

MARX BARKS

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN LITERARY SOCIOLOGY: ERNESTO LACLAU AND CHANTAL MOUFFE'S POST-MARXISM

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How do literary agency (that is, the intentionally acting "subject", whether an individual, group or class) and social structures (i.e. theoretical models devised to objectify the interfaces between agents) relate? Exploring the work of Köhler, Bürger, Dubois and Bourdieu, the essay shows how valuable "social structures" have been developed in literary theory. Bringing these up to speed with the post-Marxist and post-structuralist theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the authors argue how a more balanced approach is also able to draw agency to the fore as a source of innovation and structural change. Italian Futurism provides a case in point.

Marx Laja. Nove perspektive v literarni sociologiji: postmarksizem Ernesta Laclaua in Chantal Mouffe. *Kako se povezujejo literarni agens (tj. intencionalno delujoči »subjekt«, bodisi posameznik, skupina ali razred) in socialne strukture (tj. teoretični modeli, oblikovani za to, da bi prikazali stične točke med delujočimi)? Razprava na podlagi del Köhlerja, Bürgerja, Dubois in Bourdieuja pokaže, kako so se v literarni teoriji razvile dragocene »socialne strukture«. Avtorja teorije omenjenih raziskovalcev dopolnita s postmarksistično teorijo Ernesta Laclaua in Chantal Mouffe ter pokažeta, da lahko bolj uravnotežen pristop postavi v ospredje agensa kot vir za inovacijo in strukturno spremembo. Primer za to je italijanski futurizem.*

In *Der historische Roman* (1937) György Lukács notes that in historiography many of Marxism's elementary insights degenerated into a "toten Hund". (Lukács 1965: 208) Fredric Jameson remarks, in an entirely different context, that "the concept of dog is [not] supposed to bark". (Jameson 1998: 37). Marxism, and its founder Marx, are "dead dogs" that are not supposed to bark anymore. But has Marx really stopped barking? Of course not. When we look at what he teaches about the relationship between structure and agency, we can state outright that in literary sociology the echoes of a barking Marx have never before resounded this loudly.

Agency and structure — subject positions and structural positions

In what follows, we will use the term “agency” to refer to the intentionally (non-arbitrarily) acting subject. Agency can be linked to an individual or a group of subjects that commits itself to a class struggle collectively. A social *structure* is a closed and centered totality. A structure aims to objectivize the complex and relatively stable relationships that determine the elementary characteristics of the act of an individual or collective agent. Hence, a social structure abstracts away from agency and is in fact no more than a research construction that schematizes social reality. Together, agency and structure resemble a Janus head. The determination of the ways in which the faces of this head relate to each other leads to elementary questions in literary sociology, such as: “Is the Italian futurist movement first and foremost the result of structural transformations, such as the (late) industrial revolution in Italy and the (equally late) unification of the country? Because of the national conflicts and the dominant provincialism that precede these structural shifts, the rising Italian bourgeoisie does not yet dispose of a clear-cut awareness of its cultural and national identity, which may turn futurism into a bourgeois unity of artistic practices. Or do we have to consider the futurist movement rather as the self-expression of a group of Italian authors who revolt against the previously dominant estheticism and try to offer answers to the structural changes in Italy?”¹

From these questions, with which we will deal in more detail later on, it appears that the bipolar formulation of the problem “agency *versus* structure” is closely related to the definition of the social position of the author. On the one hand, this social position can be perceived by means of a more or less deterministic conceptualization as a site within a larger social structure (*structural position*), while this place can be taken as an explanatory factor in the interpretation of artistic activities and the *subject positions* that result from it. On the other hand, the social position can be thought of in terms of subjective factors, so that the problem is reduced to a question concerning the subject’s position, which has, within a certain social context, consequences for social action and for the structural positions that result from it. In many theories of literary sociology, both alternatives lead to implicit (and sometimes explicit) reductionist theses. Therefore, it is the literary sociologist’s challenge to find a balance between the structural positions and the subject positions without identifying *a priori* the structural determinism (structure) or the subjective, voluntaristic interventions (agency) within either of the two concepts.

If we apply these conceptual problems to the problem of “literature and class”, we can argue that the social class positions reoccur at the level of structural positions (class relationships as elements of social structure), as well as on the level of subject positions (as class consciousness). In literary sociology, a discipline in which the concept of class is exceptionally important, the issues of agency and structure often take the form of a problem of class. The following are two of the central questions: does the writer’s

social position determine their artistic consciousness and, if so, to what extent?; which of the author's activities bear traces of a particular class environment and which do not?. The answers to these questions depend on the way in which we define the horizon of literary activities. Some theorists – such as Lukács, but also Lucien Goldmann, whose views we will discuss briefly below – tend to conceive of this horizon as a wide panorama with a view of the relations of tension within the capitalist mode of production (labor versus capital). From this perspective, futurism, for example, is portrayed against a background of social transformations exterior to the literary world. Other literary sociologists, such as those discussed below, assume that the horizon of the literary activities must first and foremost be seen in the context of a modern “class of intellectuals”. In the latter case, the question of the class position of a futurist author, for example, must be understood through his relation with other positions in the literary world (take, for example, aestheticism). Evidently, the preliminary determination of the literary-sociological horizon greatly influences the evaluation of factors of agency and structure.

Echoes of Marx in (marxist) sociology

In sociology, the methodological source of inspiration of literary sociology, Marx was one of the first to attempt to connect structure with agency. Marx' *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (1859) argues that the social agents of classes are determined by the material transformations of the economic conditions of production (Marx 1971: 10–11). In his *Kritik* Marx makes clear that agency is by definition determined structurally and that agency must be linked to a collective group of agents. At the same time he writes of class struggle in the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*: “*Die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft ist die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen*” (Marx 1984: 461). From this, Ernesto Laclau (1990: 7–11) deduces two insights, which eventually also refer to the task that Marx assigns to sociology. On the one hand, Laclau observes that for Marx the class struggle (agency) is hierarchically subordinate to the level of the economic structure, of the so-called “substructure”. Social classes become conscious of the structurally determined differences between them, which leads to conflict at the cultural level or the so-called “superstructure”, which is determined by relations of production. On the other hand, Laclau also indicates that it is impossible, within Marx' analyses, to deduce the antagonism between workers and capitalists from the capitalist economy. There is nothing “economic” that can logically explain the resistance of the “proletariat” or the “seller of working power” against the “bourgeoisie” or the “provider of capital”. In the texts referred to earlier, Marx does not offer a heuristic tool to conceptualize the relationship between class struggle (agency) and economic activity (structure). At most, we can deduce that some sort of hidden mental process makes classes what they are. Of course, this does not mean that the class struggle is not connected with the capitalist

economic structure. It does mean, however, that the conflict between classes is “not internal to capitalist relations of productions” (Laclau 1990: 9). In short, Marx does not succeed in defining the identity of an agent in relation to social structure. In order to conceive of that relation as one logical unit, Marx assigns to sociology the task of defining relations between agents and social structure. Only if we understand what agents are in their relation to a certain structure can we consider, in a second step, what they do.

It does not seem easy for modern sociology to achieve this.² Countless attempts have been made to chart the relation between the identity of agents and social structures, while avoiding structural determinism or voluntarism. Recent attempts were structured in a number of ways (Ritzer 2000: 81–2; Sztompka 1994; Torfing 1999: 137–154). A necessarily concise and incomplete survey of some of these attempts illustrates that sociology constantly defines the agent's identity by presupposing closed structures that help us to understand the organization of society. Even though most sociologists try to pose the relation between structure and subjective action dialectically, we find in many cases that reflections on social structures constitute the starting point, so that the investigation is confronted with *a priori* constructs.

Overall, we can divide the many sociological attempts into two groups. First we can refer to those theories that are explicitly Marxist. In Critical Theory, for example, Jürgen Habermas argues in the second volume of *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns, Zur Kritik der funktionalistische Vernunft* (1983) that the rationalization of the private life-world results in a number of structures that colonize this life-world and in turn trigger the resistance of a series of new social movements (Seidman 1989: 25; Morrow 1994: 183–9). Louis Althusser's structural determinism, in “The Object of Capital” (1979: 180) and “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus” (1971) can also be mentioned here, because in these texts agents are portrayed as “victims” of an economic system (cf. Hirst 1976; Applebaum, 1979; Gane 1983).³ Also, the functionalistic and analytical continuation of Althusser's texts, among others by G. A. Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence* (1978), induced a defense of structural determinism. Second, we can refer to sociologists who do not simply see themselves as Marxists, but clearly struggle with the Marxian *problématique* sketched above (Giddens 1984: 219). We are thinking here of Anthony Giddens' “structuration theory” in *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984), in which the relation between agents and structures is described as a duality; neither can exist without the other. A structure is, according to Giddens, limiting and liberating at the same time. An agent's identity is always determined in relation to a structure (Cohen 1989; Craib, 1993).⁴

We remain deliberately vague with respect to the specifics of the different “structures”, for it is important that all the sociologists mentioned here believe in “the possibility of structural determinism” (Torfing 1999: 148). While Habermas and Giddens present us with a more complex, dialectical relation between agency and structure than Althusser and Cohen,

Habermas and Giddens consider the agent as an entity that *resists* some kind of structural determinism or other. They all think of structures as entirely closed, objective units, with a number of calculable effects, especially the agent's identity. Admittedly, this insight is slightly gratuitous. The intention to distill invariable and logical structures (*logos*) from the social in order to subsequently explain the social has been a constitutive part of sociology since Marx. Nevertheless, the following brief outline of a few important movements in literary sociology makes clear that the determination of the agent's identity (and therefore also agency) in the light of well-demarcated structures has its limitations. However subtle the dialectics between subjective identities or positions on the one hand and structural positions on the other hand may be conceived, and however careful both positions may be connected to agency and structural determinants, the literary sociologist remains plagued by the specter of reductionism/determinism.

Echoes of Marx in (marxist) Literary Sociology

We begin our survey of a few relatively recent developments in literary sociology with Peter Bürger's and Jacques Dubois' (early) attempt to integrate the "structure *versus* agency" debate in literary sociology. Bürger and Dubois (despite diverging methodological sources) are clearly among the Marxist sociologists cited above. They assume that the subject position of the author can be described in a non-reductionist way, if this position is first investigated as a component of a social space, which they call the "literary institution". As will become clear, the specter of reductionism/determinism reappears not infrequently in the work of both authors. This general sociological problem moves towards the relation between structural positions within the social institution of "literature" and the relative freedom which Bürger and Dubois assign to the subject positions within that institution. Also, the foundation of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the "literary field", which we will deal with below, seems to be exposed to the same danger. Nevertheless, it will become clear that his non-Marxist objective of integrating structure and agency within his genetic structuralism provides a hopeful perspective. Also, Marx is always in the background of his work, but, as we will see, we can point to a number of substantial nuances in his much subtler definition of artistic identity, as compared to the work of Bürger and Dubois.

Bürger and Dubois: Institution and Class

In globo we can argue that literary sociology was dominated up to the seventies by attempts to isolate homologies between cultural agents and social structures. Up to that time literary sociology had to a large extent been characterized by a careful reduction of agency to a (Marxian) class structure. E. Köhler and L. Goldmann, for example, argued that the High Middle

Ages and Classicist poetry evoked the values of, respectively, the feudal aristocracy and the French nobility (Köhler 1977; Goldmann 1964).⁵ In brief, attempts to determine the (artistic) identity of an agent are not even initiated in their work. Agency is, as in some writings by Marx, determined immediately by the economic structure of a given society.

The kind of literary sociology that was developed by research groups around Peter Bürger and Jacques Dubois is a product of this tradition. However, as soon as they focused on the literary history of the nineteenth century, Bürger and later also Dubois found it increasingly difficult to articulate simple homologies. The autonomy that literary practices acquire from the nineteenth century onwards makes it impossible, they both argued, to simply relate class structure to artistic agency, let alone make it possible to establish a deterministic relation between structural positions within capitalist class society and artistic subject positions. Therefore, Dubois (1978) as well as Bürger (1975) reoriented their research in order to continue their quest for the dominance of bourgeois artistic agency and its traces in bourgeois literature. Entirely in the tradition of Köhler and Goldmann they considered the bourgeoisie as the dominant class, which determines literary production from the nineteenth century onwards. Bürger and Dubois' project culminated in their *Vom Aesthetizismus zum Nouveau Roman* (a collection of essays by Bürger's research group in Bremen) and *L'Institution de la littérature*. In the latter work, Dubois relied on Critical Theory and aspects of Bourdieu's work; Bürger based himself on Critical Theory and Max Weber. In both works the idea of the *artistic institution* is brought to the fore: a unit of values and practices that define the function of art and the artist in society. According to Bürger, the artistic institution mediates the relation between artistic agency and writing on the one hand and the socio-economic structure of bourgeois society on the other (Bürger 1978b: 39–54; Bürger 1979). Furthermore, Bürger shared Dubois's view on the relative freedom of subjects who are active within the literary institution. The literary institution filters or rephrases important and determining influences of larger social structures. In order to grasp the identity of artistic agents, Bürger and Dubois argued that these agents first need to be situated within an artistic institution which is inextricably bound up with the social developments within capitalism; the institution must be seen as a thoroughly “bourgeois” institution.

Despite this apparent innovation, it is clear that Bürger's and Dubois' late-Marxian literary sociology simply revitalized Marx' notion of class identity, without overcoming Marx' problem as sketched by Laclau. Their theory did, however, give rise to a classic structural determinism. In Bürger's definition of the “Institution Literatur“, determinism clearly shines through: “*der Begriff meint [...] die epochalen Funktionsbestimmungen von Kunst in ihrer sozialen Bedingtheit*” (1978: 261). Nevertheless, the most explicit example of this structural determinism can be found in their alleged “exposure” of the objective of more subversive literary agents. Dubois and Durand, for instance, argued:

writers belong to a dominated segment of the dominating class. Strengthened by the ministry on which they depend and the mission which they internalize, writers recast their anomic status in positive terms. Anomie signals either membership in a community of the elect or a subversive distance from the establishment. In both cases, as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out in his studies of Baudelaire and especially Flaubert, the writer claims to escape the hold of social determinants and class relationships. (Dubois and Durand 1988: 141)

According to Dubois and Durand these “claims” or assertions verge on the illusory if we confront them with the autonomous structure of the artistic institution within society (compare Bertrand, Dubois and Durand, 1993). In a similar vein, every attempt at subversive, discursive behavior within the institution is a senseless affirmative act if considered from a macro-sociological perspective. Futurism is no exception to this rule.⁶ Despite its instructive attempts to weaken the emphasis of aestheticism on artistic autonomy and the alienation of literature vis-à-vis the social totality, futurism's appeal to something outside the institution is untenable (Bürger, 1974: 67–8). For Bürger, even the most explicit anti-bourgeois attitude of an artistic agent is homologous to a class position within capitalism. Here, artistic agency is swallowed up entirely by its double, i.e. class structure. Marx' Janus head becomes a caricature.

The innovation that the institutional analysis of Bürger (and the Critical Theory which he relies on in general – Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas), and to a large extent also of Dubois (and the Bourdieus Charle, Ponton and Jurt), sought to introduce can be characterized as primarily “neo-expressivistic”: whatever action is undertaken by an artistic agent, it always expresses the more comprehensive and closed social class structure. If, however, we look more closely at Dubois' source of inspiration, namely Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, it is striking that the latter describes the identity of artistic agents in a much more complex way. On the one hand, Bourdieu can be considered as a theorist who reformulates the “old” dialectic between social positions and subject positions in a framework in which the determining influence of the literary field is fundamental, as with Bürger and Dubois. Moreover, it becomes clear from his work in cultural sociology (Bourdieu 1979) that he groups the agents of the literary field with the dominated fraction of the dominant classes of society by means of a structurally deterministic argument. On the other hand, Bourdieu also develops new insights that allow literary sociology to rethink the notion of “agency”, so that a new view of the relation between structural positions and subject positions seems to be within reach. More specifically, his notion of *habitus* (which many literary sociologists, paradoxically enough, do not consider to be a very fruitful concept)⁷ opens up perspectives for rethinking structural determinism within the literary field and to translating it into a genetic, structuralist frame of reference. With this theoretical move Bourdieu succeeds in describing an (artistic) agent's identity in a way that partially transcends Marx' (economic) class problem.

Bourdieu's Genetic Structuralism⁸

The innovative power of Bourdieu's literary sociology is due to two theoretical operations. On the one hand, Bourdieu introduces a number of concepts that allow the literary sociologist insight into the place of the author within a "class of intellectuals". By focusing first on the *literary field* in the relation between literature and society, the problem of agency and structure is presented in a subtler way than before. "A *field* for Bourdieu is a network of *positions* defined by a particular distribution of [economic, cultural and/or symbolic] capital, which endows that field with its own practical logic". (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 101). The way agents take up positions and act within the social hierarchy of a field (in Bourdieu's words: *les prises de position*) is determined by the amount and kind of capital they bring along. Even more important than the introduction of "field logic", however, is the aforementioned concept of *habitus*. The *habitus* of a social agent is constituted by the unity of patterns of evaluation, action and presentation that regulate an agent's activities. Bourdieu explains social behavior by noting the acquired dispositions that accompany the agent while he or she is "playing" different social fields – through processes of upbringing and education and through practices that are characteristic of *peer groups* to which the agent belongs in his or her life: "When I say *habitus*, I mean that we act according to dispositions – a very common word in English and in French too – that is, a durable and transposable set of principles of perception, appreciation, and action, capable of generating practices and representations that are (usually) adapted to the situation" (Bourdieu 1991: 29; Bourdieu's italics). According to Bourdieu, an agent who acts in a field is characterized by "a practical sense of 'the game', a set of *dispositions* to act, which is determined by structure positions in the field and the particular social trajectory (and history) of that agent" (ibidem, our italics). This pre-determined *habitus* – these dispositions – provide the agent a certain identity within a field, and, depending on the amount of capital the agent has acquired during their life, they can also disrupt and reform institutional practices.

According to Bourdieu, the complex relation between *habitus* and field is determined by a power struggle for capital and positions within a field the eventual aim of which is to underscore the distinction between agents in the society and the field. We have already mentioned that there are several kinds of capital, but for an artistic agent who enters the literary field, cultural capital becomes especially crucial. Cultural skills are relevant for all groups in society, but for an author they are indispensable. It is through upbringing and education that an artistic agent acquires cultural capital, a unity of cognitive data and judgments, which are necessary for orientation in society and the literary field (Bourdieu 1989: 146; Wilkes 1990: 109–132). According to Bourdieu, the differences in Bürger's so-called "bourgeois artistic institution" link up with the modern consensus about the role of cultural or artistic practice. In the literary field, we find at every synchronous moment a dominant consensus about the relevant dispositions

for cultural practices (Bourdieu 1991: 29). Cultural capital is unevenly distributed between the agents that people a field, and Bourdieu argues that it is precisely this inequality that causes social antagonism in the literary field. As opposed to Bürger and Dubois, Bourdieu does not simply relate the shared cultural dispositions to the “bourgeoisie”. The idea of an “economic class” is not entirely alien to Bourdieu's genetic structuralism, but in his analysis non-economic parameters also define artistic identity and agency. For example, Bourdieu succeeds in isolating a modern artistic class by emphasizing that the authoritative literati in a field share several cultural skills. Furthermore, this artistic class differs from other important classes in the society, such as the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie, the commercial middle class, etc. The artistic class uses its cultural skills above all to acquire symbolic capital in the literary field and (only secondarily) in the wider society. All forms of capital can be converted into symbolic capital, “once they are (mis)recognised as and have the effects of forms of power” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 101). Certain artistic ways or styles of life, for example, can hardly be characterized as being “bourgeois”. Nevertheless, they occupy a significant place in the social, according to Bourdieu. Hence, symbolic power is not only used in the literary field to impose, for instance, a certain poetics. This power is also related to others in the social field. In Bourdieu's genetic structuralism the domain of symbolic power is therefore described as a “meta-field” in which divergent forms of capital meet. Nevertheless, even though symbolic capital in the literary field consists of different forms of power that also exist outside the field, what counts as symbolic capital in the literary field is itself eventually determined by (the structure of) the practices in this field. Artistic identity and agency are, in other words, mainly determined by the quantity of symbolic capital acquired in the literary field.

In the investigation of patterns of *habitus*, Bourdieu's attempts to find a balance between factors of agency and of structure are both remarkable and fundamentally innovative. While theorists formerly tended to identify the literary institution with the concept of structure and opposed it to subjective activity (agency), Bourdieu marks the subject position as an ensemble of structural factors and mechanisms of agency. Therefore, the concept of *habitus* both *structures* and *is structured*. In Bourdieu, agency is neither a simple exponent of the structural roles imposed by the social (as in Parsons 1951), nor the result of an undisguised voluntarism. In his own words, his theory ends “the absurd opposition between individual and society”, between agency and structure (Bourdieu 1990: 31).

For literary sociology Bourdieu's subtle game of structures has advantages and disadvantages. Bourdieu tends not to interweave subject positions in the literary field with the class structure very much. The classes he works on are situated within a theoretical framework that gives pride of place to non-economic parameters, so that he gives little credit to such monolithic categories as “the bourgeois artistic institution”.⁹ The aesthetic disposition that is central to Bourdieu's literary sociology lends the artistic class a special status. Bourdieu's strength, however, also appears to be his

weakness, because as soon as he has described the situation in the literary field at a certain moment, he does not succeed in convincingly relating the alleged autonomous literary field and the corresponding artistic "mentality" back to other fields. His theory seems to be very well-equipped to clarify the *belletristic* of the past two centuries, but the emphasis he puts on the symbolic capital of the literary field, which is constitutive for a well-delineated position of the literary agent in society, reduces the essential complexity of cultural and artistic identity. Bourdieu implicitly seems to assume that social agents in the literary field identify themselves fully with a single subject position – that of the producer of aesthetic discourses and objects. There is a consensus that Bourdieu pays too little attention to the literature itself, to the way in which cultural agents try to define themselves *by means of* literature and poetic texts, to the attempts of authors to introduce new forms of identity to their audience, etc. The literary field contains all of these essential phenomena. Bourdieu considers, for example, the entire avant-garde movement as the ultimate, self-critical reflection of modern literature. In short, the *anomie* we encountered with Dubois and Bürger rears its head again.

The difficulty of reconnecting the literary field to other fields in Bourdieu's frame of reference derives from his under-developed view of symbolic capital and the symbolic power struggle. Bourdieu offers no heuristic tools to describe how the symbolic capital that is specific to the literary field can be converted into symbolic capital in other fields (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 102ff.). The social role of artistic agency outside the literary field therefore remains unclear. In other words, the question of whether the futurist movement itself proposes solutions for certain social changes, such as the late industrial revolution in Italy or the late unification of the country, cannot be answered by means of Bourdieu's theory. Bourdieu prides himself on his solution to the absurd problem of "structure *versus* agency", but it very much looks as if he achieves this by structuring agency *a priori* (as *habitus*) and by *a fortiori* structuring the practices in the literary field.¹⁰ In this admittedly innovative move he does not seem capable of linking the social (power) constellation in the field to other social structures. In a sense, Bourdieu fails in the determination of the structural factors that interact with artistic subject positions. The structural factors that he mentions are often limited to the structural positions that writers take up in a given literary field, and ignore the potential multiplicity and heterogeneity of subject positions. The idea of homology does not disappear entirely from his work, but it is restricted to the literary field: for Bourdieu, literature only displays field-internal power relations and hierarchy.¹¹ This forces us again to return to one of Marx' initial problems: his structural determinism. Marx, it appears, barks with a deafening reverberation.

Post marxist (literary) sociology: Laclau and Mouffe

In order to gain insight into the subject positions that are taken up in a literary field, the literary sociologist needs a theoretical framework that conceptualizes the potential multiplicity of subject positions in literary practices.

Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's self-proclaimed "post-structuralist" and "post-Marxist" theory offers the relevant tools without simply jettisoning a long sociological tradition.¹² Their discourse-theoretical model refines the dialectic between structural positions and subject positions. While the literary subject positions in Bourdieu's genetic structuralism are approached from the interaction between cultural capital and subjective actions, their post-Marxist perspective pays more attention to the *discursive articulations* that incorporate the "cultural capital" of social agents. Through this discourse-analytical turn it becomes possible to overcome Bourdieu's practical limitations. As opposed to Bourdieu, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that practices and non-discursive phenomena (technologies, the organization of production, etc.) cannot be analyzed outside of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 107). This suddenly makes Bourdieu's investigation of the workings of symbolic capital (and the symbolic meta-field) much more succinct and shows their theory's value. For discursive articulations are not at all exclusively situated in the domain of the literary field, but comprehend a broad range of discursive constellations. In this way, Laclau and Mouffe succeed in preserving and complementing the advantages of Bourdieu's view (the dialectic of agency and structure at the level of the subjective social behavior – the *habitus*). For them, subjectivity and social behavior is, just as for Bourdieu, twofold and always contains structural positions (which show themselves only through discursive articulations) and subject positions ("an individual's sense of her structural positions") (Smith 1998: 86). Moreover – and this is where they transcend the Bourdian problem – they assume that any subject position can be understood only in the context of a system of subject positions, a system which is realized against the background of a very diversified arsenal of structural positions. From the perspective of literary sociology and its reconceptualization this is an important correction. For while the renovation of literary sociology with respect to the problem of class mainly consisted of restricting the horizon of interpretation to the literary field, subsystem or institution, Laclau and Mouffe open up the horizon, without raking up the deterministic views of the older literary sociology (which also worked on a broad horizon).

Just like the late Foucault, Derrida, Žižek and Spivak, Laclau and Mouffe emphasize that the relation between structure and agency (and the basis for the authority or power of the latter) in a specific field cannot be determined *a priori* (Laclau 1993).¹³ By taking up the task that Marx reserved for sociology, i.e. the definition of an agent's identity in order to conceptualize the relationship between agency and structure, Laclau and Mouffe demonstrate, partly after a fruitful dialogue with Slavoj Žižek (1989), that the reductive attitude of modern sociology is untenable. Laclau and Mouffe offer at least two reasons for this conclusion. First, for Laclau and Mouffe, agents are characterized by a (Lacanian) constitutive deficit of identity before their so-called *subjectivization* (i.e. their acquisition of a situationally specific identity) (Laclau and Zac 1994). Because of this deficit subjects are compelled (during their subjectivization) to identify themselves with certain (institutional) structures that are already present and creditworthy,

and which discursively create order in the world and assign a structural position to the subject (Žižek 1989: 170–175). In other words, the agent always forms part of the structure with which he identifies. An agent's identity and his place in a “given situation” is only given in relation to a structure (Laclau 1990: 44). Second, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the initial deficit of identity can never be fully overcome. The opposite would suggest the existence of a (sociological) structure that can chart an entire society, a structure that would also assign an unchangeable structural position to an agent, and which would make agency fully predictable. In *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990) – perhaps one of the most Marxian sounding titles of the last decade – Laclau nevertheless makes clear that structures that aim to envelop a part or the whole of society are constantly susceptible to *dislocation*. Dislocation must be understood as the destabilization of a discursive structure that results from the surfacing of a traumatic event that cannot be domesticated, symbolized or integrated in the discursive structure in question (Torfing 1999: 301). Therefore, a dislocation always necessitates a restructuring. If we look at Bourdieu's view in the light of this insight, we can argue that an agent who goes from the literary field to another field can be confronted with a dislocation of the field-internal dominant structure, which forces him or her to a restructuring. Crucial in this respect are subject positions (such as class, sex, generation, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) used to characterize an agent when he identified himself elsewhere with certain structures. These subject positions are by no means limited to those of the “producer of texts”, as with Bourdieu (which also means that they are less closed), but they are indeed to a large extent determined by what Bourdieu calls the *habitus* (compare Smith 1998: 63 ff.).

In this connection, Laclau and Mouffe also introduce their concept of *hegemony*. Whenever agents are forced to restructure themselves, they identify themselves with hegemonic discursive structures that order the radical diversity of norms, values, opinions and perspectives within a certain institution or practice at a certain moment (Laclau 1990: 60 and 50). In every field of society we encounter one or more hegemonic structures. Even when we restrict ourselves to one given field, we can argue that those structures are potentially susceptible to dislocation. A certain act in the artistic field, for example, can suddenly force agents to a restructuring of the dominant view of artistic practice. To take an extreme example: the uproar after Duchamp's “*Fountain*” (that's the actual title) compelled an artistic agent to incorporate this work in a certain way in his discourse about art, which potentially (but certainly not in every agent's discourse) resulted in a dislocation (Perloff 1999). Because of the multiplicity of subject positions that co-determine those structural positions, substantial shifts in another field can also induce the dislocation of a field-specific hegemony. (Our concise excursion to *l'Italia futurista* below will make clear how this can take place). As has been mentioned, a dislocation induces a restructuring. For this elicited process, Laclau and Mouffe reserve the concept *re-articulation*. Every discourse, in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, results from

an *articulation*, a practice that relates elements to each other so that their identity is modified. An *element* is “any difference [of identity] that is not discursively articulated [within a structure]”. Once an element has been articulated, Laclau and Mouffe call it a *moment*. Moments are “differential positions, in so far as they appear articulated within discourse” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105).

In brief, dislocation is the precondition for every temporality, possibility and, to revive a seemingly old-fashioned word from sociology: freedom (Laclau, 1990: 41–43). Because structures are being dislocated time and again, and because dislocation opens up a *terrain of undecidability*, the agent is forced time and again to decide with which discursive structure he identifies, which (potential) hegemony seems consistent, within the institutionally given situation in which he finds himself. Because, ultimately, no single structure can grasp or discursively “stitch up” (*suture*) the whole of society by tying together all chains of meaning, structures never fully determine an (artistic) agent. The logical incompleteness of any structure constitutes the *conditio sine que non* for agency, for the intentionally acting subject (Laclau 1990: 210–11). *Consequently Laclau and Mouffe consider agency not only as an internal part of a discursive structure. Their theory escapes every form of structural determinism, without at the same time lapsing into a naive voluntarism.*

The heuristic value of Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory of discourse needs further investigation. Laclau and Mouffe are primarily political theorists, and their own research is limited to case-studies in politics. The concept of articulation, which has been borrowed by, among others, Stuart Hall, has subsequently penetrated literary theory and *cultural studies*,¹⁴ but the discursive processes that, according to Laclau and Mouffe, enable (re)articulations, have not yet sunk in. In what follows, we will, out of the three discursive processes they present in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) – *relations of differences and equivalences*, *symbolic over-determination*, and the role of *nodal points* or *Lacanian points de capiton* – only shed light on the utility of one discursive process: that of the Lacanian nodal point (Žižek 1989: 95–97). Briefly, nodal points (also called “quilting points”) are over-determined “empty” signifiers that float above the syntagmatic chain of meaning of a discursive structure. They synchronously fix the identity of as many elements and agents as possible. “God”, “Nation” and “Class” are only a few examples of such nodal points which are over-determined to such an extent that they could literally mean almost anything. A hegemonic structure always comprises a number of nodal points to connect different fractions within institutions. In literary sociology, as we hope to make clear in our short sketch of a number of aspects of futurism, these nodal points are most clarifying when we try to describe how artistic agency and identity are related to social structures outside the literary field or the institution.

Futurism

Let us begin with the questions that initiated this study, by reformulating them in the light of Marx' legacy. Is the identity of the futurist movement an exponent of structural shifts such as the late Italian industrial revolution or the late unification of the country? Or should the futurist movement rather be seen as a group of agents that to a large extent determines its own identity and actions? Simply answering one of the two questions looks a lot like the old problem of what came first: the chicken (structure) or the egg (agency). Dubois and Bürger do not doubt that futurism can only be considered in the light of one of the previously mentioned structural shifts: futurist literature is determined by the economic structure of the society and in the literary institution within this society futurism is eventually conditioned by the laws and regulations imposed by the dominant economic class. Dubois and Bürger resolutely choose the chicken. Bourdieu manages to transcend the economic reductionism of both, but only, as we saw, at the cost of many more social structures to which futurism perhaps can or has to be related. Bourdieu's artistic agent is not simply a "product" of the economic system; he or she acts relatively autonomously, but then only within the literary field. What kind of impact an artistic practice can have outside this field, on a broader social horizon, and what the role of the symbolic capital from the literary field could be outside this field, remains unclear. Bourdieu's attempt to make the egg more decisive therefore does not immediately seem fruitful either.

Laclau and Mouffe's innovative theory of discourse forces us to reformulate the earlier presentation of the problem. Because an agent always inscribes him- or herself in a certain hegemonic (institutional) discourse that orders (articulates) not only the practices within the field, but also elements outside of that field into a totality, we have to look for those elements that are constitutive for several institutionally determined discourses from different fields. These questions constitute, as Marx already indicated, a Janus head: how does the futurist movement act, on the basis of its *habitus* and subject positions within the (counter-) hegemonic discursive structures that try to grasp the radical shifts in Italy and ascribe a structural position to agents? The modernolatriy and the futurist praise of technological innovation that was brought about by the industrial revolution in Italy are already familiar in this context. The aesthetic and "spiritual" project of the futurist avant-garde seems unthinkable without it. In what follows I will shed light on a number of aspects of the structural shift that Bürger and Dubois ignored: the formation of the Italian state. This short excursion is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather aims to argue for the aforementioned utility of the Lacanian nodal points.

When, in 1913, the futurist Giovanni Papini proposes, in the journal *Lacerba*, to give up every political ambition, Filippo Tomasso Marinetti replies on the front page of the following issue of the journal with the publication of the "Futurist Political Program". According to Marinetti, art and politics are inextricably bound up with each other, because futurism

aims for the transformation of every aspect of individual and collective life. The connection between futurism and political fascism is the subject of numerous studies (cf. Berghaus 2000: 532–537 for a bibliographic survey). As Emilio Gentile demonstrates, the *myth of the “Italian revolution”* (*Risorgimento*) has to be considered as an important cornerstone of the articulation between both the political and the literary fields (Gentile 2000: 4 ff.). The relatively late unification of the Italian state in the second part of the nineteenth century provoked a gamut of discourses on the direction in which it should evolve. Immediately before and after The Great War, the Italian avant-garde, the nationalist movement, as well as the intellectuals associated with the journals *Leonardo* and *La Voce*, articulated models of what the new state should be like – a new state, which had to replace the relatively new liberal state, which was seen as incompetent and decadent (compare Poggi 1997). Gentile argues that the institutional or field-internal differences that characterize this discourse do not prevent these discourses from commingling. According to Gentile, the siren call initially enabling this articulation was the signifier *l’Italianismo*, which denotes an “Italy destined to play a central role in the twentieth century”. In the light of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse this signifier can easily be considered as a *point de capiton* or nodal point: it hardly means anything. Only a (negative) consensus connects the discourses mentioned: an abhorrence of parliamentary democracy, the bourgeoisie, and the democratic parties. They do not agree on a positive alternative.

In this context field-internal, discursive and *habitus*-bound elements also play a role. In opposition to its political counterparts in the political field, futurism aims for a state in which the artist-futurist exercises power. Before the war this excluded any concrete practice that went beyond the literary field. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, it is only after the war, after the formation of a true futurist political party, that the dialogue between futurism and fascism starts to unfold (Bru 2002). The concrete co-operation with “rightist” fascism, however, lasted only less than one year and abruptly ended in 1919 (Gentile 2000: 10). The myth of the Italian revolution was dislocated by a traumatic event: the occupation of the factories in the autumn of 1920. In the journal *La testa di ferro*, run by Mario Carli, texts suddenly appeared that were openly anti-fascist, that sympathized with the “revolutionary Bolsheviks”, and that for the first time articulated the Italian revolution with a new (Marxian) nodal point: the (Marxian) class. While in the past, futurism aimed for an Italian revolution through the unification of (vitalist) national forces, futurism’s entire program is magically converted into a social revolution, which is deemed possible on condition of the co-operation of the proletariat and the futurists.

This complex game of articulations, which we have only touched upon, leads us back to Marx again. The game indicates that for a long time class functioned – perhaps also in academic discourse – as a *point de capiton*. Only when we try to complete the task that Marx assigned to literary sociology, may Marx stop barking and really become the “dead dog” that Lukács takes him for.

NOTES

¹ Cf. Charles Tilly and Richard Tilly (1975: 87–190) and Transfaglia (1973) on the economic, political and national issues in Italy during the *fin de siècle*. Zapponi (1981: 7–205), Blum (1996: 5) and the introductory essays in *La cultura italiana del '900 attraverso le riviste* focus on the then marginal position of Italian culture within a European perspective.

² Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that some (e.g., Archer, 1982) propose a complete separation of agency and structure.

³ For an interpretation of Althusser that differs from ours, see Sprinker (1987: 267–298), which is based on a larger corpus of Althusser's texts.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu could be mentioned here as well, but because his sociological method has also been applied to literature, we discuss Bourdieu in the next section.

⁵ In his well-known article on the system of genres, Köhler argues that boundaries of genre and style coalesce with class boundaries, with “univocally determinable” social groups. (Köhler 1977: 12).

⁶ Bürger conceives of the bourgeois artistic institution as the functional equivalent of religion (a thesis which he borrows from Weber) and argues that the religious divide between the here and the hereafter corresponds to *die Trennung der idealen Welt der Kunst vom Alltagsleben* (Bürger 1983: 29). It is this divide that is explicitly discussed and eventually bridged in the programs and texts of the historical avant-garde movements.

⁷ Cf. Verdaasdonk and Rekveldt (1981), Munnichs and Van Rees (1986), Gartman (1991) and Janssen (2001).

⁸ The term “genetic structuralism” (synonymous with “structuralist constructivism” or “structural constructivism”) is used in Bourdieu (1990: 14).

⁹ The fact that Dubois does have a lot to do with his sources of inspiration at the time of writing – Sartre, Barthes, Adorno; in later work Dubois concentrates (together with Durand) on the homology of discourses and structures in the literary field. Nonetheless, he continues to treat the problem of *habitus* in step-motherly fashion.

¹⁰ Bourdieu writes, for example, of the artistic class as a group that lives by *non-intentional* dispositions (Bourdieu 1991: 29).

¹¹ See Geldof (1993) for a complementary interpretation of Bourdieu that thinks this insight through.

¹² The work of both authors nonetheless caused a genuine riot. For an introduction to the extremely critical reception of their work since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) in sociology, cf. Laclau and Mouffe (1987) and Sim (1998: 14–67). Critical and comprehensible introductions to their theory can be found in (among others) Best and Kellner (1999), Barret (1992), Bernans (1999), Sim (1998), Torfing (1999), Smith (1998), Howarth (2000), Howarth, Norval and Stravakasis (2000) and Carpentier and De Vos (2001).

¹³ For a comparison with Foucault, see Dyrberg (1997). See also Derrida (1988: 149), Žižek (1991, on Spivak: 201–3, 214–219).

¹⁴ On the influence of the concept of articulation in *cultural studies*, which Laclau (1977) borrows from Althusser and Gramsci, Daryl Slack argues, “The concept of articulation is perhaps one of the most generative in contemporary cultural studies. It is crucial for understanding how cultural theorists conceptualize the world, analyze it and participate in shaping it.” (Daryl Slack 1996: 112). Compare also Hall (1980, 1985, and 1986).

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**■ MARX LAJA. NOVE PERSPEKTIVE
V LITERARNI SOCIOLOGIJI: POSTMARKSIZEM
ERNESTA LACLAUA IN CHANTAL MOUFFE**

Ključne besede: literarna teorija / sociologija literature / postmarksizem / Laclau, Ernesto / Mouffe, Chantal

Key words: literary theory / literary sociology / postmarxism / Laclau, Ernesto / Mouffe, Chantal

Razprava želi na novo presoditi zapleteno razmerje med literarnim agensom (tj. intencionalno delujočim »subjektom«, bodisi posameznikom, skupino ali razredom) in socialnimi strukturami (tj. teoretičnimi modeli, oblikovanimi za to, da bi prikazali kompleksne in socialno sedimentirane stične točke med delujočimi). V Marxovem poznem delu se ti dve kategoriji pojavljata kot Janusov obraz. Marx na eni strani pokaže, kako so agensi (ali razredi) določeni s svojo umeščenostjo v socialno (ekonomsko) strukturo, po drugi strani pa trdi, da lahko boj med agensi redefinira socialno strukturo. Marx nam je torej zapustil paradoks, kajti ni se mu posrečilo razložiti, kako je prišlo do boja med agensi (razredi), s tem pa je izključil možnost strukturne spremembe. Razprava na podlagi del Köhlerja, Bürgerja, Duboisa in Boudieuja pokaže, kako so se v literarni teoriji razvile dragocene »socialne strukture«, da bi z njimi definirali kompleksne odnose med literarnimi agensi. Avtorja teorije omenjenih raziskovalcev dopolnita s postmarksistično in poststrukturalistično teorijo Ernesta Laclaua in Chantal Mouffe ter trdita, da lahko bolj uravnotežen pristop postavi v ospredje agensa kot vir za inovacijo in strukturno spremembo. Koncepta »dislokacije« in »artikulacije«, ki sta ju razvila Laclau in Chantal Mouffe, omogočata uravnotežen pristop k spremembi literature, ki ne postane žrtev niti strukturnega determinizma niti voluntarizma. S kratko obravnavo italijanskega futurizma avtorja pokazeta, kako je mogoče misliti ne samo spremembe na področju literature, ampak tudi kulturne spremembe, ki izhajajo s tega področja.

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