of the content within and in the name of the old form. The second negation is the obsolescence of the form itself. In this way, something becomes the opposite of itself, paradoxically, by seeming to strengthen itself (Myers, 2003: 38-39).

Now it is time to think about the connection between the conceptualisation of the vanishing mediator and Žižek’s theory of historical change shaped under the influence of Benjamin. In the original holding of the notion, scrutinised by Jameson, it is seen that ‘vanishing mediator’ refers to the invisible or overlooked moments in major historical processes. In this way, the vanishing mediator historicises those shifts and attempts to provide intermediary or mediating causes for them. Nevertheless, influenced by a Benjaminian philosophy of history, Žižek rejects this historical function attributed to the vanishing mediator; rather, he

declares that it works in just the opposite manner. Rex Butler indicates this point in the following way:

For [Žižek], the ‘vanishing mediator’ is not to be used to historicise an event, to provide a more detailed causal explanation of it, but ... is a kind of ‘arrest’ or stopping-point that stands in for the excluded diachronic dimension of any historical explanation. That is, like the act itself, the vanishing mediator is not simply to be written back into the historical record, because it is also what must be left out for this record to be constituted (2005: 77).

Quite similar to the analysis made by Benjamin, by ‘vanishing mediator’ Žižek means an ahistorical moment interrupting the historical process and purporting to redeem the repressed revolutionary potential of the past. In Lacanian terms, a vanishing mediator that is closely associated with the act represents the constitutive lack of the history. Therefore, even though it is outside of time itself, only it is able to provide a guarantee for the existence of history.

Furthermore, the vanishing mediator involves a certain moment of undecidability in disclosing events; such a moment of undecidability makes possible every reality. In this way, the undecidability enjoyed by the vanishing mediator (or the act itself), like Benjamin’s revolutionary potential, flourishes only when it is lacked; that is to say, it exists in the form of its loss. As mentioned above, the vanishing mediator in the form of the act remains as the constitutive outside of the history, which makes any historical change possible.

3.1.4. Antigone as a Perfect Case of the Revolutionary Act

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek engages in a rough link between Lacan’s work on ‘the two deaths’ and Benjamin’s stance with regard to the revolutionary potential of the past. But before turning to this scrutiny, let me present the main theme of a famous tragedy used by Žižek to clarify his position with regard to the revolutionary act in Lacanian sense: namely Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

Antigone, hero of the play, confronts a deadlock within the symbolic order surrounding her. She is caught between two competing obligations: the familial

religious duty to bury her dead brother and the civic-political duty to obey the laws of the state preventing her from burying her dead brother. In her struggle against the despotic king Creon, Antigone buries her brother secretly and, as a consequence, Creon incarcerates her in a dungeon so that she is excluded from the community. Antigone's fiancé, the son of Creon, threatens to commit suicide if Antigone is injured. But Antigone, unable to bear this sorrow, commits suicide, then her fiancé takes his own life and the play ends with total disaster for all characters.

On the basis of this case, a Lacanian reading notes that we can die not just once, but twice. We will suffer a biological death which takes place in the Real, involving the annihilation of our material being (e.g., Antigone's suicide). On the other hand, we can also suffer a Symbolic death (e.g., Antigone's confinement) which leads to the destruction of our Symbolic universe and termination of our subject positions. We suffer Symbolic death by being left out of the Symbolic, and we exist in the Real but not in the Symbolic. In light of such a reading of *Antigone*, with the help of the conceptualisation of the two deaths borrowed from Lacan, Žižek finds the standpoints of Benjamin and Antigone parallel to the most extent.

Similar to the case of arresting the historical time or acting in spite of historical circumstances in an ahistorical manner, Antigone risks her life in order to suspend the symbolic-legal network and generate a shift in the existing power structure. In this way, Antigone is perfectly revolutionary in the Benjaminian sense. Žižek accentuates this:

[T]he perspective of Benjamin is that of Antigone – for Benjamin, revolution is an affair of life and death; more precisely: of the second, the symbolic death. The alternative opened by the revolution is that between *redemption*, which will retroactively confer meaning on the 'scum of history' (to use this Stalinist expression) – on what was excluded from the continuity of the Progress – and the *apocalypse* (its defeat), where even the dead will again be lost and will suffer a second death: '*even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*' (Thesis VI) (*SOI*: 144).

As a final remark, Benjamin (1968: 253-264) imagines what is excluded from the synchronic systematicity of history, in which each and every aspect is supposed to be dependent on every other part. But this excluded part itself originates and allows such a synchronic system of history. At that point of

analysis, Žižek states that a type of ‘primal act’ or ‘trauma’ that every act takes the place of allows the ‘fantasy’ of entirely accounting for ourselves as well as the origins of history itself. In this respect, Žižek questions the split subject:

[T]he very emergence of a synchronous symbolic order implies a gap, a discontinuity in the diachronous causal chain that led to it, a ‘missing link’ in the chain. Fantasy is an *a contrario* proof that the status of the subject is that of a ‘missing link’, of a void which, within the synchronous set, holds the place of its foreclosed diachronous genesis. The incompleteness of the linear causal chain is, consequently, a positive condition for the ‘subject-effect’ to take place (*FTKN*: 198).

In Benjamin’s approach, the circularity of synchronous history can only be achieved through the decision made by the ahistorically excluded. Žižek adds that such a decision is taken under the principles of the Real, not the symbolic, similar to Antigone’s decision to commit suicide in confinement.³¹ Thus, the kind of decisioning mechanism that ends up with nothing but the act is condemned to be undecidable.

3.2. Žižek on Schelling: What’s the Worth of Reading German Idealism?

3.2.1. Why Schelling?

Why Schelling? This is most fundamental question concerning Žižek’s political ontology because it addresses the most complicated source of his understanding of the undecidable act. To begin with, it must be noted that Schelling starts from where Kant left off. And particularly, he centres his career on answering some significant questions raised by Kant to a certain extent. Kant tries to find a transcendental balance between two universes, namely phenomena (the

³¹ Andrea Hurst (2008: 24) suggests that Žižek’s analysis of the ethical act on the basis of his study on Antigone can be seen as parallel to Derridean deconstructionist ethics, to be more specific, she declares: “On the basis of the spectral analysis, Žižek argues that the ethical act in the Lacanian sense, the moment of decision, is made possible in the first case scenario, when the Symbolic Order is suspended and the actual Antigone becomes the Thing. In this moment of collapse, she herself becomes singular, unfathomable; inimitable ... I do not see Derridean discourse engendering contrary claims concerning what it means for someone like Antigone to become the Thing in a temporary moment of decision.”

experiential sphere) and noumena (the rational sphere). But to what extent is he successful in achieving this uneasy balance?

Schelling overtly notes that Kant failed in this difficult task and, unfortunately, he privileges the side of noumena at the expense of the phenomena field.

Instead, Schelling attempts to formulate a more materialist idealism in comparison with Kant. Another related criticism raised by Schelling against Kant is that Kant is again unable to explain the emergence of experience; rather, he simply takes the givenness of experience as an incomprehensible fact.

Thus, Kant's whole logical system is based upon inexplicable empirical contingency, and so it is in danger of being left in a state of crudely metaphysical and irrational groundlessness.

As a response to such failure on Kant's part, as Johnston says, Schelling aims to go beyond Kantian transcendental idealism by formulating a prior genetic *Grund* (for instance, sensation, nature and so on). In this sense, he suggests that Kantian systematic philosophy must be placed on the firmer foundations of a far more accurate philosophical articulation of the frontal ground conditioning the origin of the experiential sphere from which Kant begins his critical scrutiny (2008: 73-74).

In this way, Schelling seeks to create a genetic transcendentalism containing the gradual materialisation of the transcendental, along with corresponding modes of experience, by the way of considering it as a philosophically explainable process immanent to ontological monism. In this respect, along with his genetic account, Schelling claims that Ideal-thought merges from Real-being, but although the Real is not external to the Ideal, the Ideal can never achieve incorporation or conceptual digestion of the Real (Johnston, 2008: 74-76). In other words, being remains as the unexplained ground of thought; no rational system can explicate it. At that point of analysis, I must warn that the Ground mentioned by Schelling has a fairly different meaning.

In order to make clear his understanding of Ground, Schelling invents another fundamental conception: *Urgrund* (primal ground). By primal ground, Schelling means the state of nothingness underlying and coming before the

Ground itself. In this sense, he associates the primal ground with the conceptualisation of the ‘groundless’.

Logos, the ideality of the transcendental subject and its conceptually mediated reality can be described as groundless for two reasons: first, the field of the rational Ideal arises from and rests upon the irrational Real; and second, this irrational Real is not the ultimate basis, but an arbitrary contingency suspended over a void (Johnston, 2008: 79).

In light of such an analysis, it can be underlined that as opposed to the enlightening stance of Kant, reason is not self-grounding, but is secretly dependent on its seemingly rejected other.

Moreover, the proper Beginning, which is identified with the conception of primal ground or the groundless, is an ‘abyssal’ absence of any base; instead, it involves a deep lack of any firmly founding ground. Here, we see a clear similarity between Schelling’s beginning as groundless ground having nothing but absence and Lacan’s notion of constitutive lack. In this sense, by the help of Schellingian formulations, Žižek spreads his Lacanianism to much wider spheres of political ontology.

Furthermore, by employing Schelling’s conceptions of *Grund* and *Urgrund*, a significant tension between idealism and materialism comes to be resolved. Even though the Real is prior to the Ideal, the Ideal field is not solely epiphenomenal in relation to the Real.

Consequently, we can not talk about mutually exclusive philosophies of pure idealism or materialism in the case of Schelling. Old-fashioned oppositions such as that between materialism and idealism can not comprehend the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling.

As Žižek brilliantly puts it, “there is no *Geist* without *Geisterwelt*, no pure spirituality of *Logos* without the obscene spectral ‘spiritual corporeality’ of the living dead” (*IR*: 3-4). By claiming so, Žižek maintains the dialectical basis of his political ontology, whose main notion is the act, by the aid of formulations emerging as a result of the philosophical framework produced by Schelling.

3.2.2. Rotary Motion of the Drives

Having underlined the centrality of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* for Žižekian political ontology, now let me elaborate on the main mechanism at work within each and every moment of groundless ground. In parallel with the materialist tendency in his understanding of the Real and the situation of the Ideal with regard to the Real, Schelling attributes a central role to the category of desire. To be more specific, he considers desire to be the original embodiment of the spiritual dimension of the Real. This point is clarified by Johnston: a passionate longing proper to the Real or natural being internally generates the momentum needed for that which is eternally "in being more than being itself" to break out of the ontological closure (2008: 84). Such closure is defined as the rotary motion of the drives or, in more specific terms, the sterile cycles of contraction and expansion. Žižek explains those two significant cycles: in the first moment of contraction, a pure potentiality of freedom which is complete and wants for nothing "actualises itself in the guise of a will which actually, effectively wants this nothing"; in the second moment of expansion, after experiencing itself as negation and destruction, this will opposes or reverses itself in the guise of a will that now wants something (*IR*: 23).

As is easily seen, those two cycles constitute two opposite poles; a cycle of contraction can only be followed by one of expansion, and vice versa. There can be no balance between these two moments. On the basis of that rotary motion of the drives, it is seen that the self, by way of unconstrained will, is the will of the original act of wanting. In other words, Schelling tends to define the self as pure activity or as an act without a prior transitive object. Rex Butler makes further amplifications on this issue:

'Contraction', that moment when the free, untethered will actualises itself in the guise of a will that wills 'nothing', is equivalent to that first 're-marking' of the void, the primordial division of a thing from itself. 'Expansion' is the moment of the naming of this 'nothing'; of having something stand in for it. And we can see here that Schelling's thinking of the act or decision that breaks the 'rotary cycle' repeats the logic of 'concrete universality', in which the void directly coincides with its naming, at once is opened up and closed by its being named (2005: 81).

The decision mentioned here has nothing to do with alternation between cycles of contraction and expansion; rather, it is associated with the immanent simultaneity between those two moments. On the basis of dialectical maintenance of his political ontology, which is dealt with in the previous section, Žižek highlights the existence of an immediate equivalence between a thing and its opposite.

This simultaneity between the opposites is applied to the relationship taking place between the act and its ground. The act interferes with existing circumstances decisively, and there can be various reasons triggering the act, which may be subjective or objective. By aid of these factors, the act ‘contracts’ to draw consequences from them. That is to say, Žižek notes, the act contracts the ground, not only in the legal sense that it becomes responsible for it but, as in something like Nietzsche’s Eternal Turn, in the sense that it repeats it, assumes it, binds itself to it (*IR*: 28).

Furthermore, although the ground precedes the act, this ground does not exist before the act; as mentioned above, we have an immediate simultaneity between the act and its ground. By the help of Schelling’s notion of rotary motion, Žižek designates that at once the act is not before the ground and, on the other hand, the ground is not before the act. Although there is nothing outside of the act, it is still not completely self-establishing.

What is more, the act is not utterly able to give meaning to itself. Rather, both act and ground are born at once in a close interaction and this process of interaction never ends. This is also the case for the relationship between the cycles of contraction and expansion.

Neither of these two moments prioritises the other one; instead, there is an interactive association between them and we can not explain how this complex linkage actually begins. To put it more clearly, the relation between the act and its ground, similar to the connection between the cycles of contraction and expansion, is undecidable, which constitutes the basis of the contingent nature of Žižekian political ontology.

3.2.3. Features of the Act

Having indicated the main mechanism taking place in each process of the act and its close linkage to its ground on the basis of the cycles of contraction and expansion, in this section, I elaborate on the fundamental characteristics of the Schellingian act that are also embraced by Žižek himself.

3.2.3.1. The Unconscious Act

Putting strong emphasis on the centrality of the drives (or desires) as well as accepting the significant role played by the absence of ground in self-formation, Schelling makes an essential contribution to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Especially in terms of illuminating the affiliation between the unconscious dimension of the subjectivity and initiation and execution of decisions, Schelling makes extremely important preliminary remarks on the psychoanalytic (Freudian) viewpoint on the category of the unconscious.

As a result of this thorough synthesis between Schelling and psychoanalysis made by Žižek, it can be proposed that “the unconscious and the subject are co-emergent, owing their existence to the same ontogenetic factors. Thus Lacan’s phrase ‘subject of the unconscious’ might be interpreted as, in one sense, signalling the claim that the process of subjectification is conditioned by or dependent upon the movements and mechanisms generating the unconscious. In other words, no subject(ification) is possible without the creation of an unconscious” (Johnston, 2008: 98). Then a critical question arises: what is the unconscious in Schelling’s vocabulary? Žižek answers this question:

[T]he unconscious is not primarily the rotary motion of drives ejected into the eternal past; rather, the unconscious is the very act of *Ent-Scheidung* by means of which drives were ejected into the past. Or – to put it in slightly different terms – what is truly ‘unconscious’ in man is not the immediate opposite of consciousness, the obscure and confused ‘irrational’ vortex of drives, but the very founding gesture of consciousness, the act of decision by means of which I ‘choose myself’ – that is, combine this multitude of drives into the unity of my self. The ‘unconscious’ is not the passive stuff of inert drives to be used by the creative ‘synthetic’ activity of the conscious Ego; the unconscious in its

most radical dimension is, rather, *the highest Deed of my self-positing* (*IR*: 33-34).

On the basis of such a description of the unconscious, one can conclude that the act of decision creates the unconscious, and is then swallowed up by this same unconscious which it generated. Žižek underlines that the Schellingian act as *Ent-Scheidung* is groundless, so it holds an absolutely contingent gesture, but it is not ‘unconscious’ simply in the sense of being structurally incompatible with consciousness; rather, the spectre of freedom associated with the act is barred from consciousness. In a disturbing and upsetting ‘flash’, it occasionally irrupts into the sphere from which it normally remains excluded, more defensively than for structural reasons (Johnston, 2008: 103-104).

3.2.3.2. The Primordial Act

In parallel with Benjamin’s analysis of the primal act of decision that closes the circularity of time and constitutes the main source of the revolutionary moment, Schelling stresses the importance of the primordial act of free self-positing. Here, the status of the Schellingian primordial act is akin to Freudian primal repression: although both cases take place in atemporal reality, we have to presuppose these hypothetically to account for the consistency of the temporal process (*IR*: 19). The correlation between the primordial nature of the act and the issue of freedom is critical. This point is closely related to the undecidable character of the decision act. And, in this sense, Schelling provides Žižek with the philosophical foundation explaining how a free act is enacted in a primordial as well as undecidable manner. Here, it is helpful to refer to Žižek directly:

[T]he primordial act of free decision is not only man’s direct contact with the primordial freedom as the abyss out of which all things originate – that is, a kind of short circuit, of direct overlapping, between man and the Absolute; this act of contracting being, of choosing one’s eternal nature, *has to be a repetition of the same act of the Absolute itself*. In opposition to Kant, who conceives the primordial act of decision as the founding gesture of a free (human) subject, and with the speculative audacity which characterises his thought, Schelling thus ventures to *ascribe this act to the Absolute itself* (*IR*: 20-21).

In this sense, again we have an immanent simultaneity between the opposites in terms of the simultaneity taking place between the undecidable (and primordial) act and the category of the Absolute.

As Žižek mentions above, Schelling assigns the act of decision to the absolute itself. At that point, the existence of the Absolute is crucial because otherwise we have nothing but totally contingent chaos due to the co-existence of various acts floating around independently. In such a situation, freedom has no meaning at all, because it loses its distinctive character (as in the case of the State of Nature figured by Thomas Hobbes, in which there is a limitless degree of freedom, so excessive collision of free acts results in the category of freedom losing its meaning).

3.2.3.3. The Atemporal Act

Another significant feature of the act is atemporality. Again this issue has been underlined in the related section on Benjamin's ahistorical analysis of redemption of the repressed revolutionary potential of the past. But in this section, a deeper scrutiny of the atemporal act will be offered by means of examining the philosophical formulations made by Schelling. One of the most noteworthy effects of the decision act is to bring about chronological temporality and to initiate the linear movement of time. This act of decision is not 'in the universe' (and thus, in time), but it produces the universe (and thus, time) (Johnston, 2008: 95). In his analysis of the atemporal Schellingian act, Žižek again turns to the conception of historicity, but in a slightly different manner:

[Schelling's] notion of the primordial act of decision/differentiation (*Ent-Scheidung*) aims at the gesture that opens up the gap between the inertia of the prehistoric Real and the domain of historicity, of multiple and shifting narrativizations; this act is thus a quasi-transcendental unhistorical condition of possibility and, simultaneously, a condition of the impossibility of historicisation. Every 'historicisation', every symbolisation, has to 'reenact' this gap, this passage from the Real to history (*AF*: 37).

In simpler terms, the temporalised content of history presupposes an atemporal form. Historicity is made possible by something that can not be

historicised. Here again, we have a complicated simultaneity between the opposites: on the one hand, temporalised content, on the other hand, the atemporal form of the act instigating that content. Another fundamental issue is atemporal freedom attributed to the act of decision within the ontology of Schelling:

Žižek characterises Schellingian freedom as the fleeting manifestation of (ahistorical) eternity in the medium of (historical) time. The unprecedented novelty of a genuine act of freedom interrupts the chronological-linear flow of historical temporality, introducing something there that can not be accounted for in historical terms as an outgrowth of what came before ... There is something timeless about acts to the extent that they are out of joint with their surrounding historical-temporal environs. They have no prearranged place there where they take place. Moreover, from the Schellingian perspective, such unconditioned deeds are intrusions into time of something coming from outside of this time (Johnston, 2008: 120).

In light of such an analysis of the atemporal act, Žižek resolves the paradoxical tension between the eternity and singularity of the act. If a primordial act of decision is done eternally, it must therefore be inherently in the past, as well; that is to say, it has to belong to a past which was never present.

Hence, the eternal past is constitutive of time, and by claiming so, Žižek means that the temporality in its original dimension is not a single line of events passing through past to present and future. Rather, it involves the tension of a bond to the (undecidable) act of decision which specifically, in so far as it was never present, in its withdrawal, is always here as the (past) foundation of the present (*IR*: 21-22).

3.2.4. Relation between the Act of Decision and Freedom

As implied in the previous sections concerning the relations of the act of decision, freedom and the act are intertwined. It is impossible to talk about one of these concepts without referring to the other. At this point of analysis, of course Schellingian theory of the Subject also plays a crucial role in enhancing Žižekian appropriation of the concept of the (undecidable) decision act and its place within the process of subjectivisation. As Žižek puts forward, for Schelling:

Freedom can become the predicate of a Subject only in so far as this Subject accomplishes the act of self-differentiation by means of which it posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from its contracted Substance: a free Subject has to have a Ground which is not himself, he has first to contract this Ground and then to assume a free distance towards it via the act of primordial decision which opens up time (*IR*: 35).

To put it more blatantly, the Subject is nothing but the outcome of an eternal original, eternally past, transcendental and most importantly free choice – that is, a choice which was always already made, although it never took place in temporal, everyday reality (*SOI*: 168). At least equally significant, Schellingian freedom is groundless; it has nothing to do with transcendental laws, and its employment is not governed by a higher, normative and rational principle. In Schelling's words:

There is a law in humanity: there is an incessant primordial deed that precedes each and every single action and through which one is actually Oneself. Yet this primordial deed sinks down into unfathomable depths with respect to the consciousness that elevates itself above it. Thereby, this primordial deed becomes a beginning that can never be sublimated, a root of reality that can not be reached through anything ... the decision that would make any kind of act into a true beginning may not be brought before consciousness (2000: 85).

3.2.5. Schelling on the Subject

Before finishing this section on Žižek's appropriation of Schelling, I must deal with another key issue concerning the Schellingian openings on the theory of the subject from the hands of Žižek, with a particular interest in the problematic of undecidability.

First of all, the basic difference between Kantian and Schellingian understandings of the subject must be presented in order to highlight the specificity of Schelling. Kant's transcendentalism treats the subject as embedded in experiential reality and always already existent and active, while Schelling seeks to explain the emergence of subjectivity and searches for the origins of this functionality attributed to the subject.

In this sense, there is significant level of similarity between Žižek and Schelling in terms of study areas, because Žižek himself devotes almost his whole career to studying the issue of the subject before subjectivisation. But how does Schelling account for the emergence of the subject?

In general terms, in parallel with his whole philosophical system of *Naturphilosophie*, he tries to outline this process as the emergence of material subjectivity immediately coming out of a substantial material base; in Schelling's vocabulary, this is the real ground (*Grund*) of nature. However, at that point, Johnston warns us: although Schelling maintains that the subject arises from substance, he nonetheless insists that, following this movement of genetic emergence, the subject thus produced remains thereafter irreducible to the materiality of its sources (2008: 71).

But here, let me note that Schelling's search for the antecedent genetic conditions of possibility for the transcendental subject has the same level of inquiry with the meta-transcendental explanation of the subject, as in the case of Kantian transcendental philosophy.

As is easily seen, the transcendental materialist theory of the subject, as presented by Schelling, is metapsychologically informed. In this sense, two axiomatic theses play a crucial role for this theory of subjectivity: First, the underlying ontogenetic base of the subject consists of the materiality of the Real, more specifically, of an internally conflicted libidinal economy at odds with itself from the beginning; and second, the subject is genetically produced as a result of the fact that disturbing the discontent of this initial state – the originally dysfunctional libidinal economy is plagued by unsettling antagonisms – prompts efforts at taming and domesticating this corpo-Real, efforts that come to constitute and define the fundamental contours of subjectivity (Johnston, 2008: 81).

With respect to the emergence of subject existence, Schelling follows the law asserting that first chaos comes, and then any established order is established; this order emerges out of such chaos, but once it is founded it radically excludes this chaotic situation.

As implied in the introductory section of this chapter, the ground of material Real can immanently cause a process of de-materialisation as well, and this

process results in the emergence of the material form of subjectivity. Owing to the level of such de-materialisation, the emergent subject has a relative autonomy with respect to the ground from which it splits itself. And once this process of splitting off, taking place between the ground and subjectivity, is completed, we can then talk about a full-fledged category of the subject.

This view of split materiality of the subject is accepted by Žižek, as well. Indeed, from the writings of Žižek, who is under the heavy influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis, it can be inferred that his authentic materialist paradigm is based on the argument that a material being itself (for example nature, human body etc.) is internally inconsistent, and also that this materiality gets cracked and remains so through antagonisms, gaps and tensions. Thus, the materiality of the Real is not homogenous and harmoniously consistent whole; rather, the Real is barred. And this split of the material Real produces the subject.

When we turn to Schelling, we come across a quite similar analysis. As Johnston points out, for Schelling, the ideality of subjectivity arises from the Real of a fractured, conflicted being as a means of overcoming and transcending this tortured mass of drive-disturbed matter. In this sense, the materialist concept of the subject belonging to Schelling is seen as the point at which nature ‘runs amok’ and goes off the rails (2008: 109). A seemingly clear parallel between Schelling’s outlook of cracked materiality of the Real and the subject and split subject negatively formed by the constitutive outside on the basis of the principle of lack allows Žižek to regard Schelling as a meta-psychological thinker. Within the psychoanalytic reading of Schelling, we see a correspondence between Schelling and Lacan, not only in terms of emergence of the subject but also with respect to the level and source of the freedom attributed to the subjectivity as well:

[E]mergent subjectivity possesses a degree of freedom in so far as its drive-ridden ‘nature’ bequeaths to it the absence of a natural program, namely, the absence of a deterministic agenda automatically oriented around the coordinated pursuit of a set of configuration of closely related means and ends. This could be described as a gift of lack. This missing mandate of nature, its original lack in relation to the conflicted libidinal being of human beings, is a (pre)condition for the coming-to-be of the ‘unnatural’ subject of freedom (Johnston, 2008: 111).

In light of such an analysis, it can be maintained that if subjectivity is inconsistent and vulnerable to conflicts, there is a barred Real which intrinsically lacks a balanced cohesiveness and coordination. But when does the freedom of the subject flourish? The transient transcendence of freedom is sparked into being when the cracks and gaps of the Real overlap with those subsisting within the Symbolic (Johnston, 2008: 113). But this kind of freedom is abyssal, because it is the contingent material condition of the possibility for the emergence of fully established autonomy, and this process continues within the principles put on the groundless ground, but, ironically, as the ground turns into groundless or *Urgrund*, it loses its grounding capacity, because it comes to be split, as well. Hence, both the processes of subject formation and getting subjective freedom are governed by the law of the lack (which is valid in the sphere of the material Real), which ends up with nothing but negatively founded undecidability. In this way, Žižek appropriates Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* to a considerable extent.

3.3. Žižek on Badiou: What's the Worth of Reading Lacan?

Particularly in the later phases of his career, Žižek starts to engage in Badiou's ultra-materialist and decisionist theory of the subject. By doing so, he makes some important openings in his orthodox Lacanianism, also borrowing several significant conceptualisations from Badiou, especially with regard to the analysis of political change. But the interaction between Žižek and Badiou is never fully smooth and harmonious; on the contrary, there are fundamental disagreements between them based on their relatively different interpretations of Lacan. In this section, I will first touch upon the main points of agreement and, as a consequence, the theoretical developments seen in Žižek's scrutiny of the (undecidable) act of decision. Afterwards, fundamental divergences will be mentioned, predominantly in terms of their theories of the subject. The last part of this section will be devoted to the Žižekian appropriation of the Lacanian act, with particular attention to the issue of undecidability which plays a crucial role in the political ontology of Žižek in general.

3.3.1. Žižek in Favour of Badiou

Before turning to put forward the main points shared by Žižek and Badiou, I must briefly elaborate on Badiou's analysis of the subject. Inspired by the Set theory, Badiou bases his ontology on mathematics. Under these circumstances, he argues that there is a possibility of an indiscernible element which exists extrinsically to each and every ontological situation, and on the basis of the ontological necessity crystallised by the axiomatic nature of set theory, Badiou argues that the subject must interfere with the indiscernible and decide for the undecidable. But how does this process takes place?

For Badiou, the subject is an active fidelity to the event of truth. In this sense, neither truth nor the subject reigns over the other side. Truth is a militant procedure through which new types of egalitarian principles emerge and the existing situation is transformed. At that point, Badiou uses the concepts of truth and event interchangeably. By those notions, he means the break in history for the sake of the subject, whose fundamental motif is the potential of radical innovation existing in every situation without exception. Through the event (the rupture in the ontology), the subject finds its own realisation and reconciliation with truth.

Badiou enlists four domains through which the subject maintains fidelity to an event: politics, science, art and love. With the help of these four conditions, an ordinary individual turns out to be a genuine subject in so far as he or she is actively involved with an evental transformative procedure. Thus, the subject is transcended by the truth, but it is through subjectivisation that truth becomes possible. At that point, the act of decision on the undecidable process of the event plays a chief role in truth production. Besides, initiative decision acts and consequences of the event are embedded throughout the process and we can not delineate a clear-cut cause-and-effect relationship between them. In other words, the truth and subject are co-engendered through the evental process.

Subject and event are tied together in the decision of the former in the name of the latter. Since the subject comes out alongside the event in fidelity to it, the event remains asubjective and it transforms the situation objectively as well as undecidably. Therefore, within the theory of Badiou, the fields of the subjective

and the objective are intertwined. In order to underline the undecidable nature of the event, let me refer to Peter Hallward: the truth process begins properly with an ‘unpredictable encounter’, a break (*trauma*) or moment of grace within the existing order that escapes conventional representation (2004: 3).

Another significant point is that the formal decision that initiates the truth is never calculable and demonstrable; thus, its result can not be anticipated, and that is why there is a necessity of faith for the event itself. Having explained the main points regarding Badiou’s theory of the subject, which is based upon the act of decision, now let me turn to the main points on which Badiou and Žižek agree to a certain extent. First of all, both are noticeably critical of relativist post-modern thought and deconstructionism. More importantly, Žižek’s scrutiny of the subject shows strong parallels with that of Badiou:

Žižekian subject emerges in the world through a sudden break with the chain of symbolic conditions delineating the process of subjectivisation. The subject is thus correlative to a traumatic encounter that determines: first, the disintegration of the fantasmatic support of subjectivity; and second the setting up of a new chain of interrelated symbolic references allowing for the construction of a radically different procedure of subjectivisation. This would seem to suggest that Žižek is very close to Badiou in defining the subject through a certain fidelity to a traumatic truth event that suspends its symbolic functioning (Vighi & Feldner, 2007: 169).

Besides the agreement on subject formation on the basis of decisionist fidelity to the event, Žižek shares his view of the conjuncture of the event with Badiou. As Rex Butler notes, according to both Žižek and Badiou, the mere context of the event is undecidable and the undecidability of the previous situation does not exist until it has been drawn attention to by a subsequent act of decision; as with Benjamin, we never actually have that void or alternative as such; it exists only in retrospect, as the very effect of its loss (2005: 89). So, it can be inferred that for both theoreticians, politics involve a collective wager on undecidability through which new forms of order can emerge. Here politics are taken as a critical gesture that is related with not only the disturbance of the existing power structure but also the willingness to create a new sort of political establishment. Let me touch upon more details of the issue of undecidability playing a crucial role in the

theoretical interface taking place between Žižek and Badiou. Žižek analyses the undecidability of the event with the aid of Badiou's political ontology:

The undecidability of the Event thus means that an Event does not possess any ontological guarantee: it can not be reduced to (reduced, generated from) a (previous) Situation: it emerges 'out of nothing' (the Nothing which was the ontological truth of this previous situation). Thus there is no neutral gaze of knowledge that could discern the Event in its effects: a Decision is always-already here – that is, one can discern the signs of an Event in the Situation only from a previous Decision for Truth, just as in Jansenist theology, in which divine miracles are legible as such only to those who have already decided for Faith (*TS*: 136).

Another key point shared by Žižek and Badiou is the self-referential character of the event. This is also closely related to the issue of undecidability. As the event is self-referential, it contains its own form and content. As mentioned above, the event precedes the subject and has no reference to the acts of the subject; thus, it has nothing to do with the decisions of the subject. In other words, the event emerges as an undecidable domain of struggle before the subject. As Žižek stresses, an Event involves subjectivity: the engaged 'subjective perspective' on the Event is part of the Event itself (*TS*: 137). At that point of analysis, there is no doubt about the centrality of the undecidability within the process of the event and subjectivisation by way of being faithful to the event. In order to figure out the undecidability of the previous situation, we need to enjoy the category of decision. The reason for this is the necessity of the simultaneity of the opposites, which has been explained in former sections. Žižek declares:

[I]t is only the Decision itself that reveals as the previous state as 'undecidable'. Prior to Decision, we inhabit a Situation which is enclosed in its horizon; from within this horizon, the Void constitutive of this situation is by definition invisible; that is to say undecidability is reduced to – appears as – a marginal disturbance of the global System. After the Decision, undecidability is over, since we inhabit the new domain of Truth. The gesture that closes/decides the Situation (again) thus absolutely coincides with the gesture that (retroactively) opens it up. The event is thus the Void of an invisible line separating one closure from another: prior to it, the Situation was closed; that is, from within its horizon (what will become) the Event necessarily appears as *skandalon*, as an undecidable, chaotic intrusion that has no place in the State of the Situation; once the Event takes place and is assumed as such, the very previous situation appears as undecidable Chaos (*TS*: 138).

3.3.2. Žižek against Badiou

We have seen an important level of agreement between Žižek and Badiou, particularly on the process of subjectivisation in relation to fidelity to the event, the centrality attributed to the act of decision and the undecidable nature of the situation, which constitutes the conjuncture of the event and self-referentiality of the event. But this does not mean that Žižek and Badiou have no discrepancies in theoretical terms.

Despite the fact that they both pay attention to the importance of the event and act of decision for the initiation of any kind of change, they attribute different levels of accents in dealing with these conceptualisations. Essentially, in the case of the act, this situation is overtly obvious. In his review of Badiou, Žižek accuses him both of failing to engage in a full revolutionary act – which would take him outside the domain of the symbolically acceptable political debate – and of refusing to involve himself with power by taking it and using it. Instead, Žižek claims, Badiou is playing “a game of hysterical provocation” rather than adopting “the heroic readiness to endure the subversive undermining of the existing System as it undergoes conversion into the principle of a new positive Order that can *give body* to this negativity” (1998: 258-259).

In other words, Žižek blames Badiou for being obsessed with the traumatic character of the act but unable to engage with the *realpolitik* within his own theoretical framework. Therefore, Badiou remains a romantic and utopic revolutionary who does not think about the internal processes through which an ordinary individual turns into an active subject. In this sense, even though Badiou shows us the destination impressively, he is incapable of clarifying the route that will supposedly lead to revolution. In a related sense, Vighi and Feldner underscore that:

[W]hilst Badiou’s emphasis falls upon the question of *fidelity* to a traumatic chance encounter (the decisions to be taken after the event has intervened); Žižek tends to focus mainly upon a series of questions related to the constitutive nature of the actual event, i.e. the encounter with the Real. If for Žižek the subject essentially *is* (i.e. it is inescapably defined by) the self-annihilating encounter in terms of the performativity it implies, its constructive development into a socially and politically

workable set of actions. In other words, if read through the Lacanian lens, Badiou's subject is already projected onto the process of subjectivisation determined by the encounter with the truth-event *qua* Real (2007: 169).

As is easily seen, one of the most fundamental differences between Žižek and Badiou is their intellectual relationship with Lacan. In this sense, on orthodox Lacanian grounds Žižek criticises Badiou by means of Lacanian terms. In this sense, Žižek attacks Badiou by arguing that he remains unable to account for the subject prior to its engagement with the event. He adds:

Lacan insists on the primacy of the (negative) act over the (positive) establishment of a 'new harmony' via the intervention of some new Master Signifier; while for Badiou, the different facets of negativity (ethical catastrophes) are reduced to so many versions of the 'betrayal' of (or infidelity to, or denial of) the positive Truth-Event. This difference between Lacan and Badiou concerns precisely the status of the subject: Badiou's main point is to avoid identifying the subject with the constitutive Void of the structure – such an identification already 'ontologizes' the subject, albeit in a purely negative way – that is, turns the subject into an entity consubstantial with the structure (*TS*: 159).

When we come to the concept of the Truth-Event, again we see a strong Žižekian critique of Badiou's political ontology. Žižek puts a central emphasis upon the death drive (which will be dealt with in the next section) in the process of subjectivisation. In this sense, he associates the death drive with the main motor of the subject formation procedure, and in parallel he conceives of the Truth-Event as correlative to the death drive. Hence, for Žižek, the Truth-Event is negative in the purest sense; nonetheless, Badiou quite naively views participation in the Truth-Event as the immortal dimension of humanity. Žižek continues:

[A]gainst Badiou, one should insist that only to finite/mortal being does the act (or Event) appear as a traumatic intrusion of the Real, as something that can not be named directly: it is the very fact that man is split between mortality (a finite being destined to perish) and the capacity to participate in the Eternity of the Truth-Event which bears witness to the fact that we are dealing with a finite/mortal being (*TS*: 164).

In this light, we notice another primary difference between Badiou's Truth-Event and Žižek's Real, essentially with respect to the issue of the subject. In Badiou's political ontology, the event plainly happens, and then the duty of faithful participation in this event is assigned to the subject extrinsically, whereas

for Žižek, the subject reveals its fidelity to the Real only by making it happen unconsciously.

Another critical issue about Badiou, as detected by Žižek, is his hidden Kantianism which is at work throughout the framework of Badiou's political ontology. The influence of Kantian transcendentalism on Badiou is significantly clear in his differentiation between the positive order of the Being (Knowledge), which corresponds to the Kantian field of phenomena, and the order of the Truth-Event corresponding to the sphere of noumena in Kant's vocabulary.

Moreover, as Vighi and Feldner assert, Badiou gets caught in the Kantian trap because his conception of the Truth-Event works as an endless attempt to detect the traces of the Truth-Event, which is precisely identified with the Kantian ethical injunction. However, for Lacan, the *innomable* core (Truth) is always and already here, as it is rooted in a fundamental fantasy functioning as a path for radical subjectivity (2007: 176-177).

3.3.3. Žižek's Appreciation of the Lacanian Act

Following Lacan's tendency of paying special attention to the centrality of the death drive in his theory of the act, Žižek sees the death drive as a starting point for his analysis of the act, as well. But what does 'death drive' mean? Žižek defines this originally Freudian concept in the following way: "Death drive means precisely that the most radical tendency of a living organism is to maintain a state of tension, to avoid final 'relaxation' in obtaining a state of full homeostasis. 'Death drive' as 'beyond the pleasure principle' is this very instance of an organism endlessly repeating the state of tension" (*OWB*: 24).

By death drive, Žižek does not mean the negative end point of life; rather, he identifies the death drive with immortality. In this sense, throughout his career, Žižek deals with numerous ethical characters that have made great impressions on our lives, such as Antigone, Sygne de Coufontaine, Oedipus at Colonnus and so forth. The basic common point for these heroes is their willingness to reject compromise, struggle against their symbolic universe and insist on their original position regardless of how conditions alter, who is against them or how much they

must pay in the end. As is clearly seen, the death drive (in other terms, the symbolic withdrawal of the subject) is the precondition of the act, but it can not be understood without the act, because it can come out merely as a consequence of the act itself. Žižek notes:

In this precise manner, the act involves a dimension of death-drive that grounds a decision (to accomplish a hegemonic identification; to engage in a fidelity to a Truth), but can not be reduced to it. The Lacanian death-drive (a category Badiou adamantly opposes) is thus again a kind of ‘vanishing mediator’ Being and Event: there is a ‘negative’ gesture constitutive of the subject which is then obfuscated in ‘Being’ (the established ontological order) and in fidelity to the event (*TS*: 160).

At first glance, the concept of a death drive brings suicide to mind. This is a valid point, but only to a certain extent. At this point of analysis, we should explore the issue of suicide in Lacanian vocabulary. In parallel with two types of death, namely real and symbolic, we have two sorts of suicide, as well. As easily guessed, symbolic suicide is an act of withdrawing from the symbolic reality that enables us to begin from the point of absolute freedom, while suicide in *reality* is caught in a symbolic network of communication. There can be diverse symbolic explanations for the act of suicide in reality, for instance, the demonstration of opposition to any circumstance, admission of guilt, a sobering warning and so on (*EYS*: 43-44). Here, Lacan (and also Žižek, pursuing a Lacanian path) deals with symbolic suicide and regards it as the mere case of a successful act. As Stavrakakis underlines, for Lacan suicide is the only act which can succeed without misfiring, a totally successful, “unconditional” act (2007: 135).

In this sense, Lacan uses the concept of *passage à l’acte* as a synonym for the suicidal act in the symbolic field. In suicidal *passage à l’acte*, the subject offers himself (his being) as the object that fills, in the Real, the constitutive gap of the symbolic order (*FTKN*: xxxix). In Žižek’s political ontology, *passage à l’acte* is sole way of going beyond the ideological deadlock. In acting in accordance with the existing symbolic order, we do nothing other than reproduce the existing dominant ideological setting, as well. Therefore, in order to break the domination of ideology, we have to play without referring to the rules of the game.

To put it more blatantly, if we want to change the given symbolic reality, we have to withdraw from it in a total manner, and act not in symbolic terms. So, the problems of supposedly democratic states can not be resolved within those systems; rather, we must leave those power structures fully and act extrinsically. This may sound like a militarist calling for struggle against various corruptions of nation-states and other global atrocities. Žižek frankly acknowledges this alternative:

We simply *have to accept the risk* that a blind violent outburst will be followed by its proper politicization – there is no short cut here, and no guarantee of a successful outcome either. Horrible as it may sound, we should therefore *not* simply condemn acts like the one committed by Andrea: we should discern in them a hidden liberating potential (RG: 225).

When we turn to Lacan again, it must now be indicated what Lacan means by the conception of the act. He characterises the act as something that marks out human activity as such and draws attention to the Real: “an act, true act, always has an element of structure, by the fact of concerning a real that is not self-evidently caught up in it” (1979: 50). To put it differently, the act in the Lacanian sense involves an encounter with the Real in a radical way. Žižek makes further clarifications, particularly in rejecting deconstructive ethics by aid of a Lacanian conceptualisation of the act:

The act is for [Lacan] strictly correlative to the suspension of the big Other, not only in the sense of the symbolic network, but also in the sense of the absent originator of the ethical call, of the one who addresses us and to whom we are irreducibly indebted and/or responsible, since (to put it in Levinasian terms) our very existence is responsive – that is we emerge as subject in response to Other’s call. The (ethical) act proper is precisely *neither* a response to the compassionate plea of my neighbourly semblant (the stuff of sentimental humanism) *nor* response to the unfathomable Other’s call (2000: 668).

Before ending this section, let me briefly touch upon some key aspects of the Lacanian outlook of the act, those appropriated by Žižek to the greatest extent. In the Lacanian act, we see the “abyss of freedom”, autonomy and “responsibility coinciding with an unconditional necessity”. The Lacanian act has nothing to do with acting through strategic calculation. During the process of the act, a big Other

or symbolic universe speaks through the subject. A key condition of the Lacanian act is a disturbance of the phantasmatic background. In this sense, Žižek maintains, the act as Real is an event occurring *ex nihilo*, without any phantasmatic support; as such, the act as subject is also to be opposed to the subject and the act in its traumatic *tuche* is that which divides the subject, who can never subjectivise it, assume it as his own or posit himself as its author-agent (*TS*: 374). “In the act, the subject, as Lacan puts it, *posits himself as his own cause*, and is no longer determined by the decentred object-cause” (*TS*: 375).

3.4. Žižek on Žižek: Towards a Pervert Synthesis

Having dealt with three major intellectual sources influencing Žižek (particularly his theory of the act), namely Marx, German Idealism and Lacan, through his direct appreciation of Benjamin, Schelling and Badiou respectively, in this last section of the third chapter, I touch upon the ‘Žižekian’ viewpoint on the conception of the act, with a particular emphasis on the central facet of this issue – to be more exact, undecidability. But before turning to the undecidability of the Žižekian act, let me explain what Žižek means by the notion of the act.

3.4.1. What is the Žižekian Act?

In the most radical sense, the act involves an interference with the existing (symbolic) situation, by the way in which it is not approved by the symbolic universe itself. The radicality of the act is underlined by Žižek: an act is not “the mere endeavour to ‘solve a variety of partial problems’ within a given field”, but should rather be understood as “the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of this field” (*CHU*: 121). Thus, the act in the Žižekian sense does not correspond to any symbolic aspect, and it is totally against the principles of the power structure taking place in the symbolic.

On the other hand, the Žižekian act does not work within the boundaries of the possible as moulded by the symbolic; in other words, it engages in an ‘impossible’ intervention in not only the symbolic, but also the Real. As Žižek

notes, there *are* political acts, “for politics can not be reduced to the level of strategic-pragmatic interventions”, since “an act is neither a strategic intervention *in* the existing order, nor its crazy destructive negation; an act is an excessive, trans-strategic intervention which redefines the roles and contours of the existing order” (*OWB*: 80-81). In this way, the Žižekian act is outside of the symbolic and that is why the element of the undecidable and unpredictable is inherent to the category of the act (the undecidability of the Žižekian act will be analysed in detail in the next section).

The level and intensity of the functions attributed to the act show how central this concept is for Žižek’s political ontology. In one sentence, it can be stated that by way of the act, a radical break can be established vis-à-vis the existing symbolic order. In this sense, “a complete rejection of the given enemy” must be the foundation of the act, and only then can a new form of order be instituted by getting rid of each and every trace of the former order. As is easily seen, by the concept of the act, Žižek highlights the possibility of the transformation of the symbolic order; in his words, “it is only through an act that I effectively assume the big Other’s inexistence, that is, I enact the impossible, namely what appears as impossible within the coordinates of the existing socio-symbolic order” (2003: 132).

Besides this overtly negative side of the act in terms of refusing the existing symbolic order, there is also another task assigned to the act with regard to establishing a new order, and only after accomplishing this aim can an act can be considered successful; otherwise it remains purely destructive. As Žižek points out:

... [A]n act ‘succeeds’ the moment it ‘sutures’ anew its own past, its own conditions, effacing its ‘scandalous’ character – the act is the mergence of a new master-signifier, that supplementary ‘bet of your finger’ which, miraculously, changes the previous chaos into ‘new harmony’ ... What is lost after the onset of the ‘new harmony’ is the radically contingent, ‘scandalous’, abyssal character of the new Master-Signifier (*FTKN*: 193).

But during such a transformation of the symbolic order, the initiator of the act, namely the subject, does not remain the same. This is another fundamental function of the act: it drastically changes the subject itself, but in an undecidable

manner. In Žižek's words, "the act proper is the only one which restructures the very symbolic coordinates of the agent's situation: it is an intervention in the course of which the agent's identity itself is radically changed" (*OB*: 85).

On the basis of its transformative capacity, effective on both the symbolic order and subjectivity, the act goes beyond any piecemeal reformism involving only an alteration of the power holders within the same symbolic order. "An act proper is not just a strategic intervention into a situation, bound by its conditions – it retroactively creates its own conditions" (*IDLC*: 311).

As implied above, in order to overwhelm the existing order, the act works in accordance with its own principles, because if it stays in the field governed by the rules of the existing symbolic order, the act can only reproduce that power structure in different forms without altering its essential content.

As a final remark, let me present the formal parameters of the act proper: a proper act is supposed to be non-intentional, non-strategic, non-pragmatic, pure, negative with respect to its relation with the symbolic, risky (even catastrophic, terroristic and abyssal), authentic (as well as ahistorical), able to suspend the symbolic field and thus outside of the symbolic order, impossible (in symbolic terms), unpredictable and, most importantly, undecidable (in terms of its effects on both symbolic order and the subject). This undecidable character of the act of decision will constitute the content of the last part of this chapter.

3.4.2. Undecidability of the Žižekian Act

The final key part of this chapter is devoted to the most fundamental characteristic of the act, that is to say, its undecidability. As mentioned in the previous part, Žižek regards the act proper as risky and inexplicable in symbolic terms. But how does he set up such a proposition theoretically? To begin, let me repeat that the Žižekian act has nothing to do with the symbolic principles of the existing power structures. As Oliver Marchart correctly puts it, "an act touches at the Real, and is entirely of a groundless nature"; in this sense, it works within the

“ontological level of the political”, not the ontic level of politics³² (in Bowman & Stamp, 2007: 100-101).

In this way, Žižek suggests the politics of the Real at the expense of the symbolic reality; therefore, a truly political act must be purely authentic. Moreover, in Freudian terms, an authentic act retroactively (re)constitutes the past, as Žižek writes:

[I]n our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual-fantasmatic) coordinates of our identity, while an act proper is the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual ‘transcendental’ coordinates of its agent’s being ... which not only changes the actuality of our world, but also ‘rouses its infernal regions’ ... while the pure past is the transcendental condition for our acts, our acts not only create an actual new reality, they also retroactively change this very condition (*IDLC*: 315).

By seeing the act as the main instrument of the politics of the Real, he indicates – since the act has the capability of redefining its own conditions – that the Real can also be transformed by means of the act.

In a recent interview, Žižek underlines this clearly: “the true act is precisely as Lacan puts it, that which changes the Real itself” (in Beaumont & Jenkins, 2000: 192). From such a proposition, it can be inferred that the act proper transforms the Real, because it re-establishes the role of antagonism in the new constitution of the symbolic.

Even though in the earlier stages of his career Žižek underscores the symbolic conditioning of the real act (see *SOI*: 216), within his more mature theoretical framework, he seems to articulate that “the Real of an act happens without the symbolic” (Pluth & Hoens, 2004: 187). Such thorough redescription of the rules of the symbolic within the Real field shows us the abyssal character of the act proper:

The act is therefore not ‘abyssal’ in the sense of an irrational gesture that eludes all rational criteria; it can and should be judged by universal rational criteria, the point is only that it changes (re-creates) the very criteria by which it should be judged – there are no antecedent universal rational criteria that ‘one’ applies when one accomplishes an act (*DSST*: 170).

³² At this point of analysis, one should remember that the distinction between the ontological level of the *political* and ontic level of the *politics* was originally invented by Jacques Rancière.

In light of such an analysis of real acts, we uncover that the undecidable character is intrinsic to the Žižekian act, because it can not be understood and determined by the factors of the existing symbolic order. Therefore, the possible end result of the act corresponds to absolutely nothing in the symbolic and so it has no guarantee for a better future. In this sense, Žižek gives the example of Lenin.

Even a few weeks before the Bolshevik Revolution, no one could expect such an outcome in the undeveloped circumstances of Russia. In 1917, Russia was a completely agricultural society and had nothing to do with capitalist development of means of production; there was no crystallisation of capitalist relations of production between the well-established classes of the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Nevertheless, Lenin, as a perfect ‘actor’, solely decided the Bolshevik Revolution; through this process he refrained from making strategic calculations and being affected by the opposition of the symbolic order.

As Žižek puts it, despite widespread disbelief and explicit confrontation within the Bolshevik Party itself, Lenin was able to sustain the “abyss of the act”, and during this process he was aware that the revolution only legitimised itself by itself, irrespective of opportunist calculations, and that “those who wait for the objective conditions of the revolution to arrive will wait forever” (*RG*: 6-9).

In this sense, another defining and most significant aspect of the Žižekian act is its intensified decisionism, leading to nothing but undecidability. More directly, it is the decision itself that produces the undecidability. As noted by Žižek, far from being determined by the situation, acts are possible on account of the ontological non-closure, inconsistency and gaps in the situation (*IDLC*: 309).

Inconsistent parts and gaps of the symbolic order mentioned here are filled by the act of decision, but this process does not allow us to figure out its course and end point, because it is not conditioned by the symbolic in which we are living; rather, it is enacted under the principles of the constitutive outside. Accordingly, we have no criteria for the good act promising emancipation. Žižek clarifies the undecidability of the act:

With an act, *stricto sensu*, we can therefore never fully foresee its consequences, i.e., the way it will transform the existing symbolic space: the act is a rupture after which ‘nothing remains the same.’ Which is why,

although History can always be explained, accounted for afterward, we can never, as its agents, caught in its flow, foresee its course in advance: we can not do it insofar as it is not an ‘objective process’ but a process continuously interrupted by the scansion of acts. The new (the symbolic reality that emerges as the aftermath of an act) is always a ‘state that is essentially a by-product,’ never the result of advance planning (*EYS*: 45-46).

Concerning the centrality of the decision act, it is beneficial for us to assess Žižek’s reference to Schmitt. Žižek says that the essence of Schmittian ultrapolitics is that “the decision which bridges the gap [between ‘pure normative order’ and ‘actuality of social life’] is not a decision for some concrete order, but primarily a decision for the formal principle of order as such” (in Mouffe, 1999: 18).

At this point, it must be stressed that Schmitt’s stance on the act of decision takes place within the Real of the politics, which necessitates the act of decision in an antagonistic mode. In this way, the act remains authentic and more significantly undecidable with respect to the symbolic order or ontic level of the politics.

3.5. Concluding Comments: Politics of Impossibility

Having outlined Žižek’s standpoint on the issue of undecidability by elaborating on his analysis of the act of decision, in this last section of the chapter, the relevance of Žižek’s political ontology will be put forward with a particular emphasis on the undecidability question. In that context, this section will concentrate on Žižekian projections on the practice of politics.

Furthermore, my own critical assessment of Žižek’s standpoint in terms of the relation between his discussion of the undecidability issue and political phenomena will be presented.

Before turning to my evaluation of Žižek, I will underline Žižek’s concern for *realpolitik* in four subsections: the Žižekian contrast between the act and acting, Žižek’s view of the act as revolution, Žižek’s stance on capitalism, and class struggle.

3.5.1. The Act vs. Acting

To begin with, the distinction made by Žižek between the act proper and acting must be highlighted in order to understand his position with respect to the practice of politics. At that point of analysis, Žižek considers acting as strategic, ‘rational’, pragmatic, calculative, technical and piecemeal. In Lacanian vocabulary, acting has meaning within the sphere of the symbolic.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the Žižekian act is defined in terms of the Real. It is performed in order to go beyond the symbolic and recreate a new order. In this sense, that kind of act is nothing other than a critical encounter with the Real. Through prioritising the act proper, Žižek insists that (strategic) acting is absorbed by the symbolic and has nothing to do with political change in real sense. In that respect, the act ends up with a radical break from the symbolic order.

In referring to Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek distinguishes the act from acting (out): “[while] acting out is still a symbolic act ... addressed to the big Other ... a ‘passage to act’ [*passage à l’acte*, in Lacan’s terminology] suspends the dimension of the big Other, as the act is transposed into the dimension of the Real” (*FTKN*: 139).

As Oliver Marchart underscores, the distinction between the act and acting corresponds to the differentiation between the ontological level of the political and the ontic level of politics (in Bowman & Stamp, 2007: 103). In other words, the act proper is defined within the ontological field of the political, whereas acting is active in the ontic level of politics.

This type of separation is closely related to the Kantian differentiation between the universes of phenomena and noumena, and this parallelism will be analysed in the following chapter in detail. The act proper constitutes a component of the noumena, whilst acting out is a part of phenomena sphere.

To put it more blatantly, any example of acting occurs in accordance with temporal and spatial limitations, and hence it is accessible through experience. On the other hand, the act proper can not be executed and grasped within the phenomenal world; rather, it has a transcendental character. In that sense, Žižek privileges the politics of the Real at the expense of practical politics. What he

stresses is that acting leads to nothing but reproduction of the symbolic order. Žižek's differentiation between the act and acting and prioritisation of the former at the expense of the latter allows us to consider him a transcendentalist political thinker. Particularly by the mid 1990s, Žižek combined his particular version of Marxist thought with transcendentalism by referring to Schelling and especially Kant. As a result, he has started to emphasise the politics of the Real at the expense of *realpolitik*.

Even though he is critical of the symbolic order, namely the capitalist world order, his suggestion of how to fight against capitalism – to be more precise, the act proper – has nothing to do with the symbolic. Consequently, his attention paid to the act remains epic, ambiguous, and hypothetical. In other words, he can not present any satisfying projection for practical politics. On the contrary, he privileges the undecidable nature of the act of decision. In this sense, undecidability is an indispensable feature of the act, because otherwise, the act would be defined in the symbolic. More clearly speaking, what allows the act to be against the existing symbolic order is nothing but the undecidability attached to it. That kind of ambivalence is also intrinsic to Žižek's analyses of capitalism and class struggle. Moreover, as noted by Lacan, since the mere successful example of the act is suicide, we have no possibility of successful or complete acts within the domain of reality. Hence, Žižek offers solely the politics of impossibility. In this sense, although some of his diagnoses on the contemporary world order make sense, what he says about the means for struggling against the existing political order loses its meaning, to a certain extent. Particularly, his stress on the undecidable politics of the Real makes his projections on the practice of politics almost totally irrelevant.

3.5.2. The Act as Revolution

In light of such an analysis of the act of decision, it is understood that Žižek considers the act proper as a consequence of the moment of madness. The reason for this is that, as long as the subject acts in accordance with rational principles, this sort of action takes place within the governing rules of the symbolic. In order

to create a radical break in the symbolic order, therefore, rational elements moulding any activity of the subject must be gotten rid of entirely.

In Tony Myers' words, "it is an act of madness in which one withdraws from the world, risking not only any possible return but more fundamentally what one will return to" (2003: 60). In other terms, Žižek employs an all-or-nothing logic of the act. In that respect, Žižek presumes, the act proper is revolutionary by definition. Since the act of decision solely aims at toppling the existing symbolic order, the only form of successful act ends with revolution. Geoff Boucher accentuates this line of argumentation as follows: "As Žižek explains, the archetypal Act is a political revolution. Yet, it follows from Žižek's construction of the opposition between Symbolic Order and the Real that it must happen 'in the Real,' through the unilateral declaration of a new social order" (2008: 211).

As undecidability is inherent to the character of the act of decision, any act proper can not guarantee the revolution. But the argumentation linking the successful act of decision to the revolutionary moment is just a 'fantasy' of Žižek's. Moreover, the act of decision is regarded as an instrument of the politics of the Real, but it is claimed to bring a new 'Symbolic' order at the end. In that sense, the act of decision takes place and purports to (re)generate a new order within the conditions of the Symbolic. However, combining Lacan's observations in therapies throughout his career with the elements of political practice, Žižek concludes that the act of decision has an undecidable character, and, in this sense, he says nothing about the possible forms of order that would be achieved after the revolution.

Thus, an analysis of Žižek on the revolutionary (and undecidable) act of decision has significant shortcomings in terms of its applicability to concrete political phenomena. His formulations on the possibilities of the political change stemming from an undecidable act of decision have no relevance to the contemporary debate on emancipatory politics. As is easily seen, to a certain extent his emphasis and central role associated with the moment of undecidability reduce the meaning of Žižekian work on the transformation of the current world order. This radical deficiency will be further discussed in the subsequent subsections of this section.

3.5.3. Žižek on Capitalism

Similar to his other analyses, Žižek's scrutiny of the issue of capitalism also suffers from significant contradictions. The basis of those contradictions is Žižek's ambivalent and arbitrary explanation of the Real. The concept of the Real was developed by Lacan towards the end of his career, and due to this, the notion of the Real may have some 'blind spots' in a theoretical sense. In this respect, Žižek moulds this conceptualisation of the Real according to his own subjective interests.

One of the most significant examples of such manipulations made by Žižek is about the nature of the Real. In Lacanian vocabulary, the Real is defined as the sphere that can not be symbolised. On the other hand, Žižek combines such an understanding of the Real with his political ontology. And in this respect, he attributes an antagonistic nature to the Real. However, Žižek does not bring a detailed account of such a category of antagonism. Rather, as in the case of the Real conception, the antagonistic Real is also claimed to be inaccessible. This inaccessibility (and its result, undecidability) mystifies Žižek's account of the contemporary political phenomena, and in that respect capitalism is not an exception.

As implied above, Žižek analyses capitalism contradictorily. For instance, in *The Ticklish Subject*, he argues that capitalism is a reality within the symbolic order; in other words, the capitalist world order is the dominant symbolic order. In a nutshell, Žižek notes that capitalist ideology creates consciousness (true or false) and this ends with social practices or beliefs.

As formulated by Matthew Sharpe, in Žižek's analysis, ideologies as well as the interpellating of subjects into a set of symbolic understandings and mandates necessarily turns around the structuration of regimes of illicit jouissance (in Boucher, Glynos & Sharpe, 2005: 151). In simpler terms, capitalist ideology, Žižek suggests, interpellates the subjects and seizes them in the degree of the unconscious.

In Lacanian terminology, subjects' political enjoyment is structured by fantasies, and in this sense subjects' "fundamental fantasies" serve to foreclose

their own existential finitude and ideological fantasies conceal from the subjects the traumatic Real of social antagonism (*SOI*: 45). In other words, the capitalist ideology is claimed to cover the undecidability surrounding the subjects: by doing so, it makes the subjects involved with acting (out), not the act proper.

On the other hand, in *The Fragile Absolute* and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Žižek considers capitalism to be the Real. In his words:

Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real; ‘reality’ is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive process; while the Real is the inexorable ‘abstract’ spectral logic of Capital which determines what goes on in social reality. The gap is palpable in the way the modern economic situation of a country is considered to be good and stable by international financial experts even when the great majority of people have a lower standard of living than they ever did before reality doesn’t matter, what matters is the situation of Capital (*FA*: 15-16).

Even though the dominant ideology shapes the consciousness (true or false) and social reality (particularly identity politics), capitalism overdetermines the social reality in a considerably undecidable manner. So, he associates capitalism with a transcendental status having nothing to do with socio-political ‘reality’. Thus, Žižek’s formulations on the struggle against the capitalist world order are directly affected by this new stance.

M. Sharpe notes that, as with Marx’s immanent critique of capitalism which turns his location of immanent contradictions around in its structural logics, Žižek hopes, through recourse to the category of the Real, to be able to negotiate a conceptual unification of a descriptive and prescriptive political theory; to traverse the fantasy in late capitalism is to identify with these symptomatic points (in Boucher, Glynos & Sharpe, 2005: 162). More blatantly, the way of fighting capitalism is nothing but the mere act of decision, because such an act proper is the mere example of the critical encounter with the Real. Hence, to put an end to the capitalist world order which is projected as the Real, there must be an act of decision over the Real itself.

Again and again, Žižek addresses the undecidable act of decision as the means for initiating political change. But both his theorisations of capitalism and

the act proper as the Real suffer from serious shortcomings. In relating them to the sphere of the Real, Žižek confuses the socio-political reflections of his standpoint.

Particularly, in the case of capitalism, Žižek's viewpoint is so paradoxical that he can not ascertain whether capitalism is a defining component of the symbolic or the Real. This contradiction further complicates his understanding of the transformation of capitalism, social antagonism and transformative political agency.

As a result, due to his unduly vague connection made between capitalism and the Real, ruled by the undecidability, Žižek's outlook on the contemporary dominant political order is condemned to be regarded as the politics of impossibility.

3.5.4. Žižek on Class Struggle

Another significant issue addressed by Žižek is class struggle; again, we come across an unclear picture. In *Mapping Ideology*, Žižek engages in an uneasy synthesis between the Marxian concept of 'class struggle' with the category of the Lacanian Real. Opposing the classical understanding of the classes that views these as outcomes of historical transformations of the societies, Žižek argues that classes are the constituents of nothing but the Real.

Žižek's position in *Mapping Ideology* is that "class struggle" is not a locatable historical phenomenon that underlies, informs or gives meaning to people's socio-political experiences; rather, it is a traumatic antagonism that can not be symbolised because it rends the socio-political fabric.

On the other hand, every social phenomenon is an effect of this never-symbolisable cause, Žižek specifies: "a vain attempt to erase or 'repress' its politically traumatic insistence" (in Boucher, Glynos & Sharpe, 2005: 153). In other words, even though it has no direct reflection on the Symbolic, the class struggle influences the symbolic order implicitly.

At this point of analysis, a series of critical questions comes to mind: If class struggle constitutes the Real to a certain extent, how can it affect the symbolic without symbolising itself? If the class struggle suffers from "the bar of

repression”, how can this bar be gotten rid of in order to symbolise the class struggle? If the classes as well as capitalism are the Lacanian Real, how can we explain the symbolic practices and institutions directly while constituting these categories?

In other words, owing to the existence of these socio-political practices and institutions, it can be concluded that both the classes (and so the class struggle itself) and capitalism are definitive components of the symbolic order, not the Real. In associating capitalism and class struggle with the Lacanian Real, Žižek tries, to a certain extent, to provide his inaccessible understanding of the undecidable act of decision with some meaning.

But, in my opinion, he can not achieve this aim; what he gets in the end is nothing but further complications of the categories of capitalism and class struggle. In other words, he applies his privilege on undecidability to capitalism and class struggle in one way or another.

Consequently, his account of the contemporary world order and any possibility of political (emancipatory) change remain ambivalent, having no relevance with practical politics.

3.5.5. Final Overview: Žižekian Decisionism

Before completing this section and chapter, I must present my general idea on Žižek’s understanding of undecidability and its place within his standpoint with respect to the contemporary political agenda. An essentially antonymous approach to the act of decision is the most significant tendency followed by him, and the linkage between this propensity with Kantian philosophy will be further analysed and discussed in the following chapter.

More plainly speaking, his view of the act of decision as both impossible and necessary for any political change underlines the fundamental line of paradox contaminating his political ontology. However, for Žižek, this inconsistency is the defining feature of the act of decision: “This is the Lacanian act in which the abyss of absolute freedom, autonomy and responsibility coincides with absolute necessity”, or in which “I feel obliged to perform the act as an automaton, without

reflection (I simply have to do it, it is not a matter of strategic deliberation)” (in Barnard & Fink, 2002: 69).

In other words, even if I am free to choose not to perform the act of decision, I ‘must’ involve myself with the decision act at the same time. This necessity of acting, as underlined by Žižek, has nothing to do with strategic rationality; otherwise, we can not talk about any possibility of absolute freedom. To put it more precisely, Žižek concludes his argumentation with a dramatically decisionist stance, particularly in terms of his analysis connecting undecidability and the act of decision.

At that point, Ian Parker sees an interesting similarity between Žižekian political ontology on the basis of the act of decision and Schmitt’s political philosophy. As noted by Parker, the antonymous nature of the act with respect to the kernel of necessity and freedom “seems to draw him to Schmittian ultrapolitics, and [Žižek] tries to retrieve some authentic moment from it, as if he were trying to capture and symbolise a notion of decision in relation to order before it had been foreclosed from politics, before it appeared in the Real as something akin to fascism” (2004: 97). Schmitt’s ontological extremism derives a political theory of normal order from a moment of exceptional decision and an act of unlimited authority that emanates from nothingness and has no content other than the intensity of its ontogenetic force (Prozorov, 2007: 230). Such Schmittian extremism considering the decision act as exception is shared by Žižek.

Disregarding any decisiveness of ethical foundations, Carl Schmitt argues that the consequences of the act of decision itself constitute the very core of ethics. Following Lacan’s ethical theory, Žižek embraces such an outlook of decision. According to Žižek, a Schmittian approach focuses not on the impossible attempt to establish the fact of ethicality of decision, but on affirming the decision itself as an ethical act, whose authenticity is conditioned by “going through” both the abyss of undecidability and its violent effacement; similarly, in Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis, existential decisionism urges one not to “give ground relative to one’s desire” because of the impossibility of its grounding (*OWB*: 200-205).

Moreover, like in Schmitt’s decisionist standpoint, Žižek considers the decision to be the sole act able to go beyond the emptiness of the political

stemming from the constitutive lack. In Žižek's vocabulary, simultaneously with any exclusion or authoritative nomination of a *positive other* (the enemy as something existentially alien to the self), the decision of the friend-enemy distinction traverses a space of negative alterity, the void of undecidability, where neither the self nor the other yet exists (Žižek, 1999b: 19-20).

It is this radical alterity that is indeed ontologically prior to the self, but it must logically also be prior to any positive figure of the other; that is, what precedes and exceeds the identities of both self and the other is quite literally the void, the "background of emptiness", whose only characteristic is its radical difference from any positivity (Prozorov, 2007: 234).

Furthermore, Schmitt's emphasis on the political performed within exceptional fields of the borderline separating the political and its exteriority is endorsed by Žižek. The ethos of insecure life, as employed by Carl Schmitt, connects with Žižek's "ethics of the Real", which is squarely Schmittian in its decisionist emphasis on the *act* as a radical rupture in the existing space of possibilities that takes the infinite risk of willing the impossible (Prozorov, 2007: 237). In light of such an analysis, it may be inferred that Žižek's standpoint prioritising the decisionist pole suffers from a biased reading of contemporary political order and possibility of political change. Obviously, Žižek's analysis on the interrelationship between the moment of undecidability and the decision act makes his stance, in terms of the practice of politics, agent-centric.

But this agent-centrism has nothing to do with the classical liberal approach or rational choice theory centralising the human (technical) rationality governed by the dynamics of the market. Rather, Žižek centralises the irrationality of the political agent, because in so far as the political actor decides over the undecidability irrationally, it can trigger any possibility of political change in a radical sense. As a last remark, let me quote Geoff Boucher's brilliant summary of Žižek's problematic political outlook uniting undecidability and subjective decision act: "Žižek's philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity necessarily leads to ethical decisionism and political voluntarism, cognitive irrationalism and the transposition of individual psychology (madness) onto social formations" (2008: 220).

CHAPTER IV

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF TENSION BETWEEN LACLAU AND ŽIŽEK ON THE ISSUE OF UNDECIDABILITY

4.1. Some Introductory Remarks

Having dealt with the approaches of Laclau and Žižek to the concept of undecidability respectively, in this chapter, I endeavour to engage in a critically philosophical (even ontological) analysis of the theoretical interaction taking place between Laclau and Žižek, with particular emphasis on the issue of undecidability.

In this sense, the work entitled *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (CHU), co-authored by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, plays a crucial role in shedding light on the intellectual stances of Laclau and Žižek. The critical (sometimes polemical) dialogues taking place between them especially inform us in terms of the main lines of disagreements.

This interactive study is also significant with respect to illuminating the philosophical and theoretical backgrounds feeding these two thinkers in a comparative manner. Hence, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* constitutes one of the most fundamental reference points in my own philosophical-comparative analysis problematising the outlooks of Laclau and Žižek on the undecidability question.

But this is just a starting point, because as this chapter deepens with regard to its level of inquiry, we will see that those seeming discrepancies between Laclau and Žižek on the undecidability issue form just one side of the coin. More significantly (or at least equally importantly), Laclau and Žižek share a relatively common Kantian inheritance, especially within their scrutiny of the free act of decision under the circumstances presented by undecidability.

Some theoretical seeds of this concurrence are sown in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, but, as mentioned above, this text is just a starting point. Essentially, in their mature phases of intellectual careers, the underlying share of Kantian premises becomes more evident. In this sense, throughout this chapter it will be argued that the approaches employed by Laclau and Žižek are different in their discursive manners, whereas these apparently diverse standpoints can be analysed generally by means of Kantian tenets.

4.2. Laclau vs. Žižek: Discursively Strong, but Essentially Trivial Divergences

As mentioned above, in this section, the main facets distinguishing the theoretical positions of Laclau and Žižek will be presented, particularly by referring to the dialogues taking place between them throughout *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. To begin, I will deal with their relatively different grasps of Lacan. Opposing the somewhat transcendental Žižekian interpretation, Laclau argues that Lacan is a post-structuralist because he criticises the transparency of the linguistic sign, and in this respect plays a crucial role in the emergence of deconstruction. Thus, deconstruction extends the field of the undecidable to quasi-infrastructures by the help of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (*CHU*: 74). Hence, in Laclau's thought, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides important openings in the analysis of how hegemonic action takes place in the terrain of undecidability (or open intertextuality, in the vocabulary of the deconstructionist attitude) However, in another work, Žižek says almost the opposite:

...this Lacanian notion of act also enables us to break with the deconstructionist ethics of the irreducible finitude, of how our situation is always that of a displaced being caught in a constitutive lack, so that all we can do is heroically assume this lack, the fact that our situation is that of being thrown into an impenetrable finite context; the corollary of this ethics, of course, is that the ultimate source of totalitarian and other catastrophes is man's presumption that he can overcome this condition of finitude, lack and displacement, and 'act like God', in a total transparency, overcoming his constitutive division. Lacan's answer to this is that absolute/unconditional acts do occur, but not in the (idealist) guise of a self-transparent gesture performed by a subject with a pure Will who

fully intends them – they occur on the contrary, as a totally unpredictable *tuche*, a miraculous event which shatters our lives (*TS*: 376).

Facing such a reading of Lacan, Laclau claims that Žižek privileges the moment of necessity, and on the basis of this, he locates Lacan within the rationalist (and also Cartesian) tradition of the Enlightenment (*CHU*: 75). In this sense, Žižek is assumed to prioritise the category of necessity at the expense of impossibility.

Another related theoretical differentiation between Laclau and Žižek is on the equivalence between the moment of decision and the moment of madness. As we remember, Laclau, following Kierkegaard, asserts that under the conditions determined by structural undecidability, the subject's act of decision is nothing other than a mad activity having no rational basis. But Žižek corrects Laclau by affirming that the moment of decision is a moment of madness precisely insofar as there is no big Other to provide the ultimate guarantee, or in other words, the ontological cover for the subject's decision (*CHU*: 258).

Žižek also seems unsatisfied with Laclau's considerably contingent analysis of the impossibility of the society and asks him a number of critical questions:

What if the political itself is also split / barred in its very notion? What if it can be operative only insofar as it represses its radically contingent nature, insofar as it undergoes a minimum of naturalisation? What if the essentialist lure is irreducible: we are never dealing with the Political at the level of its own notion, with political agents, who fully endorse their contingency and the way out of this deadlock via notions like strategic essentialism is definitely condemned to fail? (*CHU*: 100)

By asking those questions, Žižek implies that Laclau's analysis of the impossibility of society mitigates its own degree of contingency; the reason for this is its avoidance of involving itself with any sort of essentialism. On the contrary, for Žižek, a determinate level of essentialism is indispensable for the constitution of the political, because the act of decision within the field of the political can not be neutral. Rather, it always takes a side at the expense of others. In this light, the political itself is as split as the social.

In response to the issue of minimum naturalisation, Laclau says that although positivisation is unavoidable, nothing prevents this positivisation from symbolising impossibility as such, rather than concealing it through the illusion of taking us beyond it; this minimum naturalisation is different from impossibility with a positive differential content (*CHU*: 199). As is easily seen, Laclau and Žižek have different levels of analysis in conceiving the question of impossibility: while Žižek holds a more transcendental stance, Laclau stands in a spatiotemporal position.

Under the circumstances of such a separation, Laclau accuses Žižek of attempting to determine a systemic level which would totalise social relations and be universal in and for itself. On the other hand, Laclau declares that what he tries to do is elaborate on a notion of universality which would be the result of some form of interaction between particularities (*CHU*: 207).

In this regard, it can be inferred that, even though Žižek employs categories like impossibility, undecidability and contingency, the method he utilises is entirely deterministic as well as essentialist. As an orthodox Leninist, Žižek answers, the ultimate question is not which particular content hegemonises empty universality; the ultimate question is which ‘specific’ content has to be excluded so that the empty form of universality emerges as the battlefield for hegemony (*CHU*: 110).

By claiming this, Žižek notes that Laclau’s notion of hegemony describes a universal mechanism of ideological cement and that it is a neutral notion that can analyse all socio-political orders, because, for him, Laclau has nothing to do with a strict separation between fact and value (*CHU*: 79-80). As can be easily guessed, Laclau does not accept this criticism and puts forward the argument that his conception of hegemony engages in both transcendental analytic and historical condition at the same time, and, however, none of them (*CHU*: 200).

In other words, the outmoded differentiation made between ahistorical transcendentalism and radical historicism should be overcome, because both terms necessitate each other. In this sense, Laclau argues that Žižek still pursues such a demarcation of transcendental and historical fields, and he situates class struggle to the sphere of the transcendental (this is clearly privileged by Žižek), whilst he sees

postmodernism in the field of the historical, which should be abandoned as soon as possible. Such a differentiation, held by Žižek, of these two areas is misleading, because as Laclau notes, the entities (e.g., class struggle, class, capitalism and so forth) around which Žižek structures his discourse are fetishes and do not have precise meanings within the socio-political universe (*CHU*: 211).

The main source of this controversy between Laclau and Žižek is their distinct understandings of Hegel. According to Laclau, Žižek does not consider Hegel's 'panlogicism' and neglects the fact that Hegel's philosophy forms a 'closed' system which radically reduces contingency, since the passage from one position to the next is always, by definition, necessary (*CHU*: 60). As a reply to such a classical critique of Hegelian philosophy, Žižek highlights:

Laclau's position is all too crude, and misses the (already mentioned) key feature of Hegelian dialectics: the ultimate mystery of what Hegel calls 'positing the presuppositions' is the mystery of how contingency retroactively 'sublates' itself into necessity – how, through historical repetition, an initially contingent occurrence is 'transubstantiated' into the expression of a necessity: in short, the mystery of how, through 'autopoietic' self-organization, order emerges out of chaos (*CHU*: 227).

In this way, Žižek, by means of Hegelian dialectics, stresses that necessity and contingency entail each other under the principle of the simultaneity of the opposites. In a related manner, as opposed to Laclau's attack in terms of Žižek's advocacy of Cartesian cogito regarding the self as transparent, Žižek reminds readers that there is a long tradition within Cartesian studies of demonstrating that the gap forever separates the cogito itself from the *res cogitans* (*CHU*: 226).

Hence, it is seen that Žižek endorses Lacanian Cartesianism, developed under the heavy influence of Hegelian analysis of the self on the basis of the master-slave dialectic in which the recognition of the other is considered to be vital for the constitution of the subjectivity. In one sentence, Laclau envisages Hegelian philosophy as purely positive and deterministic, while Žižek underlines the negativist side of Hegelian dialectics. What is more, for Laclau, Hegel was caught in a double movement: on the one hand, he tries to submit his model to the whole world of differences; on the other hand, the latter reacts by subverting the workings of reason. As he further adds, Žižek transforms this ambiguity in the

unilateralisation of one of its two sides, and he also does not take it sufficiently into account that whenever Hegel makes his project explicit, it is always the panlogistic side that predominates (*CHU*: 296).

Last and most importantly (and also most ironically), the distinction taking place between Žižek and Laclau is a *hidden Kantianism* (in Žižek's vocabulary) endorsed by Laclau in engaging with the issue of undecidability. Throughout *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Žižek underlines this 'mistaken' stance embraced by Laclau several times. As mentioned above, Laclau points out that the process of the constitution of hegemony and, in a related manner, the subjectivisation of the individual identity, suffer from a constitutive crack. As a result, full closure of both hegemonic formation as well as the subject is impossible. Rather, such processes of constitution are endlessly approximated (e.g., "democracy to come"). In other words, each and every dislocation, which is condemned to fail, takes place while the sedimentation of the previous hegemonic orders and subject positions is still there. In this sense, in order to highlight this standpoint, Žižek quotes Judith Butler: "Inevitable as it is that a political organisation will posit the possible filling of that [empty place of the universal] as an ideal, it is equally inevitable that it will fail to do so". Having stressed this argument, Žižek notes that this is the logic of the ideal to be endlessly approximated that is underlying the *Kantianism* of both Butler and Laclau (*CHU*: 257). Since fullness of the society is impossible, what we have is an endless struggle between specific elements claiming to stand in for the imaginary (as well as impossible) totality. This will bring out nothing but partial solutions to the particular problems. Starting from such a point of view, Žižek raises some fundamental questions for Laclau:

Does this solution not invoke the Kantian logic of the infinite approach to the impossible fullness as a kind of 'regulative idea'? Does it not involve the resigned / cynical stance of 'although we know we will fail, we should persist in our search' – of an agent which knows that the global goal towards which it is striving is impossible, that its ultimate effort will necessarily fail, but which none the less accepts the need for this global Spectre as a necessary lure to give it the energy to engage in solving partial problems? What about changing the very fundamental structural principle of society, as happened with the emergence of the 'democratic invention'? (*CHU*: 93)

In more classical terms, Laclau sees no possibility of achieving full emancipation for the whole of humanity. Instead, in each and every historical era, any search for overall emancipation is frustrated by minor power relations. And interestingly, such a contingent scene of social and political change is the sole source of freedom. The reason behind this is that in a transparent society, there is no room for any subjective intervention in the formation of order. To put it more blatantly, any hegemonic struggle ending with a deficient totality limits human freedom, but at the same time it is the mere foundation of freedom which makes it possible. Žižek again links this argument to Kantian logic and attacks it in the following way:

... [Laclau's] reasoning reproduces almost verbatim Kant's argumentation, from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, about the necessary limitation of human cognitive capacities: God, in his infinite wisdom, limited our cognitive capacities in order to make us free responsible agents, since, if we were to have direct access to the noumenal sphere, we would no longer be free, but would turn into blind automata. Human imperfection is thus, for Kant, the positive condition of freedom (*CHU*: 317-318).

We can not accomplish full emancipation because we must not, because full emancipation would be the end of any type of freedom. Such a line of thought echoes the famous Kantian motto of "you can, because you must". Having emphasised this point, Žižek blames Laclau for using idealisations of Kantian ethical theory (*CHU*: 318).

In this respect, Laclau makes use of Kantian formal logic of the ideal in his understanding of social and political change. When we come to the issue of undecidability, he adds Kierkegaard's dictum that "the moment of decision is the moment of madness".

In other words, the Kantian viewpoint that an individual's cognitive incapacities result in his or her freedom is associated with Kierkegaard's assumption that the prerequisite of making free decisions is being mad.

To sum up, it seems that there is a significant level of dissidence between Laclau and Žižek particularly in terms of the problem of undecidability and the decision-making mechanism of the subject.

Laclau utilises a ‘postmodern’ language in dealing with the decision process, and in this regard he prioritises categories like the contingency of deciding activity, the role of madness in making decisions freely, the “logic of spurious infinity”, the inevitability of endless approximation and so on. In contrast, Žižek’s stance appears to constitute the other pole. He employs the Cartesian understanding of cogito, the philosophical findings of German Idealism and the transcendental theory of subjectivisation, ending up with nothing but the subject having ability to achieve emancipation in one way or another (or to put an end to capitalism).

Under those circumstances, there ‘seems’ to be a radical divergence between Laclau and Žižek.³³ But is this really so? My answer to this question is ‘no’. Although they use quite different vocabularies, lines of thought and conceptual frameworks, they share a fundamental intellectual source: Kantian philosophy.

This crucial linkage between Laclau and Žižek allows them to conclude that there is no ultimate objective ground for a decision, since those grounds are always and already retroactively constructed from the horizon of a decision.³⁴ Despite their routes being distinct, the final destination they reach is the same. As the title of this section clearly demonstrates, the tension between Laclau and Žižek takes place at the discursive level.

When we look at it more deeply, noteworthy similarities appear with respect to their involvement with the issue of undecidability. The following section will be devoted to clarifying this Kantian basis shared by Laclau and Žižek, with particular attention paid to their analyses of the undecidability issue.

³³ This ‘so-called’ divergence between Laclau and Žižek is also underlined by Glyn Daly. According to him, the tensions that exist between these perspectives [those of Laclau and Žižek respectively] can not be reduced to degrees of emphasis and/or analytical objectives. Rather they reflect basic philosophical and theoretical differences over the interpretation of such notions as totality, necessity, suture, traversing the fantasy, and so on. These differences have precipitated distinct views as regards the authenticity and effectiveness of political action and the nature of political logics (2009: 279).

³⁴ Judith Butler criticises the common theoretical framework shared by Laclau and Žižek centred around the conception of the undecidability: “‘gender is always a doing’ or ‘a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’. In this context, processes of repetition and iterability, not singular acts of decision, provide the route to new constructions of one’s identity” (1999: 33, 44, 179-188).

4.3. Kantian Basis of Laclau and Žižek

In this part, as its title clearly implies, the Kantian ground shared by Laclau and Žižek will be examined. In each subsection, a significant point borrowed from Kantian philosophy by Laclau and Žižek will be exposed and discussed. Particularly those Kantian points moulding the analyses of Laclau and Žižek on the issue of undecidability will constitute the foundation of this section.

To be more practical, I will not touch upon all ontological and ethical roots coming from Kantian philosophy. Rather, theoretical elements related to the problem of undecidability and its role in the subject formation process will be dealt with. Let me start with a central Kantian tenet shared by both Laclau and Žižek: the category of antinomy.

4.3.1. Privilege Given to Kantian Antinomy

One of the most basic Kantian legacies utilised by Laclau and Žižek is the category of antinomy.³⁵ The use of Kantian antinomy is considerably central for Laclau and Žižek, because the seemingly contradictory suggestions offered by their theoretical frameworks gain meaning with the help of the Kantian conceptualisation called ‘antinomy’. This is also valid for their scrutiny of the undecidability. But before turning to deeper analysis, I must briefly explain the Kantian category of antinomy. Kant depicts the antinomy concept in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. When we improperly approach the categories which are constitutive for understanding, antinomies arise. As Kant obviously put it, precepts and concepts are both necessary for proper understanding and there should be an equilibrium between these two spheres. But where our perceptions do not work, antinomies transcending our empirical reason are applied to the universe of both experience and pure thought.

³⁵ Emphasis on the Kantian antinomies shared by Laclau and Žižek stems from the central role played by the Kantian (essentially mathematical) antinomies in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This point is stressed by A. Kiarina Kordela in the following way: “The Kantian antinomies are central to the entire Lacanian conceptualisation of the formation of the subject and of discourse, not only to the identification of human sexual difference” (1999: 794).

Kant classifies two kinds of antinomies: mathematical antinomies and dynamic antinomies. Both propositions of mathematical antinomies are unverifiable. A classical example is, “The world has both spatial and temporal limitations,” and “the world has no beginning and end, and no limits in space...” Both sides of this antinomy can not be validated by means of perceptions. Instead, as Žižek stresses, they both seek to apply categories transcendental for the field of experience to adjudge of the real existence of objects that can never be given to sensible intuition (*TN*: 55). On the other hand, both sides of a dynamic antinomy can be true simultaneously. For instance, “There is no such thing as freedom,” and “causality according to nature is not the only causality operative to originate the phenomena of the world”. Propositions of dynamic antinomies can be conceived of because they are noumenal. In this sense, they are possible objects in terms of pure thought, but they do not really exist at all. In Kantian terms, they do not belong to the universe of phenomena.

Both Laclau and Žižek make use of mathematical antinomies in understanding social and political contradictions. Since both sides of those antinomies (or discrepancies in real life) can never be substantiated totally, the antagonistic relationship between those two sides remains everlasting. In this sense, Laclau’s defence of the endless approximation of the hegemonic order and subjectivisation comes to be much more meaningful. On the other hand, since both spheres of mathematical antinomies are out of the world of phenomena, we, as real subjects, can never fully handle them. This ends with nothing other than the unavoidable failure of any attempt of social and political closure in a total manner.

Žižek also employs the category of antinomy in comprehending social and political antagonisms. He especially applies the antinomy concept to the apparently inconsistent nature of the contemporary stage of capitalism. In this sense, antinomy constitutes an instrument for both grasping and criticising current problems affecting whole mankind. This point is brilliantly expressed by Matthew Sharpe:

Žižek, knowingly and avowedly, prioritises ‘antinomy’ over ‘contradiction’ (Marx) or ‘overdetermination’ (Althusser) in his attempt to (re)generate a species of immanent critique ... Žižek [nominates] antinomy as the decisive category in his immanent critique that underlies

his manifold sociotheoretical and political inconsistencies, and which ensures that he can never fully put to rest the spectre of total critique (2004: 207, 209).

When we come to the issue of undecidability, we find a similar picture. Even though it seems contradictory, undecidability and decision constitute two sides of a mathematical antinomy. Both of them can not be confirmed in the real sense, but they constitute two antagonistic poles. Additionally, despite the evident antagonism between these two, each side makes the other one possible. Without undecidability, decision becomes impossible, and without decision, undecidability comes to be empty and meaningless. Therefore, Laclau makes use of the category of relatively structural undecidability, and Žižek deploys a somewhat economic determinism; meanwhile, neither thinker totally renounces decisionist voluntarism. More clearly speaking, both Laclau and Žižek attempt to solve the tension between undecidability and decision with the aid of the category of antinomy. By doing so, they aim to carry out a more balanced conclusion without succumbing to either of these poles. In this sense, when we see the parallel use of Kantian antinomy by Laclau and Žižek, it becomes clear that their grasps of the antagonistic relationship between undecidability and decision are alike. But this similarity is not sufficient; rather, it is just a starting point in highlighting the theoretical association between Laclau and Žižek with the help of their Kantian legacy. In this context, a very special form of antinomy clarifying the uneasy character of undecidability issue will be examined, namely the antagonistic affiliation between ‘necessity’ and ‘impossibility’.

4.3.2. Necessary but Impossible

The difficult association between the categories of necessity and impossibility is applied to the processes of both hegemonic formation and the constitution of the subject. In both procedures, striving for full closure is necessary, but accomplishment of such a closure is impossible. That kind of implication is quite manifest for Laclau and throughout the chapter on Laclau, this linkage between necessity and impossibility has been underlined several times.

Žižek also utilises this type of outwardly inconsistent proposition, essentially in his analysis of act of decision.

The act of decision is a limit to the master signifier, but this limit makes the master signifier so-called total. In this sense, the act of decision makes the master-signifier at once necessary and impossible. In parallel, in the sphere of the symbolic, the act of decision comes to be necessary to highlight the antagonistic nature of it, whilst the act decision also prevents the symbolic from closing itself off totally.

Laclau reaches a similar conclusion even though he uses different vocabularies and theoretical instruments. He notes that the constitutive outside of any hegemonic formation makes it both possible and limited. It makes the borders of hegemony clear, and thus hegemony becomes possible and has a concrete meaning.

But at the same time, through challenging it permanently, the constitutive outside makes full closure of the hegemony impossible. In this regard, the constitutive outside is necessary for hegemony to exist, but the total completion of any hegemony also remains impossible due to the constitutive outside.

A similar line of argument is also valid for the relationship between undecidability and the act of decision.³⁶ As the word itself clearly manifests, ‘undecidability’ excludes the category of decision, because as long as the act of decision is there, we can not talk about any degree of undecidability.

Nevertheless, the category of undecidability is an indispensable precondition for the free act of decision. If there are overdetermined principles imposed so as to guide the subject in the process of deciding, then we have no possibility of a free act of decision. To put it in Kantian terms, undecidability is necessary for the free act of decision, whereas any act of decision turns out to be impossible in an undecidable ground.

³⁶ Lasse Thomassen highlights such an originally simultaneous existence of both necessity and impossibility by means of the conception of ‘heterogeneity’. He underlines, “Heterogeneity refers to the simultaneous condition of possibility and impossibility of hegemonic articulations, including antagonism ... accordingly, hegemony analysis and deconstruction can not be distinguished according to dualisms of possibility/impossibility, closure/contingency, or decision/undecidability” (2005: 304).

To put it differently, for both Laclau and Žižek, the act of decision is necessary for social-political change to happen. In this sense, the free procedure of decision-making exercised by the subject constitutes the mere motor of any transformation. But on the other hand, such a free act of decision is so challenging that it makes it impossible for the existing socio-political order to maintain itself eternally.

What is more, since the free act of decision is governed by the principle of undecidability, its existence within the given social-political order becomes impossible to comprehend (the act is a potential outside of the symbolic). However, the act of free decision-making comes to be necessary for the Real in order to realise its own antagonistic and undecidable character and for the symbolic to distinguish itself from the Real.

In both Lacanian terms of psychoanalysis (utilised by Žižek) and the Derridean vocabulary of deconstructive thought (employed by Laclau), the simultaneous and mutually-inclusive association taking place between the categories of necessity and impossibility turns out to be a central kernel.³⁷ Especially in clarifying the complicated relationship between undecidability and the act of decision, such a Kantian line of thought becomes so fruitful that Laclau and Žižek seem to go beyond this seemingly contradictory interconnection between undecidability and decision to a certain extent.

But that kind of theoretical exposition is still inadequate, because the issue of undecidability and its linkage with decision is significantly complex. In this sense, a very parallel Kantian analysis must be elaborated on: to be more precise, the issue of negativity.

The negativity of the subject and the negative nature of the act of decision will be the main theme of the following subsection, with particular attention drawn to the Kantian parallelism between Laclau and Žižek.

³⁷ François Raffoul (2008: 270-290) pays attention to the issue of the simultaneity of the necessity and impossibility of the decision within Derrida's line of thinking especially his ethical theory. In that sense, he argues that "Derrida often insists that ethics must be the experience and encounter of a certain impossible. A proposition all the more troubling, as it is proposed by Derrida in the context of a return precisely to the conditions of possibility of ethics" (2008: 270).

4.3.3. Emphasis on Negativity

As implied in the preceding subsection, the total closure of the subject is impossible, but striving for such an imaginary closure is the main requirement for the subject to emerge. Therefore, this kind of ‘failing’ process turns out to be the basis of subject formation. As formulated by Mladen Dolar, “the subject is precisely the failure to become the subject” (1993: 77-78). One of the most important philosophical grounds influencing Laclau and Žižek (most significantly, Lacan shaping the stances of these two theoreticians) is Kant’s epistemological portrait of subjectivity.

As opposed to the orthodox Cartesian viewpoint pursued by rationalists, Kant notes that there are two types of the self: the empirical self and the transcendental self. As its name implies, the empirical self is a particular sort of entity encountered in an experience (or in the universe of phenomena). For the subject, it is quite the same with any other objective thing in experience, and its patterns of behaviour are determined by the rules of nature on the basis of physical causality. On the other hand, we have ‘transcendental conditions’ and ‘synthetical operations’, which are empirical but able to make possible all empirical experience. Those transcendental syntheses are preconditions of any objects, including the empirical self. This conceptualisation constituting a prerequisite of any being, forms or functions of unity is called “transcendental self” in Kantian terminology. Nonetheless, since those (transcendental) categories apply solely to a sensuous content, these operations are condemned to be incomplete and imperfect.

This is also valid for the transcendental self’s grasp of empirical self. To put it more blatantly, the transcendental self fails to know the empirical self in a total way. Owing to this, any process of subjectivisation suffers from constitutive negativity in a phenomenal manner. This is a useful starting point for Lacan’s theory of ‘the subject of lack’. As Žižek underscores, the subject literally ‘is,’ in its very being (rather than as a matter of finite, limited thought and the shortcomings of its consciousness of self), nothing other than the void of negativity forever irreducible to any and every instance of determinate, phenomenal actualisation (*IR*: 124).

Such a limited grasp of the empirical self prevents any process of subjectivisation from being complete. Under those circumstances, there is always some degree of undecidability for each and every act of decision. More fundamentally, the category of undecidability comes to be constitutive of the moment of decision.

The reason is that the subject engages in the act of decision in order to go beyond existing undecidability, but as in the case of a negative relationship between 'two' selves, or the negative nature of any subjectivisation, any such attempt is totally susceptible to fail.

The dimension of negativity that for Lacan causes the failure of every process of subjectivisation is a crucial point for Žižek:

... For Lacan, negativity, a negative gesture of enthusiastic identification with a Cause ... Lacan implicitly changes the balance between Death and Resurrection in favour of Death ... Here Lacan parts company with St. Paul and Badiou: ... after Freud, one can not directly have faith in a Truth-Event; every such event ultimately remains a semblance obfuscating a preceding Void whose Freudian name is death drive (*TS*: 153-154).

As mentioned in this quotation and all other related references, the category of negativity is key for Lacan, especially for his theory of the subject. Hence, Laclau and Žižek, distinct but loyal followers of Lacan, naturally make use of this category and attach importance to it.

As in the case of the subject suffering from negativity and failing to achieve full closure, the act of decision also bears a negative relationship with its mere constitutive outside, namely the undecidability. In other words, the moment of undecidability indirectly structures the act of decision in a noticeably contingent manner. In this sense, each and every attempt to decide is condemned to fail or remain partial, incomplete and lacking. This point is accepted by both Laclau and Žižek.

In the following subsection, another Kantian notion related to the category of negativity and its influence over Laclau and Žižek, particularly with respect to their analyses of the issue of undecidability, will be exposed. This conception is 'void'.

4.3.4. Kantian Void and Category of Fundamental Fantasy

As mentioned in the previous subsection, the subject (or the transcendental self) has no capability of knowing the phenomenal side of itself. In that regard, the knowledge of the Thing is never full and perfect; on the contrary, there is always some degree of emptiness. Lacan's understanding of 'void' is borrowed from such a Kantian theoretical framework of the subject. Žižek overtly underlines this point:

To put it in Kantian terms: because of the inaccessibility of the Thing in itself, there is always a gaping hole in (constituted, phenomenal) reality, reality is never 'all', its circle is never closed and this void of the inaccessible Thing is filled out with phantasmagorias through which the trans-phenomenal Thing enters the stage of phenomenal presence – in short, prior to the Kantian turn, there can be no black hulk at the background of the stage (*EYS*: 136).

This void prevents the subject from completing or closing itself. But at the same time, the subject strives to fill this gap, and that kind of act which is condemned to fail is the motor of the subjectivisation process. The act of decision can be seen as an example of this situation. In each and every act of decision, the subject purposes to close itself off. However, there is always a particular level of undecidability obstructing this procedure, and that is why Laclau defines the subject as "the distance between the undecidability of the structure and the decision" (1996: 54). In other words, both Laclau and Žižek, following Lacanian psychoanalysis, recognize the existence of a constitutive void within any identification procedure; in addition, this void plays the role of the undecidability moment.

We now turn to the mechanisms of (so-called) filling this gap. Starting from the Kantian understanding of 'void', Lacan considers a critical Freudian conception, 'fundamental fantasy', as the vital instrument for filling the constitutive crack. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis describe, the fundamental fantasy shares a lowest common structural/functional denominator; it attempts to answer, through the fictions of personal myths, inquiries into matters of origins: Where do "I" come from? Why, and for what desires am "I" here?

What is the founding reason or purpose for sexuality? The obsession with origins is the defining feature of fundamental fantasy (in Johnston, 2008: 33-34).

In Kantian ontology, such necessary incompleteness (or void) is somehow contained by the aid of the transcendental illusion. In other words, the deficiencies in empirical knowledge of the phenomenal world are compensated for by the category of the transcendental self. But that type of illusion is completely different from all other fantasies. This critical distinction is highlighted by Alenka Zupančič:

... [T]ranscendental illusion is the name for something that appears where there should be nothing. It is not the illusion of something; it is not a false or distorted representation of a real object. Behind this illusion there is no real object; there is only nothing, the lack of an object. The illusion consists of 'something' in the place of 'nothing,' it involves deception by the simple fact that it is, that it appears (2002: 69).

As is clearly seen, Kant's conception of transcendental illusion and Freudian-Lacanian term of fundamental fantasy have similar connotations. Nevertheless, there is an uneasy relationship between the content of the fundamental fantasy (or transcendental illusion) and the functionality of it.

As mentioned above, the necessity of the fundamental fantasy for the subject to realise itself is eminent. But how is this fantasy formulated? Or, in Kantian vocabulary, what constitutes the ingredient of the transcendental illusion? Both Kant and Lacan have no clear-cut determinate answer to this question. In other words, the content of the fundamental fantasy or transcendental illusion remains contingent.

Such a line of thinking attributes a significant role to the moment of undecidability. It can be inferred that the content of the fundamental fantasy is undecidable in the phenomenal universe. Instead, it depends on the contingent process of the free decision act exercised by the subject. Again Laclau and Žižek agree on this point about the undecidable nature of the subjectivisation procedure.

Even though they use diverse terminologies, in essence what they argue is the same. The ideological-political fantasy fulfils the role of the constitution of the subject in an undecidable manner, and this idea stems from the functionality of 'transcendental schematism' in Kant's explanation of the subjective formation of

the phenomenal sphere. In the next subsection, the (undecidable) end result of fundamental fantasy (or transcendental illusion, in Kant's words) will constitute the main theme, and more precisely, the self-alienated/split subjectivity will be examined.

4.3.5. The Self-Alienated/Split Subjectivity

In this subsection, I will turn to the Kantian distinction between the transcendental self and the empirical self. By means of such a classification, Kant aims at surpassing Descartes and the overall Cartesian belief in the self-conscious (monolithic) subject, trapped by a tautological deadlock. What Kant recognised but Descartes could not avow, as Žižek notes, is the unbridgeable topological discord between the form 'I think' and the 'the substance which thinks' (*TN*: 13). In this sense, only after Kant, the Cartesian understanding of cogito has been challenged drastically and the tenet of split subjectivity has flourished. Due to the constitutive split dividing the phenomenal and transcendental sides of the self, the components of subjectivity remain incompatible, fractured and self-alienated.

What is the most significant effect of splitting subjectivity? Following the Kantian theme, Laclau and Žižek associate the cracked nature of subjectivity with its contingency and freedom. With the help of the undecidability offered by the unreachable and divided subjectivity, the subject is able to decide freely.³⁸ Otherwise, the possibility of a 'free' act of decision can not be discussed. In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek, referring to *The Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant's second *Critique*) underlines that "self-consciousness ... is possible only against the background of its own impossibility" and that "I retain my capacity of a spontaneous and autonomous agent precisely and only insofar as I am not accessible to myself as a Thing" (1993: 15). In other words, the split subject can be and remains free so long as it accepts the existence of that split.

³⁸ This point also echoes Derrida's tendency to employ Kantian ethical theory based on the understanding of the split subjectivity. Following Derridean deconstructionist thinking, William W. Sokoloff puts forward the claim that a decision grounded on the maintenance of identity negates decision; subjects certain of their identity do not decide (2005: 345). In light of such an analysis, it can be argued that a decision can not be determined by the fixed identity and in each and every act of decision, the subjectivity is interrupted and then a new subject is invented.

In spite of the necessity of the recognition of the split nature of the subjectivity, the subject still strives to accomplish a self-transparent centrum. This somewhat futile struggle for reaching full closure makes the subject possible. This further implies the undecidable character of any subjectivisation process. In the undecidable atmosphere provided by the split nature of the subjectivity, the subject deeply engages in the acting of decision to go beyond this undecidability.³⁹ Such an explanation relating split subjectivity to undecidability is shared by both Laclau and Žižek to a great extent.

In the following subsection, the category of ‘crack’ is applied to the more general fields of the epistemological and the ontological. Again, Kantian critical philosophy presents the road map for both Laclau and Žižek.

4.3.6. Crack and Finitude in both the Epistemological and the Ontological

As touched upon in the former subsection, the transcendental self has no capacity to know the empirical self within the phenomenal world. Here, categories like ‘crack’ and ‘finitude’ seem to be valid in the field of the epistemological. But this is not the end of the story. Those categories are also applied to the sphere of the ontological. In other words, the finite and split character of the subject in the symbolic is closely related to the Real of the subject’s ontological finitude and crack. Adrian Johnston writes:

The psychical antinomy plaguing the epistemologically finite subject is a symptomatic manifestation of its problematic (non-)rapport with the foreclosed ground of its ontological-material finitude, with the unimaginable nothingness out of which it emerged and to which it is destined to return. Succinctly put, direct experiential self-acquaintance with oneself as finite is exactly what remains forever barred (2008: 61).

³⁹ For the discussion relating this kind of understanding of incompleteness of the subject and justice, see Michael Dillon who argues that the advent of Justice and the possibility of politics arise only because that plethos is ineradicable; there is no then sovereign subject. Rather the self is a divided self from a beginning that is itself incomplete. It is only by virtue of that division, that very incompleteness, that the question of justice arises at all (1999: 157).

More clearly speaking, epistemological finitude is regarded as the unknowable restrictions going beyond all phenomena, and this echoes with an ontological-material finitude itself. As asserted by Kant, what makes such subjectivity finite is not only the epistemological dimension of its limitations, but at the same time, its ontological-material condition. In order to overcome that kind of dual limitation, Žižek, following the transcendental basis taken from Kant by Lacan, affirms that nothing other than the category of fantasy can fulfil this function:

The ultimate gap that gives rise to suture is ontological, a crack that cuts through reality itself: the ‘whole’ of reality can not be perceived/accepted as reality, so the price we have to pay for ‘normally’ situating ourselves within reality is that something should be foreclosed from it: this void of primordial repression has to be filled in – ‘sutured’ – by the spectral fantasy (*FRT*: 71)

Under the light of the preceding Kantian analyses borrowed by Laclau and Žižek, an ontological-material finitude is necessary for the epistemologically finite subject; on the other hand, such a finitude in the ontological field makes any possibility of the fullness of the subject invalid. The difficult interrelationship between these two types of finitude (or unknowableness) is clarified in the following manner:

... [T]he ultimate paradigm of the unknowable Thing, of its absolute alterity, is man himself, our neighbour – the other as person. Nature is simply unknown, its unknowableness is epistemological, whereas the Other qua another person is ontologically unknowable, its unknowableness is the way its very being is ontologically constituted, disclosed to us (*FTKN*: 199-200).

So, the level of finitude is deepened and radicalised through its spreading to the field of the ontological. Laclau and Žižek, following the Kantian theory of finitude, start with the subjectivity having no capability of obtaining complete knowledge of itself and end with the subjectivity unable to know the ‘outside’ reality, as well. Consequently, the level of undecidability is also intensified. The undecidability emerges as the governing principle in terms of not only the epistemological field but also the ontological-material sphere. In this sense, the act of decision gains meaning with regard to acquiring the knowledge of the

ontological-material conditions as well.^{40, 41} But, as can be easily guessed, such attempts of deciding in the face of the outside reality succumb to ultimate failure.

In the following subsection, another Kantian duality, which is dreadfully associated with the division made between the epistemological and the ontological, will be assessed. This duality is nothing but the famous distinction between the ‘phenomena’ and ‘noumena’.

4.3.7. Distinction between Phenomena and Noumena

The basis of the novelty offered by Kant to the history of thought is the effective combination of both the empirical factor and the universal and necessary factor. On the other hand, he stresses that the source of the knowledge is nothing other than mere experience. But here he does not talk about physically perfect perceptions. On the contrary, as Kant explains, there must be a ‘self’ for there to be perceived. But without experience itself, we can not point out the possibility of any sort of self perceiving. Such a reciprocal relationship is crystallised with the famous maxim expressed by Kant: “Concepts without precepts are empty; precepts without concepts are blind”.

As is easily seen, all experience is meaningful within the temporal and spatial limitations. In that regard, time and space are forms of the human mode of perception. On the other hand, objective things have a unique character intrinsic to themselves. But unfortunately, we can never get to the deepest knowledge of such a genuine nature of things. Kant calls those authentic sides of the things ‘things-in-themselves’.

⁴⁰ At this point, Michael Dillon (1999: 165-166) highlights the similarity between Kantian ethical theory and Derridean Deconstruction: “And only deconstruction thinks it through the intimate relation between ‘decision’ and assumption of responsibility, which effect egress into a future that has not yet been – could not yet have been – known ... Ultimately one can not know everything because one is advancing into a future which simply can not be anticipated, and into which one can not see.”

⁴¹ François Raffoul also underlines the Kantian ground utilised by Derrida, particularly in linking not-knowing with decision. As he notes, “A not-knowing is thus a condition of ethical decision, marking another appearance of the impossible ... The moment of decision, the moment of responsibility, supposes a rupture with the order of knowledge, with calculative rationality; to that extent, there is what Derrida calls a ‘madness of the impossible’ as opening to the incalculable” (2008: 285).

In light of such an analysis, Kant classifies the things under two titles: phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are any observable and physical objects. They can be perceived by the self directly by means of its sensory organs. However, noumena are not able to be observed. They are manifested in the objective things ‘themselves’ and inaccessible to sensation. In other words, they can not be known by the subjectivity. Concisely put, things-in-themselves constitute the content of the category of the noumena.

If we turn to our fundamental issue, what is place of the subjectivity within the tension between the phenomena and noumena? Stemming from the distinction made between the empirical self and the transcendental self, here we have a categorisation of transcendental subject and empirical self. In this context, Kant’s transcendental subject corresponds to the Lacanian *sujet*, while the Kantian empirical self refers to Lacan’s *moi* (i.e., the ego).

This analogy between Kantian and Lacanian terms, especially Lacan’s tendency to pursue Kant’s line of thought⁴², is emphasised by Adrian Johnston:

[Lacan] clearly intends to align, as precisely parallel, Kant’s distinction between noumenal and phenomenal subjectivity (i.e., the distinction between the ‘I’ as an unknowable *an sich* [in-itself] kernel and the ‘I’ as it appears to itself vis-à-vis various series of appearances and their qualities) and Lacan’s separation of the *sujet* from the *moi* (2008: 13).

Within the language of psychoanalysis, such a duality intrinsic to any form of subjectivity is closely associated with the split nature of the subject. “Noumenal subject of enunciation” matches up to the category of the unconscious. On the other hand, the “phenomenal subject of utterances” is taken as synonymous to the “determinate signifier-predicates” as used in the terminology of the psychoanalysis.

⁴² Not only on the issue of the subject, but also all objects of inquiry within the ontological realm are understood by the help of the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena. In other words, Lacan’s ontology, constituting the basis of the ontological stances of both Laclau and Žižek, is grounded in this crucial differentiation made between phenomena and noumena. As put by Andrea Hurst, Žižek raises a fundamentally ontological concern, namely the troubling question of the border, and therefore the relationship or ‘axis’ between what is described in Lacanian terms as ‘phenomenal reality’ and ‘the traumatic Real’; and these terms mark the difference between the imminent, interpreted, constituted, appropriated, understood, textual, phenomenal structures of ‘here and now’ reality (actuality in the Aristotelian sense), and the ‘transcendent actuality’ to which such phenomenal structures are indexed: the Sublime or ineffable Other, or the ‘traumatic Real’ (2008: 13).

Nonetheless, the category of the noumenal subject can only be detected within the temporal and spatial limitations. Hence, the mere possibility of the appearance of the noumenal subject is valid in the phenomenal universe. But as mentioned above, noumenal objects can not be perceived as in the case of the phenomena. In this sense, having knowledge of the noumenal subject is impossible. For that reason, in itself being of the Kantian noumenal subjectivity, it can only be experienced as a void, absence or lack.

This standpoint highlighting the correspondence between the noumenal subject and the category of void is clearly embraced by both Laclau and Žižek. As mentioned throughout the related chapters on how both thinkers follow in the footsteps of Lacan, it has been noted that the subject is nothing but the subject of the lack. In that respect, the category of the lack is constitutive for the subject. Such an undecidable emptiness of the subject can only be deficiently filled by the attempts of free decision acts.

But thinking through Kantian tenets, Laclau and Žižek agree that the inaccessibility of the noumenal subject and undecidability of the subjectivisation process are perpetual. In that regard, free acts of decision exercised by the subject bring about nothing but partial closure, which will end in failure sooner or later.

In the following subsection, I will elaborate on a specific propensity belonging to both Kant and Lacan (and inherently to Laclau and Žižek). This is their tendency to prioritise one pole of the duality (exposed throughout this subsection), namely the noumena, at the expense of the other, that is to say, the phenomena.

4.3.8. Prioritisation of (Kantian) Thing-in-Itself and the (Lacanian) Real

One of the most important intersection points between Lacan and Kantian philosophy is their privilege of the noumenal side at the expense of the phenomenal. In this sense, Laclau and Žižek follow this trend and are involved with a somewhat transcendental theory of the subject. Their analyses of undecidability must be discussed under these circumstances.

What do I mean by the tendency of privileging the noumenal side? Kant, as a critical philosopher, devotes his career to engaging in the most significant problems remaining unsolved. One of these crucial questions is the issue of knowledge. What is the source of true knowledge? How could it be obtained? Is there any boundary of human reason? What are the proper instruments in the process of acquiring knowledge? These and many other related problems occupy his mind.

In this sense, Kant aims to go beyond the metaphysics created by rationalists who configure human rationality as overwhelmingly capable of comprehending any type of knowledge, and there is no need for any other tools. Stemming from Descartes' Cartesian theory of the subject, they attribute some sort of super hero role to the human reason. Kant is deeply critical of such a standpoint.

But at the other pole, it could be said that empiricists totally ignore the role of the human mind in the generation of knowledge. For them, the human being is just a robotic organism having the ability to sense nature and nothing beyond that. In that regard, human reason can only work with perceptions coming from experience. During such a process, the cognitive side has no determining role at all. Therefore, the mere source of knowledge is experience, and it can be acquired only by the help of the sensory organs. Kant is also against such a crude empiricism, as well.

In that respect, Kant attempts to create a more balanced epistemological theory and avoid falling into the pitfalls trapping both rationalists and empiricists. As mentioned above, for him, the main source of knowledge is experience, but without cognitive activities of the human reason, such perceptions come to be meaningless.

In order to clarify his epistemological theory, he invents the typology made between the universes of phenomena and noumena. These have been explained in the previous subsection.

At first glance, such a schematic and clear-cut, as well as balanced, theory of knowledge sounds appealing. But when the concept of the 'thing-in-itself', the controversial content of the noumenal universe, comes to the scene, the rosy picture is fatally challenged. As mentioned above, we, as rational human beings,

are excluded from the knowledge of noumena. In other words, as Kant insists, noumena are unknowable and problematic; what is more, they just restrict the domain of concepts. In other words, noumena represent the limits of both the understanding of the subject and the validity of sensible knowledge. In this sense, noumena, in the Kantian vocabulary, are considered to be a 'regulative idea'.

On the other hand, although we can not gain knowledge of them, we can still think about noumena. So as to elucidate this point, Kant notes that noumena, like God, morality or freedom, are logically possible, despite the fact that they are inexistent within the framework of phenomena. Nevertheless, their objective validity can not be proven by the aid of human cognition. At that point of analysis, to attribute some sort of objective validity to noumena, Kant resorts to 'practical' sources of knowledge, namely moral life. Manifestly put, our whole-hearted feeling about the legitimacy of our 'duties' to others provides those noumena with objective validity.

This opens room for faith as the central reference point for gaining knowledge of the noumena, or things-in-themselves. At that point, he equates the category of faith with the "experience of values". In this sense, he produces a controversial duality between knowledge (experience of objective things) and faith (experience of subjective values).

Essentially, throughout his political philosophy, whose study area is the noumenal world, such a metaphysical line of thought makes Kant's stance transcendental. Thus, he necessarily prioritises the noumenal thing-itself conception in coping with socio-political issues. But unfortunately, that type of transcendentalism leads to ambivalent viewpoints about very vigorous issues. This propensity is also seen in Lacan's pursuing a Kantian route, to a certain extent.

Most significantly, the Lacanian Real can be understood through a Kantian lens. Similar to Kant's explanation of the noumena (more crudely put, things-in-themselves), Lacan maintains that the order of the Real can not be known. Unlike the symbolic, the Real is not structured by means of language. In this sense, it has no existence at all. But interestingly, the Real and the symbolic are interconnected; that is, the symbolic works upon the Real. In that respect, one of the ways of 'recognition' of the Real is being apathetic to the impositions of the Real. Žižek

illuminates this point by the aid of his analysis of the act. Laclau makes use of a similar line of thinking in associating the moment of decision with the moment of madness.

As is easily seen, both Laclau and Žižek, believing in the possibility of the Lacanian Real, offer metaphysical, or, more truly said, transcendental solutions to the problems of daily life in general and socio-political issues in particular. In the next subsection, such a transcendentalist leaning observed in both Laclau and Žižek will further discussed by referring to their mutual Kantian legacy.

4.3.9. Transcendental Turn

As the preceding subsection revealed, both Laclau and Žižek, in following Lacanian thought, owe the basis of their theory of the subject to the transcendentalism of Kant.⁴³ It has been mentioned that the defining feature of the subject is self-ignorance about its own split nature. In Kantian terms, the transcendental self remains as unknowable and, in this respect, full closure of the subject is impossible. But in spite of this impossibility, the subject never renounces its striving to fill the constitutive gap.

In this sense, both Žižek and Laclau ascribe a transcendental role to the subject's actions. In other terms, both thinkers try to formulate an act of decision which goes beyond the existing socio-political conditions. Only after such transcendental acts can socio-political change occur in any real manner. In this sense, transcendental factors mould the physical ones. But as in the case of the self-ignorant subject, that kind of act of decision is actualised only under the governing principle of undecidability.

Žižek clearly declares his indebtedness to Kantian transcendentalism in the following way:

⁴³ Another significant figure affecting Laclau and Žižek's propensity to the transcendentalism is Derrida. This point is correctly stressed by Richard Rorty (1978: 150) in the following way: "There is a side of Derrida which looks unfortunately constructive; a side which makes it look as if he in the end succumbs to nostalgia, to the lure of philosophical system-building, and specifically that of constructing yet another transcendental idealism". For a similar critique of Derridean transcendentalism, see Fredric Jameson, (1972) *The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton: Princeton University Press: 182-183.

... [W]e should accept the lesson of Kant's transcendental idealism: out of the confused multitude of impressions, *objective* reality emerges through the intervention of the *subject's* transcendental act. Kant does not deny the distinction between the multitude subjective impressions and objective reality; his point is merely that this very distinction results from the intervention of a *subjective* gesture of transcendental constitution. Similarly, Lacan's 'Master-Signifier' is the 'subjective' signifying feature which sustains the very 'objective' symbolic structure: if we abstract this subjective excess from the objective symbolic order, the very objectivity of this order disintegrates (*CHU*: 239).

As this quotation notes, the Lacanian understanding of the master signifier must be taken as transcendental. It fixes the meaning and pretends to create a fullness of the symbolic. But similar to other examples of noumenal things-in-themselves, we can not have knowledge of the master signifier.

On the other hand, the master signifier also suffers from the constitutive lack, because, in Laclau's terms, a fully transparent society is impossible. In that sense, the contingency (or, in the more correct sense, undecidability) of the master signifier is everlasting. Another reason leading to the undecidability of the master signifier is the fact that nothing but subjective (and undecidable) acts of decision result in the emergence of any master signifier.

In that respect, the tension between necessity and impossibility again comes to light. Even though the master signifier as a transcendental anchor is necessary for the survival of the symbolic (or, in Laclau's terminology, the discursive formation of hegemony), it also makes that sort of social order impossible due to its own undecidable nature.

In a similar way, the subject's transcendental act of decision to complete itself is necessary for it to exist, but at the same time, the fate of failure belonging to the act of decision makes the project of subjective closure impossible. Here, one of the most critical points is the unreachable (and therefore undecidable) character of the subjective decision act.

Undecidability constitutes the occasion in which the subjects strives for fullness and thus becomes possible, but at the same time it is a setting in which such subjective attempts for achieving the complete closure end in nothing but ultimate failure. Žižek again underlines the Kantian spirit shaping that type of

analysis of undecidability and combines the transcendentalist leaning with Kant's epistemological theory based on the self-ignorance of the subject:

Kant, far from simply expressing a belief in the constitutive power of the (transcendental) subject, introduces the notion of the transcendental dimension in order to answer the fundamental and irresolvable deadlock of human existence: a human being strives compulsively towards a global notion of truth, of a universal and necessary cognition, yet this cognition is simultaneously forever inaccessible to him. For this reason, Kant was undoubtedly the first philosopher who, in his notion of 'transcendental illusion', implicitly outlines a theory of the structural necessity of ghosts: 'ghosts' are apparitions which are constructed in order to fill in this gap between necessity and impossibility which is constitutive of the human condition (*CHU*: 234-235).

In addition to the process of subjectivisation, the transcendental is decisive in the (re)creation of the empirical world, as well.⁴⁴ Although they use different jargon and conceptual frameworks, both Laclau and Žižek highlight this situation overtly. For instance, in *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek contends that the ideological-political fantasy in what could be termed the "political economy of subjects' jouissance" has the same structural function as the 'transcendental schematism' in Kant's account of the subjective constitution of the empirical field (1993: 90). In parallel, Laclau declares:

... [T]he transcendental dimension is unavoidable but that transcendental, in the full sense of the term, is impossible ... There is no object without conditions of possibility transcending it (this is the unavoidable transcendental horizon), but, as this horizon consists of undecidable infrastructures – iteration, supplementarity, re-mark, and so on – the empirical moment of the decision is in a complex relation internality / externality to the transcendental horizon (*CHU*: 76).

In summary, both Laclau and Žižek see transcendentalism as one of the most determining factors influencing not only the subjectivisation process, but also the

⁴⁴ Kant's transcendentalism also moulds the ontological theory of Derrida and this kind of Kantian influence over deconstructive line of thought shapes the transcendentalist tendency of Laclau and Žižek to a certain extent. Kantian basis of Derrida's transcendentalist approach is underlined by Andreas Hurst, "For Kant, transcendental constitution does not create existence, but interprets or synthesises what is given, thereby constituting a phenomenal world. In his phrase 'there is no outside-text,' Derrida intends the equivalent claim. Although it is precisely through the interpretative process that 'the event' first takes shape as a phenomenon, there can be no interpretation (i.e. texts) unless 'something' beyond the text first occurs."

production of the empirical and objective world.⁴⁵ Both procedures are absolutely contingent, and the main source of this contingency is the overriding principle of undecidability.

In this sense, the undecidability makes the accomplishment of any fullness within the domains of both subjectivity and the social-political sphere impossible. But at the same time, undecidability makes those fields possible by presenting the grounds on which those efforts to attain fullness in both fields are executed again and again. In the following subsection, another Kantian theorisation, namely the aesthetic (reflexive) judgement, will be touched upon. The importance of this concept for Laclau and Žižek is its role in substantiating the tension between the particular and the universal.

4.3.10. Utilisation of Aesthetic (Reflexive) Judgement

So far, a series of dualities has been examined within Kantian philosophy. The main line of these dualities is the distinction between the two major universes of phenomena and noumena. In this sense, he classifies two kinds of reason: theoretical reason and practical reason. As is easily guessed, theoretical reason deals with the phenomenal world and works on the scientific knowledge taken from objective experience. On the other hand, practical reason tries to cope with the field of noumena and obtain knowledge of the experience of subjective values.

In order not to fall into the trap of dualism formulated by Descartes, Kant endeavours to mediate between these two worlds and reasons respectively. He introduces a theory of 'judgement' in that context. Judgement is regarded as the mediator between practical reason and theoretical reason. In this sense, Kant supposes that the subject has the capacity to synthesise practical and theoretical reason.

⁴⁵ Here I must note that Derrida's emphasis on undecidability is also affected by the transcendental turn. In Derrida's deconstructive thought, even though each and every decision which is considered to be unique and singular is structured by the governing rules of undecidability, the structure of undecidability is taken for granted transcendently. This point is criticised by Jack Reynolds as follows: "...if we are to take [Derrida's] emphasis upon the undecidability of decision-making seriously, it almost becomes a transcendental condition for the possibility of decision-making, rather than a discussion of how various decisions can and do take place" (2002: 463).

Even though he is against dualisms and aims to go beyond the classical as well as the dualities dominating the history of thought, Kant, similar to his other analyses, is again involved with another duality. This time he establishes two sorts of judgement: teleological judgement and aesthetic (reflexive) judgement.

Teleological judgement is related to the natural life. In nature, organisms act according to the rule of physical causality, 'as if' life has its own meaning and end. By the aid of the teleological judgement, we can consider nature to be meaningful. In that respect, Kant's goal is to transcend the tension taking place between necessity and freedom.

Aesthetic judgement, which constitutes the main topic of this subsection, also functions to merge these two opposing poles, but in a quite distinctive manner. Judgements of taste are subjective and particular. However, Kant believes that taste is not simply subjective and relative. What is more, he notes that subjects can reach a general idea of the beautiful. But this process does not take place by the help of the cognitive abilities informed by perceptions, because Kant is aware of the fact that human sensation does not perfectly reflect the nature. Yet Kant also assumes that the aesthetic judgement can be somewhat subjective and universally valid at the same time.

Although aesthetic judgements do not emerge with the aid of the conceptions, they are still governed by definite principles. In parallel, aesthetic judgement reconciles morality and truth, ethics and science, practical reason and theoretical reason. In consequence, the aesthetic judgement is tied to the subjective feelings of individuals and at the same time universally valid.

By employing a Kantian understanding of aesthetic (reflexive) judgement, Laclau and Žižek try to challenge the classical viewpoint of the universal.⁴⁶ But they also evade the trap of pure particularism. In a sense, they invent a third way by implementing Kantian aesthetic (reflexive) judgement. For example, as mentioned in related prior section, Laclau notes that the universal can be seen as

⁴⁶ The Kantian viewpoint of the aesthetic (reflexive) judgement constitutes a fundamental reference point for Derridean deconstruction, as well. The influence of Kantian aesthetics over Derrida's political approaches of hospitality and forgiveness is critically assessed by Alison Ross and for more details on this discussion, see Alison Ross, 'Historical Undecidability: The Kantian Background to Derrida's Politics', in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 12, No: 4: 375–393.

an empty space waiting to be filled by the particular that is victorious in the hegemonic antagonism. Here this 'filling' is performed by the subject and only the struggle against the hegemony can bring about the role of determining the universal. In that respect, the way in which the universal is settled is ruled by certain tenets of hegemonic politics. This point is stressed by Rado Riha as follows:

What characterises the reflexive judgement is the absence of the instance of the universal – a norm or a rule, say – in which such a judgement could ground itself. A reflexive judgement is therefore required whenever we are faced with a situation in which neither the particular nor the universal are given in advance. It is, rather, the act of reflexive judgement which produces, invents as it were, the universal by elevating some particular entity to the dignity of a 'case of a universal' (in Critchley & Marchart, 2004: 83).

In parallel, Žižek combines the category of universality to the master-signifier emerging within the antagonisms involved in fixing the meaning of the symbolic. As is clearly seen, by making use of Kantian analysis of aesthetic (reflexive) judgement, both Laclau and Žižek provide universality with an undecidable nature. Instead, the subjective decision acts practised by the subjects represent the process of the 'creation' of the universality. In the following subsection, a closely related issue will be addressed: the conception of concrete universality. Again, the Kantian roots utilised by Laclau and Žižek will be the basic starting point. Also, the key interconnection of the notion of concrete universality and the issue of undecidability will be dealt with.

4.3.11. Concrete Universal

The concrete universal is an originally Hegelian concept. But a particular Kantian interpretation of this notion makes it relevant to the analyses of Laclau and Žižek. With the help of his speculative method, Hegel concludes that the universal is nothing but self-actualising. There is no isolation between the universal and the particular; rather, the universal necessitates the particular. As a result of this necessity, the universal flourishes as a fundamental determination of

the particulars. For Hegel, the universals are derived from other universals, as well. Hence, the concrete universal has its own moment of particularity.

Laclau and Žižek accept that Hegelian kind of reciprocal relation between the particular and universal. However, pursuing the Kantian dictum on the unknowableness of the knowledge of universally valid noumena, Laclau and Žižek note that the procedure of turning into the universal is an ultimate failure for the particular. In other words, to bring the universal and the particular together is totally impossible. The reason is that, as Lacan implies, the universal also suffers from the constitutive lack. In this sense, the gap in the universal can not be filled by any specific particular. Despite this ‘destiny’, each and every particular aims at filling the emptiness of the concrete universal.

Žižek connects the concept of concrete universality with Kantian epistemological theory: “since each particularity involves its own universality, its own notion of the Whole and its own part within it, there is no ‘neutral’ universality that would serve as the medium for these particular positions” (*CHU*: 316).

According to Žižek, the political positions are each instead (and *a priori*) singularities: always incommensurable attempts to symbolise the nature of the social body *tout court* and/or ‘repress’ the primordial antagonism that rends it. We are back, that is to say, to conceiving of the “non-existence of the Other” that opens the space for politics in the model of the Kantian mathematical antinomy (*CHU*: 112-113). In a parallel manner, Laclau associates his own notion of the empty signifier with the conceptualisation of the concrete universal. He notes, “What we have called the logic of empty signifiers belongs to this type of concrete abstract or universal” (*CHU*: 191).

As stated above, the empty signifier is a kind of signifier having no signified. At the end of each and every hegemonic struggle, a particular signified occupies the position of empty signifier and pretends to be universal. But this pretension is just temporary, because no signified can fulfil the role of being the signified of the empty signifier eternally. In that regard, the next winner of the hegemonic antagonism topples the existing universal and begins to act ‘as if’ it is universal.

Žižek agrees with Laclau and accentuates the Kantian logic underlying such an understanding of the concrete universal:

Perhaps, following Kant, we could designate this impasse the ‘antinomy of criticoideological reason’: ideology is not-all; it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it can not be occupied by any positively determined reality* – the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology (MI: 17).

In light of this analysis, it can be inferred that in order to go beyond the governing principles of the symbolic and consequently transform it, Žižek supports the pure ‘emptiness’ of the act of decision.

By the aid of the Kantian interpretation of the concept of universal notion, the category of the universal gets correlated with undecidability.⁴⁷ Which particular will fill the emptiness of the concrete universal, however, remains undecidable. In this context, the universal, in a classical sense, is impossible. Rather, the universal emerges due to the undecidable struggle taking place among hegemonic forces. Although those attempts to finalise the concrete universal are condemned to fail, without these efforts, we can not talk about the category of the universal at all.

In the final following subsection, an overview of the critical linkage between Kantian philosophy and the issue of undecidability as raised by Laclau and Žižek will be presented. Theoretical questions like the emergence of political agents (or subjects) and the undecidable character of the decision act will constitute the basis of this subsequent subsection. In that respect, I will especially stress the common Kantian foundation feeding both Laclau and Žižek.

4.3.12. Kant and the Issue of Undecidability

So far, the major Kantian points underlying the parallelism between Laclau and Žižek on the issue of undecidability have been discussed. In this final subsection, the similar ways that Laclau and Žižek analyse the main conception,

⁴⁷ For more details about the discussion on the radical relationality between the universal and the particular in general, and the notion of the concrete universal in particular, see Zerilli (1998: 4-8, 10-16).

namely the act of decision, through the guidance of Kantian political philosophy will be addressed. At this point of analysis, the originally Lacanian concept of 'traversing fantasy' comes to the scene.

As its name implies, the subject traverses the fantasy when it faces the constitutive gap preventing it from being complete. But Kantian antinomy is again involved with the process of traversing fantasy. The reason is that when the subject traverses the fantasy, it realises that it can never be closed off. But at same time, the subject can only be considered as the subject as long as it traverses the fantasy, because during this operation, it identifies itself with the fantasy in a total manner. However, similar to the subjectivisation procedure in general, such identification with the fantasy remains incomplete, because filling the constitutive lack is impossible.

In the political sense, the practice of traversing fantasy establishes the constitutive lack by leaving room for political antagonisms. Although it is impossible for these antagonisms to create a fully transparent society, the permanence of those antagonisms makes the sphere of the political possible. Both Laclau and Žižek believe in such a paradoxical nature of the processes of both subjectivisation and the socio-political (re)production of order.

We now turn to the issue of the subject. Laclau and Žižek formulate their theories of the act of decision as well as undecidability by also referring to Kant's understanding of the ethical act. For Kant, we are free because we have a cognitive incapacity for gaining knowledge of the noumena. Otherwise, we automatically live a fully moral life. Nonetheless, since we have no idea about the noumena by the aid of experience, we can do the right things only after our free choice. This process of free preference of the good life is totally undecidable, because it is fully dependent upon the faith of the subject, or the experience of subjective values.

In that sense, the act of decision in performing a moral life is the mere source of the subjective freedom. This results in not only subjectivisation but also the generation of any hegemonic order. Here, the subjective duty plays a determining role in both Žižek's theory of political order, and Laclau's deconstructive outlook on radical democracy. As Matthew Sharpe clearly states, Žižek's *oeuvre* constitutes a theoretical defence of radical subjective responsibility (2004: 165). In

another analysis, the linkage between the emphasis on radical subjective responsibility and the Kantian theory of act is stated: Žižek's assertion is that this laying aside of all (pre-existing) substantial-discursive coordinates when an agent 'traverses' the ideological fantasies mirrors the bracketing of all 'pathological' or selfish motives in a properly ethical act, in the Kantian sense (Sharpe, 2004: 241).

In a similar line of thinking, Laclau argues that "the madness of the decision is this blind spot in the structure, in which something totally heterogeneous with it – and, as a result, totally inadequate – has, however, to supplement it" (1996: 55). In that context, Laclau assumes that the political act of decision is contingent, particular, singular and, most importantly, undecidable. With the aid of deconstruction, he analyses the structural undecidability of not only the social but also the political. For Laclau, following Kantian tenets on the epistemological theory of the subjectivity, making a decision in accordance with the existing rules, standards or principles (which claim to be universal) is not a decision at all. Instead, there is a predetermined adherence to the commands of the hegemonic order. In this case, we have no freedom, either. As he affirms, "the decision can not be ultimately grounded in anything external to itself. The decision has to be grounded in itself, in its own singularity" (1996: 52-53).

But this does not mean that the subject precedes the decision; in contrast, it emerges by only the decision act itself. The reason is that in deciding over the undecidability and becoming involved with the act, the (incomplete) process of subjectivisation starts. In other words, the subject comes out merely in the moment of decision, which is nothing but mad. And this madness or radical undecidability of the decision act is the foundation of subjective freedom. In consequence, both Laclau and Žižek equate the mechanism of subjective decision-making with the emergence of the political agent. More clearly put, as long as we engage in the act of decision, we turn out to be political agents with the ability to initiate socio-political change. Hence, the materialisation of political agent leads to nothing other than the creation of new socio-political orders. In brief, by following the Kantian path, both Laclau and Žižek attribute a central as well as similar role to the tension between the undecidability and the act of decision in both the procedures of subjectivisation and (re)formulation of the political (or hegemonic) order.

4.4. Concluding Comments: Laclau and Žižek as Representatives of Postmodern Politics⁴⁸

Before finishing this chapter, I will outline my own critical commentary on the viewpoints of Laclau and Žižek in light of their shared Kantian legacy. To begin with, both believe that the subject flourishes as long as the act of decision is performed, but this act is ruled by the principle of undecidability and that situation makes the subjectivisation process incomplete. Consequently, subjectivity can never accomplish fullness; on the contrary, it remains susceptible to a constitutive lack. Hence, undecidability turns out to be the decisive factor moulding subjectivity. The same is also valid for the settlement of any political order. Even though the constitutive lack provides the possibility of any political order, it also prevents that order from being completely all-inclusive. The moment of undecidability is at work in this dual procedure of the realisation of both the possibility and impossibility of the political order.

But this is not a purely theoretical and academic inference; on the contrary, such a tendency as carried out by Laclau and Žižek has significant reflections. Such a partnership of Laclau and Žižek becomes much more meaningful when we look at it from a wider angle. The era we are living in can be called the postmodern period, whose distinguishing characteristic is the rising ambiguity of concepts.

One of the most fundamental features of political thought⁴⁹ is the belief in the erosion of meta-narratives. Grand narratives like the Enlightenment (a narrative of infinite progress in knowledge and liberty) or classical Marxism (a narrative of the progressive emancipation of the proletariat) are especially abandoned by the postmodern thinkers. In this sense, both Laclau and Žižek,

⁴⁸ Pauline Marie Rosenau (1992: 138-166) deals with various factors of postmodern political orientations. In that context, she talks about the scepticism embraced by postmodernists; the affirmativeness of postmodern political thought is also underlined. Furthermore, she tries to answer the question of whether postmodernism is left-wing or right-wing.

⁴⁹ For more discussion on postmodern political thought, please see Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1991: 1-30. Colin Hay (2002: 216-250) also elaborates on the postmodern challenge to political analysis and presents a critical assessment of postmodern politics in general.

particularly with the aid of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction, agree on criticising and relinquishing the modern meta-narratives.

Another significant postmodern tenet shared by Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek is their assumption that the traditional understanding of the subject governed by self-conscious rationality is nothing but a myth that must be rejected. At that point, the Kantian basis grounding the approaches of Laclau and the Žižek to the issue of the subject comes to the forefront.

As noted by Iain Hamilton Grant, just as the Nation, the People or the Party are condemned for their totalising aspirations, so too the ideal of a coherent and integrated self, such as that promised by psychoanalysis, falls under suspicion; this is a problem that was initially opened by Kant, who introduced an unbridgeable gulf between the knowable self and the knowing self, a gulf that was only provisionally held together by our ability to use the word 'I' (in Sim, 1998: 16).

In parallel with such an analysis of the subject, postmodern political theory privileges difference, contingency and contradiction at the expense of unity, universality or necessity. Since Laclau and Žižek utilise the undecidability within the processes of subjective formation and political change, this postmodern prioritisation of difference, openness, contingency or contradiction (or, in Kant's words, mathematical antinomy) is held by these two thinkers, as well.⁵⁰ By doing so, they are involved with the dogmatism of relativism.

That kind of stress on difference, contingency and contradiction is applied to concrete political phenomena by means of the concept of antagonism. Both Laclau and Žižek attribute a central role to the antagonistic nature of the political. Particularly with the help the Lacanian Real, the antagonist character of the political is eternal and this situation constitutes the main source of the undecidability, which is inherent to any identification or political change.

However, the attention paid to the category of antagonism does not mean that postmodernists engage in a well-established analysis of socio-political

⁵⁰ Alexander Argyros criticises that type of postmodern stance and its relation with the issue of the decision act in following way: "the deconstructive and postmodern turns, valorising multiplicity, dissemination and fragmentation, have mistakenly attempted to obviate the dangers of bad decisions by arguing for, in the best case, the inadequacy, and in the worst case, the impossibility of any decision" (1990: 33).

resistance to inequalities. Rather, those postmodern theoreticians are concerned with the ambiguous scrutiny of resistance.

In this sense, Laclau and Žižek can not be seen as exceptions. Laclau's study on the 'new social movements' ruled by undecidability and Žižek's association between class struggle and the Lacanian Real, which has nothing to do with the Symbolic order, can be regarded as examples of the ambivalent postmodern analysis of the resistance.

Under these circumstances, Laclau and Žižek, similar to postmodern political thinkers, regard the sphere of the political as a contingent as well as undecidable construction. In this respect, they criticise the traditional viewpoint of representation. Postmodernists, including Laclau and Žižek, claim that the overall ethical-political foundations pretending to be universal are supposed to collapse within the contemporary phase of capitalism. Rather, they are in favour of movements working for anti-centralisation.

I will now focus more deeply on the issue of undecidability and its linkage to the postmodern leaning shared by Laclau and Žižek. By means of attaching a constitutive importance to undecidability in the formation of both subjectivity and the political order, Laclau and Žižek serve the interests of postmodern thought.⁵¹ In this sense, they further substantiate the intellectual tradition of relativism. By doing so, they celebrate the ultimate emptiness occupying the centre of the political and the subject.

As a consequence, such a line of thinking holds no promise in regard to the formulation and realisation of emancipation. Although Žižek seems to be sensitive to emancipatory politics on the basis of Marxian class analysis, he remains silent about how this kind of struggle will be realised. Rather, he accepts the overwhelming governance of undecidability, because he defines the act of decision as an encounter with the Real. But the Real is not described in the capitalist world in which we live. In this sense, he is an anti-capitalist only in discursive terms.

⁵¹ In his critical analysis, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh rejects postmodern political projections, and he especially criticises postmodernists' propensity to attribute a key role to the conceptualisation of undecidability. To be more precise, he argues that the postmodern emphasis on undecidability preserves the interests of the North Atlantic ruling classes by rendering decidedness and certainty unintelligible (*passé*) (1992: 43).

In this sense, his idealisation of Antigone, a heroine in Ancient Greek mythology, as the perfect example of a socio-political actor is not a surprise. When we turn to Laclau, we come across a similar picture. Since the early 1980s he has believed in the transformative potential of the social movements for the attainment of a more democratic society.

More blatantly speaking, he highlights that social movements like anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-capitalism or the ecological movement have the ability to convert our society into a political order in which we have an increased degree of equality and liberty. But again, an undecidable nature is attributed to these social movements, and this makes any social intervention contingent. By doing so, we have autonomisation of spheres of struggles and multiplication of political spaces. At the end of such an undecidable procedure, collective identity formation can not be accomplished. However, as we have seen, nearly none of these new social movements could collectivise their pre-suppositions and demands. Due to this fact, they remain as minor, elitist and intellectual movements participated in by only a few socio-economically well-off people and students. In other words, those social movements could not be completely “grass-root” movements.

What we have is just partial struggles aimed at offering minor solutions to minor problems. Such an ambivalent (as well as undecidable) account of social actors resembles Žižek’s epic description of classes with regard to their inexistent capacity for initiating any political change. Who will actualise the radical democratic revolution or socialist revolution is undecidable. Moreover, Laclau and Žižek can not give a satisfying explanation of the possible ways of fighting capitalism. Instead, they just remain faithful to the promising future, but they also insist that this future is structured by nothing but undecidability. In this sense, Laclau and Žižek share a ‘Kantian’ silence on the question of the emancipation of humanity.⁵² Since the mere sources of our freedom are regarded as self-ignorance and knowableness of the noumena, with the help of such a freedom, the subject is condemned to fail in each and every attempt to trigger political change.

⁵² Following the criticism raised by Andrew Norris (2002: 554-573), it can be argued that unduly psychoanalytic versions of classical Marxist ideas such as class struggle (a la Laclau and Žižek) suffers from being apolitical.

When we turn to the issue of subjectivity, again we come across an emphasis on the partial outcomes of undecidable subjectivisation processes. To put it differently, partial selves, which are totally vulnerable, are claimed to arise as a consequence of undecidability. How can we expect such a deficient category of the subject to act in the creation of emancipation? Let me formulate this critical question differently: If the subject has no fixed identity, how can we be sure of its eternal striving for more equality and liberty? In my opinion, Laclau and Žižek have no satisfying answer to this question.

What do Laclau and Žižek offer instead? Nothing other than a fetishism of contingency, negativity and impossibility. Although they are against all types of overall fixations, in defining the subject as lack, they implicitly fixed the category of the subject to the lack. In that sense, if the Cartesian understanding of cogito is a positive fixation of the subject to the self-determining self-consciousness, Laclau and Žižek are involved with a negative fixation of the subject to the undecidable absence of any essence. In some ways, they devote themselves to an uneasy sort of essentialism of undecidable emptiness. Such essentialism insists on both the necessity and impossibility of emancipation.

As a last remark, such a pessimistic rapprochement of formation of both subjectivity and political order is the product of the emphasis on undecidability. As it is regarded as the central factor guaranteeing the contingency and openness of the processes of subjectivisation and political order establishment, the current dynamics of the political or the existing power relationship continue to be effective. So Laclau and Žižek, being severely critical of the inequalities stemming from capitalism, can not formulate a satisfying explanation for understanding or changing the existing conditions governed by capitalism. Rather, they join the postmodern tendency, legitimating nothing but the present capitalist order.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

When we come to the last quarter of the twentieth century, a major part of scholars and thinkers were persuaded that mainstream approaches aiming to understand and explain social life (such as classical Marxism or traditional liberalism, as well as structural functionalism or conflict theory) and their newer versions (like structural Marxism or open Marxism, or neoliberal and neoconservative perspectives) were far from bringing a satisfactory account for the current situation, and, more dramatically, they remained unsuccessful in configuring the ideal society as pre-supposed in their theoretical grounds. In this sense, there seemed to be a kind of deadlock in socio-political analysis, and this crisis gave rise to a new and innovative opening in the social sciences in general, namely, the 'linguistic turn'.

Most especially, a re-consideration of Saussurian linguistics has played a crucial role in this process. Perhaps equally importantly, the work of Lacan, which can be summarised as an uneasy and brilliant combination of Freudian psychoanalysis and Saussurian linguistics, has also led to drastic developments in socio-political analysis. Moreover, at the same time, we have witnessed the revitalisation of existentialist philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger by Foucault and Derrida, respectively. In that regard, a newly emergent linguistic theory has started to collaborate with (mostly deconstructive) post-structuralism in attacking the conventional standpoints. As a result, the level of severity of the critique of mainstream grand theories has risen radically.

Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek began their careers under these circumstances. As a result, they remain critical of any sort of classical orthodox school of thought. Instead, they aim to reconfigure the most significant objects of inquiry of political science. Most fundamentally, they problematise the category of the subject and question its freedom to act. To what extent is it free to decide to

(re)create not only itself, but also the socio-political world? Is there any level of external determination, and if so, to what extent is it determined? What is the place of the subjectivisation process in such a formulation of action purporting to generate order? Is there any degree of determination within the procedure of subject formation? Or is it totally contingent; rather, is there any necessary conditions for the constitution of subjectivity?

How do Laclau and Žižek try to answer these questions? One of the main objectives of my thesis is to respond to this question. But at least equally importantly, I have dealt with how they differ from each other. In this sense, the current polemical situation between these two thinkers has been touched upon by enlisting the main points distinguishing their theoretical frameworks. Although at first sight, it seems that there is a total theoretical contrast between them, with a deeper analysis, I can now conclude that this is not the case. I argue that they share a common Kantian legacy in grasping the issue of the subject in general and the undecidability in particular. But before I substantiate my claim, I will summarise the outline of my thesis.

In the chapter on Laclau, I divided his line of thinking into three eras: post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. I am aware that such a clear-cut separation is not free from criticism, but for the sake of being analytical and practical I had to prefer such an analysis. As mentioned above, during these three epochs, he uses fairly distinct conceptual frames, and this is also valid for his scrutiny of the undecidability issue.

As a consequence, we have seen a process of concretisation and radicalisation of the undecidability notion and the subject as Laclau has progressed from post-structuralism to deconstruction via psychoanalysis. In *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*, he does not thematise the undecidability issue and its association with the subjectivity in definite manner. Instead, with the help of the Freudian concept of overdetermination, he argues that hegemonic articulations constitute the subject contingently. But this constitution is not unchallenged. The reason is that any hegemonic order also has at least equally powerful rivals waiting to topple the existing order and create their own. In this sense, contingency is considered to be a determining characteristic in procedures of not only subject

formation but also the establishment of hegemonic order. At this level of analysis, the undecidability is intrinsically implied and any explanation of its working mechanism is put aside.

But after Žižek's Lacanian intervention, Laclau deals with the undecidability issue in a more direct way. In addition to Lacanian psychoanalytic thought, he makes use of Saussurian linguistics. And he bases his analysis on the undecidability of the signifier. In that respect, he asserts that, at the end of the hegemonic antagonisms among many signifieds, one of them occupies the status of 'the signified' of the signifier. This process is totally undecidable and always open to being interrupted by other signifieds. To clarify himself, Laclau introduces his concept of the floating signifier. Its basic feature is nothing but the lack of a specific and eternal signified. With such a starting point, Laclau explains that the categories of hegemony, structure and the subject suffer from this constitutive lack. Thus, their processes of formation remain undecidable.

Under the influence of deconstructive thinking, Laclau further radicalises the conceptualisation of undecidability by attributing a key role to it. To elucidate and put an end to the tension between the universal and the particular, he uses the notion of an empty signifier waiting to be filled by any particular victor in the hegemonic antagonism. As a result, as one of the particulars fills the emptiness of the signifier, it pretends to be universal, but it never achieves this completely. The reason is that the operation of fixing the meaning is also undecidable and always vulnerable to the attacks of opponent particulars having equal capacity for pretending to be universal. At first glance, such a picture can be regarded as total ambivalence. But following Derrida, Laclau notes that undecidability provides the necessary principles through which any decision can be formulated. On the other hand, the undecidability itself prevents any decision from being enacted entirely. In that context, undecidability is necessary for the decision to flourish, but also makes any act of decision's leading to full closure impossible. In light of such an analysis, Laclau formulates that the subject is the moment of the decision, but this moment is structured by nothing other than undecidability. So, undecidability turns out to be a defining trait of subjectivity.

On the other hand, Žižek pursues a different theoretical path in handling the issue of undecidability. First of all, I must point out that he deals with undecidability within his theory of the subjective act of decision. In this sense, he utilises the outlooks of three major figures: Marx, Schelling and Lacan. To start with, in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek reads Marx via Benjamin to a certain extent. According to him, history is full of ruptures and this situation results in an undecidable scene. Against classical historicist beliefs, Žižek rejects the idea of a linear cause-and-effect relationship shaping history. Instead, he develops the notion of historicity, ironically taken as ahistorical. Historicity is also traumatic and non-symbolisable. By involving himself with such an analysis, Žižek associates the act of decision with the role of being the motor of historical change. But this is not a simply agent-centric and decisionist understanding. On the contrary, he argues that the act is a vanishing mediator reconciling the opposites. And in that respect, each and every event (or reality in general) taking place as a result of an act of decision becomes possible due to the undecidable interconnection between the opposites.

In order to materialise his theory, Žižek employs the Schellingian school of thought. Particularly, Schelling's transcendental materialist theory of the Real allows Žižek's analysis of the act of decision to gain a more mature form. Schelling's conceptions of the *Grund* (ground) as groundless and Rotary Motion of the Drives are introduced to psychoanalytic thinking by Žižek. Consequently, Žižek reaches the contention that the act of decision is unconscious, primordial and atemporal. Besides, Žižek makes use of Schelling's philosophy in his theory of the subject. In that regard, what he claims is that the transcendental subject emerges within groundless ground (in Lacan's vocabulary, the Real) and the free act of decision plays an indispensable role in its undecidable process of subject formation.

The third and perhaps most important source referred to by Žižek is Lacan. Particularly in the issues of the subject and undecidability, his critical dialogue with Alain Badiou is fruitful. Žižek accepts Badiou's viewpoint on the subject acquiring subjectivity only being loyal to the Event. What is more, Badiou's belief in the undecidable character of each Event moulded by contingent decisions of the

subject is shared by Žižek. Blatantly put, both Žižek and Badiou associate the act of decision with a central position in subjectivisation. Despite these agreements, Žižek blames Badiou for not explaining the subject prior to the fidelity to the Event. In this respect, Žižek asserts that Badiou engages in an arbitrarily selective reading of Lacan. In opposition to Badiou, Žižek appreciates Lacanian psychoanalysis in far deeper manner. By employing the Lacanian notion of *passage à l'acte* and combining it with Freud's analysis of the death drive, Žižek notes that all acts, except for suicide, are condemned to fail. The basis of such a claim stems from the constitutive lack cursing any act of decision. The end result is nothing but the undecidable constitution of the subject.

In light of this, Žižek accounts for his own understanding of the act. For him, the act of decision is an antagonistic encounter with the Real. Moreover, the proper act aims at going beyond the principles of the existing symbolic and transforming it radically. But the end result is not chaos; rather, each act of decision purports to create a new political order (or a new symbolic) in the end. During this process, the subject is also transformed. But subjectivisation occurs in accordance with the governing principles of the Real; in other words, it suffers from undecidability. More clearly speaking, the act of decision, which leads to the constitution of the subject, works within the moment of undecidability.

Having outlined Laclau's and Žižek's perspectives on the issue of undecidability, I have covered the main points of the theoretical polemic between them. Of course, I could not include all elements separating these two scholars; rather, I have focused on their relatively distinctive approaches to the problem of the subject and undecidability. Especially *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, a critical exchange between Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, presents a vivid picture of the basic disagreements on these issues.

Laclau accuses Žižek of prioritising the Cartesian cogito and, in this sense; he sees Žižek as an orthodox member of modernism. In parallel, Laclau rejects Žižek's belief in the category of the necessity at the expense of the contingency. Therefore, for Laclau, Žižek reproduces the classical deterministic Marxian essentialism by regarding classes as the necessary agents of historical change. In

that respect, Laclau rejects the Žižekian view on totalising and unduly logical universality in dealing with issues like subjectivity and undecidability.

On the other hand, Žižek declares that Laclau falls into the trap of postmodernism by privileging the moment of contingency. Furthermore, he blames Laclau for not being critical of capitalism because his theory of hegemony presents a neutral guide for political change. Most significantly, Žižek alleges that Laclau suffers from hidden Kantianism, essentially by applying the kernel of necessity and impossibility to the issues of the undecidable processes of subjective identification and (re)establishment of hegemonic order.

So far, it is observed that Laclau and Žižek engage in quite different positions with respect to the issue of undecidability and subjectivity. But I think this would be a misleading conclusion. Concerning the undecidability question, the disagreements listed above seem to be discursive and shallow. On the other hand, they share a common Kantian heritage which lead them reach similar theoretical destinations in terms of undecidability. In this sense, I have dealt with twelve major points merging Kantian philosophy with the issue of undecidability held by both Laclau and Žižek.

By embracing a Kantian analysis of (mathematical) antinomy, Laclau and Žižek attempt to explicate the paradoxical relationship between the act of decision and undecidability. In this sense, they can clarify that the act of decision is both necessary for the emergence of subjectivity but simultaneously makes the accomplishment of a fully disclosed subject impossible. This emphasis on impossibility echoes Kant's view of negativity as the determining category in subject formation. Laclau and Žižek accept the Kantian dictum that at the centre of the subject there is nothing but void, which can not be filled entirely. As a consequence, Laclau and Žižek agree on the inevitability of the self-alienated and split subjectivity. In this agreement, Kantian epistemological theory, considering self-ignorance as the determining feature of the modern subject, plays a crucial role. A self-ignorant subject, as expected, suffers from a constitutive crack and finiteness. Following the Kantian ontology, Laclau and Žižek note that the spheres of the epistemological and the ontological are separated from each other in an unbridgeable manner. This split stems from the Kantian distinction between the

universes of phenomena and noumena. Again like Kant, Laclau and Žižek privilege the latter side of this duality (noumena, or more correctly, ‘things-in-themselves’). As a result, unknowable and transcendental factors get prioritised in the understanding of both the subjectivisation procedure and the (re)creation of political order. Additionally, so as to reconcile the categories of the universal and the particular, Laclau and Žižek endorse Kant’s view on aesthetic (reflexive) judgement. In a related way, they interpret the originally Hegelian conceptualisation of ‘concrete universal’ by means of the Kantian perspective of antinomy. Thus, similar to the subjectivisation process or institutionalisation of any political order, the category of the universal is embodied by the undecidability moment. As a final remark, with the aid of Kantian (ethical-political) philosophy, Laclau and Žižek maintain that the antagonistic interconnection between the act of decision and undecidability plays an indispensable role in making both identification and political order possible but incomplete (and vulnerable to any external threat).

Before concluding my thesis, I will delineate the main points I find needing criticism in Laclau’s and Žižek’s stances. To begin, Laclau’s understanding of populism suffers from serious inadequacies, particularly due to his excessive emphasis on the moment of undecidability.

Referring to the Kantian notion of void and the Lacanian category of lack, he sees a constitutive emptiness at the centre of populism and, in this sense; he refrains from an overall historicist account, rather embracing a relativist perspective in comprehending populism. In light of such an understanding, contingency remains as inherent to any process of construction of the people, and this leads to the relativity of social demands changing dramatically from time to time. Within such an environment, there is no possibility of a radical democratic revolution generated by the people.

Another significant weakness of Laclau’s line of thought, essentially owing to the central role he attributes to undecidability, is his deficient analysis of nationalism. In parallel to his scrutiny of populism, he considers the empty signifier to be the central element providing the nationalist discourse with meaning in so far as it filled by any particular signified. This understanding neglects the

historical process of nationalisation stimulated by the nation-states. Moreover, the nation-state's institutions and practices ideologically generate a nationalist consciousness which can not be overthrown easily due to hegemonic antagonisms.

The 'new social movements' constitute another fundamental environment in which Laclau appeals to the moment of undecidability. As a result, he claims that new social movements are diversified as socio-political issues as well as subject positions proliferate within the contemporary era of capitalism.

In this sense, Laclau avoids prioritising one of these struggles at the expense of others, but at the same time he hopes that those distinct new social movements can bring about radical democratic revolution. But I think that the ambivalent and chaotic scene underlying the differences of these social movements can not turn out to be manifestations of a collective will which fights against the inequalities stemming from the capitalist world order. In this sense, new social movements remain as partial struggles aiming at resolving partial questions in reformist terms.

Laclau's stress on radical (plural) democracy illustrates another sphere where undecidability is utilised. Radicality of democracy is rooted in the prioritisation of the political, characterised as undecidable. Even though he sees the subjective act of decision as the mere motor of the radical democratic revolution, Laclau can not explain in which conditions the subject decides over the undecidability in order to accomplish radical (plural) democracy.

My critiques of Žižek are somewhat parallel. In his differentiation between the strategic act and the act proper, he refers to the Kantian epistemological distinction made between phenomena and noumena. Žižek also employs this epistemological separation on the ontological level and distinguishes between the ontic level of politics (where strategic acting is performed) and the ontological level of the political (in which the proper act of decision is performed). And clearly, he privileges the ontological level of the political, corresponding to the Kantian universe of noumena, but this attitude (stressing the moment of the undecidability) makes his analysis of contemporary political phenomena vague.

In a related manner, Žižek considers the proper act of decision to be revolutionary, but the main source of this situation is nothing but the crucial role

played by the madness in the decision-making procedure. Because of his emphasis on the self-alienated/split subject suffering from constitutive lack, undecidability, Žižek argues, is intrinsic to any act of decision, and this undecidability, which has nothing to do with the symbolic, can lead to a radical break in the symbolic order.

But similar to Laclau, Žižek's description of the act of decision's encounter with the 'Real' has significant shortcomings. The reason is that Žižek can not explain the sphere of the Real as a source of political change that can take place in the contemporary world order. Such theoretical deficiency is also valid for Žižek's studies on capitalism and class struggle.

In the case of the capitalism, Žižek employs an antonymous comprehension, seeing it as both socio-political reality and the Real. Even though the former theorisation, taking capitalism as reality, presents important arguments in terms of ideological critique, the latter, analysing capitalism as the Real, leads to further ambiguities. By regarding capitalism and class struggle as the Real, Žižek ignores the institutions of the socio-political practices performed and established by the capitalist relations of production and historical development of class struggle. Instead, by centralising the moment of undecidability, he mystifies those two fundamental factors moulding the current political agenda.

In this sense, his analysis of undecidability has no convincing relevance to the practical politics exercised within the conditions of the contemporary capitalist world order. In light of such a critical assessment, let me note that by paying specific attention to the moment of undecidability and comprehending the act of decision by means of this attention, Laclau and Žižek serve the dominance of the postmodern understanding of politics. By doing so, they see the processes of both subjectivisation and political change as shaped by the governing principles of undecidability. In this sense, the Kantian heritage of Laclau and Žižek offers a guideline for them in substantiating their understandings of undecidability.

To repeat my hypothesis, despite the fact that Laclau and Žižek 'seem' to have quite different viewpoints on the issue of undecidability, which can be caricaturised by the distinction between post-Marxism (Laclau) and orthodox Marxism (Žižek), I argue that they share a common group of Kantian tenets. And as a result, Laclau and Žižek reach considerably similar conclusions on the issue of

undecidability and subjectivity. In that context, even though they underline an uneasy interrelationship between undecidability and the act of decision, they end up with a strange form of irrational decisionism in analysing the concrete political phenomena, most especially emancipatory politics.

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