

**The Impasse of the Left in Western Thought: Laclau and
Mouffe's Critique of Classical Marxism
– and –
Everyday Life in Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts"**

by

Narcisa Medianu
MA in Society and Politics, Central European University 1997
BA in Sociology, University of Bucharest 1996

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APPROVAL

Name: Narcisa Medianu
Degree: Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Title of Essays: The Impasse of the Left in Western Thought: Laclau and Mouffe's Critique of Classical Marxism – and –
Everyday Life in Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts"

Examining Committee:

Chair:

Dr. Michael Kenny
Professor of Anthropology

Dr. Kathy Mezei
Senior Supervisor
Professor of Humanities

Dr. Peter Schouls
Supervisor
Visiting Professor of Philosophy, UBC

Dr. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon
External Examiner
Associate Professor of Humanities

Date Defended/Approved: December 8, 2009



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ABSTRACT

Essay 1: “The Impasse of the Left in Western Thought: Laclau and Mouffe's Critique of Classical Marxism” explores the possibilities for social change in democratic Western societies. While Laclau and Mouffe’s project has revolutionised the Left and redefined Marx in terms relevant to today’s society, their optimistic view of the future has yet to come true. The final part of the essay discusses the limitations of Laclau and Mouffe’s project, including the rise of individualism and the decreased relevance of antagonistic political identities.

Keywords: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe - Radical democracy

Essay 2: “Everyday Life in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*” aims to show that Virginia Woolf’s works and critical social theory share a common interest in the creative and subversive potential of everyday moments. Through the works of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, critical social theory has witnessed a revived interest in the sphere of everyday life. This growing interest in the everyday has been initiated in fiction by modernist authors, such as Virginia Woolf, who have captured the multiplicity and fluidity of everyday moments, moving away from the heroic and the monumental.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf – *Between the Acts*; Theories of Everyday Life

DEDICATION

For Călin

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
The Impasse of the Left in Western Thought: Laclau and Mouffe's Critique of Classical Marxism.....	7
Introduction	8
Conclusion	41
Reference List.....	43
Everyday Life in Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts"	45
Introduction	46
Conclusion	76
Reference List.....	77

**THE IMPASSE OF THE LEFT IN WESTERN
THOUGHT: LACLAU AND MOUFFE'S CRITIQUE
OF CLASSICAL MARXISM**

Introduction

The Communist Manifesto was published for the first time in 1848, in a time of major social and political upheaval, when the revolutionary wave was sweeping throughout Europe. With the advance of capitalism and the failure of the working class to mobilize and bring about the proletarian revolution, the overall possibility for radical social change, as forecast in *The Communist Manifesto*, appears to have diminished. In what follows, I intend to explore the critique of classical Marxism formulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their ground-breaking book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*¹, first published in 1985, and continued by Laclau in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*², published in 1990. Through their critique, I will be able to throw light on why *The Communist Manifesto*'s predictions about the proletarian revolution could not be realised.

The work of Laclau and Mouffe started off as a response to the crisis of classical Marxism which, many felt, failed to explain the increased complexity of advanced industrial societies, the fragmentation of various forms of political resistance, and the decreased relevance of class identity. Attacking classical Marxism at its core, their critique questions the ideas that the logic of the capitalist system is contradictory in itself and, as a consequence, the proletarian revolution is a historical necessity. As an alternative, Laclau and Mouffe put

¹ Hereafter cited in text as *HSS*.

² Hereafter cited in text as *NRR*.

forward the project of radical democracy, rethinking the role of class identity in bringing about social change.

With the Left currently struggling to maintain the relevance of class identity as a source of solidarity for political action, Laclau and Mouffe's critique becomes increasingly relevant for today's politics. Their critique re-positions classical Marxism in the contemporary debates on the Left, outlining the role of new social movements in expanding the principles of freedom and equality. However, while asserting the fundamental role of conflict in democratic societies, their critique does not address the implications of neoliberalism for the adversarial model. In the last part of my essay, I will discuss the limitations of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, drawing on the works of Michel Foucault. Specifically, I will look at the connections between neoliberalism and the enterprising vision of the self in undermining the political relevance of antagonistic social identities in Western democracies.

The Proletarian Revolution

Marx and Engels saw the revolutionary ethos present around 1848 as evidence that class struggle can mobilise workers and bring about fundamental social change. They expected the proletarian revolution to overthrow capitalism by doing away with the contradictions existing in the capitalist mode of production. Departing from Hegel who saw historical development as guided by Spirit (Geist) coming onto the scene, Marx and Engels understood development in reference to existing societies and actual historical facts, and focused on the material forces which, they argued, would bring about historical change.

According to the principle of material determinism, the ultimate cause of social and cultural change lies with the economics of society or, to use the terms coined by Marx, the “superstructure” (human subjectivity) is determined by the “base” (material substance). According to Marx and Engels:

“the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the philosophy but in the economics of each particular epoch” (*Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, 90).

The contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production, Marx believed, will eventually trigger the proletarian revolution and the coming of the classless society. Capitalism must come to an end because productive forces have evolved in a way that contradicts the logic of the capitalist system of production. Forces of production, according to Marx, have become independent and divorced from most individuals, and have come to belong to a small minority of owners of private property (*The German Ideology*, 91). The proletarian revolution must abolish private property because “the productive forces and forms of intercourse have developed so far that, under the domination of private property, they have become destructive forces, and because the contradiction between the classes has reached its extreme limit” (*The German Ideology*, 117).

Marx argues, therefore, that capitalist economy has led to a change in the relation between labour and means of production. Instead of being subordinated to human activity, productive forces have become an end in themselves and the commodified labour force has become nothing else than a means for the

bourgeoisie to maximise their wealth. Since productive forces have become means of oppression, their appropriation is necessary for the working class to become free and non-alienated from their labour.

The primary force that drives social change lies, therefore, in the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. However, for the revolution to take place, class struggle has to be intensified and the proletariat has to develop a class consciousness by articulating their common interests, that is, it has to become a “class for itself” rather than a “class in itself”. Without fully developing a theory of class-consciousness, Marx stressed the role of the communist party in organising the working class, which would come to see itself as a revolutionary force through political struggle.

Laclau and Mouffe: Hegemony and the Critique of Marx

Laclau and Mouffe begin their critique by questioning the necessity of the connection between contradictions emerging from the expansion of productive forces and class struggle. They agree with Marx that relations of production have come to be in contradiction with productive forces, acting as an obstacle in the way of historical change. However, against Marx, they argue that there is no antagonism in this contradiction because the system could collapse without a confrontation between classes taking place. Although class struggle is the expression of an antagonistic relation between classes, it is not a historical necessity in itself. In order to explain the emergence of class identity and class struggle, one needs a more elaborate conception of the articulation point between relations of subordination and the awareness of these relations in terms

of identity and solidarity. The main thesis put forward by Laclau and Mouffe is that for the antagonistic relation between classes to exist, the antagonism has to be constructed through a hegemonic discourse.

The failure of classical Marxist philosophy to elaborate a more nuanced conception of what came to be known as “hegemony” obscures the mechanisms, which make possible the connection between class identity and proletarian revolution. The concept of “hegemony”, central to Laclau and Mouffe’s critique of Marx, has its origins in Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, written between 1929 and 1935, during his 11 years of incarceration. From Gramsci’s perspective, hegemony can be understood as the process through which the consent of the masses is organised in support of the dominant class. Through hegemony, the ruling bloc can create a popular culture that fosters consent and secures the participation of masses in the political project. Hegemony ensures, thus, the balance between force and consent, between coercion and persuasion, necessary for maintaining the ruling class in power. As opposed to the more limited notion of political ideology, hegemony encompasses cultural institutions, families, education as well and political institutions. As Michele Barrett points out, Gramsci has the merit of opposing economic reductionism through stressing the non-deterministic character of hegemony. Distinct from superstructures in classical Marxist theory, hegemony for Gramsci cannot be reduced to its economic foundations. The concept of hegemony allows Laclau and Mouffe to question the assumption that social and cultural change has an ultimate material cause and that social identities can be explained through laws governing

relations of production. Decoupling the process of identity formation from its material base, Laclau and Mouffe reject thus the unidirectional determination of class identity through the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production.

A second departure from classical Marxism in Laclau and Mouffe is the incorporation of psychoanalysis in explaining the constitution of the social and political field. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, Laclau and Mouffe place the category of “lack” at the heart of any individual and social identity³. Lacan’s claim is that the identity of a subject is constituted through identification with a signifier. However, because of the limits of signification in the realm of language, the process of identification is always incomplete and the filling in is temporary. Starting from the presupposition that individual and social identities are incomplete, Laclau and Mouffe discuss the implications for political analysis. On this basis, they disagree with classical Marxism over the idea that societies can be seen as closed systems organized around a single fixed principle. To use Laclau and Mouffe’s terminology, society is not a “sutured” totality. The concept of “suture” is understood by Laclau to mean a double movement pointing simultaneously to the category of lack and the possibility of filling in. Hegemonic practices are “suturing” insofar as they are trying to fill in the original lack, while operating in a social field defined by “the ultimately unfixed character of every signifier”. A “totally sutured society” is impossible, as it would represent “a closed

³ For this reason, Oliver Marchart considers the project of radical democracy as a type of “unstable ontology”, where “all presence is defined by a constitutive absence” (*The Absence at the Heart Presence*, 26). I shall return to this category of “lack” in the next section.

symbolic order” (Notes to Chapter Two, *HSS*, 88). In the article entitled “The Impossibility of Society” (published in *NRR*), Laclau criticizes the concept of social totality, arguing that “‘society’, as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility” (*NRR*, 90). Because of the relational character of all identities which cannot be translated into an intelligible essence, the social, Laclau claims, should rather be seen as an “infinite play of differences” (*NRR*, 90). This play of differences gives society its discursive and undetermined character, making possible the continuous articulation of identities through discursive formations.

“Articulation” and “discourse” are pivotal concepts for Laclau and Mouffe. Articulation is defined as: “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice”; discourse is “the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice” (*HSS*, 105). Avoiding the leap into idealism, the authors reject the “mental” character of discourse, emphasising that discourse cannot to be reduced to speech and writing, as it also has a material character, consisting of both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. According to Laclau and Mouffe, “the practice of articulation, as fixation/dislocation of a system of differences, cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured” (*HSS*, 109).

The unsutured and discursive character of society ties into the influential role hegemony plays in Laclau and Mouffe's work. This aspect is nicely summarized in the following paragraph from the "Impossibility of Society":

"The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order. But this order – or structure – no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt – by definition unstable and precarious - to act over that 'social', to *hegemonize* it" (emphasis in the original text, *NRR*, 91).

Without hegemony, the articulation of identities would not be possible, the fluid structure of the social would become unintelligible and we would be lost in an infinite sea of differences. To "hegemonize" a content, according to Laclau and Mouffe, means "fixing its meaning around a nodal point" (*NRR*, 28) or, in other words, any discourse represents an attempt "to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre" (*HSS*, 113).

Discourses are thus attempts to hegemonize, to attach and fix the meaning of otherwise floating signifiers. However, because of the openness and infinite character of the social, meaning can only be partially fixed, creating identities that are transient in nature, decoupled from any permanent essence.

With this conception of the social in mind, Laclau and Mouffe ground their project of democracy by proposing a different way of looking at social identities. Their main thesis affirms the contingent, anti-essentialist character of all social identities, including class identity. Rather than being determined by one's position in the social structure, identities are seen as socially constructed through discourses. The anti-essentialist perspective extends well beyond the sphere of

Laclau and Mouffe's theory, occupying a central position in what has been coined the "cultural turn" in humanities and social sciences. To put this in perspective, I will turn briefly to Stuart Hall's article "Who Needs Identity", where he explains the paradigm shift from the traditional to the discursive approach to identities. The traditional view of identities (on which Marx based his entire political philosophy) is based on the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with a group or an ideal. The discursive approach, which forms the foundation of Laclau and Mouffe's theory, understands identity as an ongoing process of construction (Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 2). Unlike traditional identities which are pre-determined at birth or by one's position in the social structure, anti-essentialist identities are marked by contingency in the sense that they can always be lost or gained, abandoned or sustained. As Hall points out, essentialist identities assume a "stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always – already 'the same', identical to itself across time" (Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 3). Rather than being unified and permanent, modern identities are transient and constructed through various antagonistic discourses, which require a constitutive Other. The process of identification thus becomes crucial. By ceasing to be a simple act of individual attachment to a particular discourse, identification is "the effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position" (Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 6). Identification is not to be taken for granted as it is an act of power and hegemony that constitutes the

subject. By probing the implication of anti-essentialism for political life, Laclau and Mouffe have redefined classical Marxism in poststructural terms⁴.

Anti-essentialist Identities: A New Possibility of Freedom?

Recognizing that classical Marxism has failed to put forward an adequate theory of subjectivity, Laclau found in psychoanalysis a foundation for explaining the missing link between the psychology of identity formation and the discursive character of the social. Drawing on the ideas of Lacan and Freud, Laclau adopted the constitutive notion of “lack”, which rests upon the assumption that the full recognition of the self by the Other is always open to doubt⁵. Because of the incompleteness of subject-formation at the individual level, antagonisms continue to proliferate in society as the Other is blamed for the blocked identity of the subject. The opposition between the subject and the Other, as a constitutive outside, sustains the sense of one’s identity, and, in the case of social identities, the feeling of belonging and solidarity. As Laclau argues, “every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends on an outside which both denies that identity and contributes its condition of possibility at the same time” (*NRR*, 39). To establish the importance of antagonistic relations in the formation of identities, Laclau turns to Derrida’s notion of violent hierarchies, claiming that “an identity’s constitution is

⁴ By “poststructuralism”, I refer to the philosophical movement which began in France in the late 1960s, that draws upon the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida, and is associated with writers such as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. For definition see “poststructuralism” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 13 Jun. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/472274/poststructuralism>>.

⁵ In his article “*Psychoanalysis and Marxism*” (published in *NRR*), Laclau concludes that “the category of hegemony can be thought only by assuming the category of *lack* as a point of departure.” (*NRR*, 96)

always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between two resultant poles – form/matter, essence/accident, white/black, man/women etc” (*NRR*, 32). What determines the hierarchal character of the relation is the unequal relation between terms, of which one is “unmarked” and conveys the principal meaning, while the second term becomes merely a supplement to the first term, as is the case with terms such as man/women or white/black (*NRR*, 32).

To explain how antagonistic identities emerge, Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of “total equivalence”, by which they mean the equivalence that is constructed discursively in a way that erases differences between social actors who constitute themselves in opposition to the common oppressor. Antagonisms based on total equivalence tend to reduce everything to two opposing positions simplifying the political space, but new antagonisms continue to emerge subverting the existing discourses that divide the social field. Thus, the confrontation between classes “is undermined from the start by a radical insufficiency, arising from the fact that class opposition is incapable of dividing the totality of the social body into two antagonistic camps, of reproducing itself automatically as a line of demarcation in the political sphere” (*HSS*, 151).

Far from leading to pessimism regarding social change, the categories of lack and antagonism which ground the impossibility of constituting a full identity are, for Laclau and Mouffe, a source of optimism regarding the expansion of freedom and equality in society. The incompleteness of identity at the individual

level sustains the overdetermined⁶ character of social relations, that is, the absence of a relation of simple (one-directional) determination between superstructure (culture) and base (economic relations). Given its discursive character, the social is necessarily anchored in the symbolic field, encompassing signifiers whose various meanings cannot be fixed. Thus, as Laclau and Mouffe argue, social relations “lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to the necessary moments of an immanent law” (*HSS*, 98). Along with the idea of economic determinism, Laclau and Mouffe’s also reject the notion of a system in the strong sense of the term, breaking away from the Marxist conception of society as a self-regulating and ordered totality functioning according to an internal logic.

While both classical Marxism and Laclau and Mouffe’s project of radical democracy support the idea that social change will bring about freedom, the source of their optimism is fundamentally different. Through the abolition of class divisions and the appropriation of productive forces, Marx believed history will eventually bring about a shift from alienation to the emancipation and freedom of individuals. The proletariat will act as the agent of change, given that individuals would understand necessity and act according to it, by becoming aware of and embracing their class identity. For Laclau and Mouffe, there is no immanent law of history, but the contingency that marks the character of the social is in itself the source of freedom. As a realm of discursive differences, the production of the

⁶ The concept of “overdetermination” was originally used by Freud to refer to the plurality of meanings entailed by the symbolic dimension. In their use of the concept, Laclau and Mouffe draw on Althusser whom they criticize for ignoring the implications of the concept and opting for a new variant of essentialism (see *HSS*, 98).

social takes place every time new signifiers come along and enter in relation with other signifiers. The constant negotiation of meaning disrupts the existing configuration, producing a dislocation in the social field (*NRR*, 28). Thus, Laclau argues, dislocation “is the source of freedom. But this is not the freedom of a subject with a positive identity – in which case it would just be a structural locus; rather it is merely the freedom of a structural fault which can only construct an identity through acts of identification” (*NRR*, 60). Individuals do not have to cope with pre-existent identities and social relations that have been chosen for them, but are free to invent their own social forms. The potential negative impact of contingency on human agency and social change is thus changed into a call for action for the deepening of the democratic revolution and the expansion of equality through the claims put forward by new social movements. In Laclau’s words:

“... if something is essentially historical and contingent, this means that it can always be radically questioned. And it also means that, in such a case, there is no source of the social different from people’s decisions in the process of the social construction of their own identities and their own existence” (*NRR*, 192).

Laclau and Mouffe retain, thus, an optimistic stance regarding the role of new social movements. Among post-Marxists, however, it has been a contentious issue whether new social movements can in fact be radical. In his study of urban social movements, Manuel Castells concludes that urban movements are not able to transform history: “In fact, all social movements are unable to accomplish their project since they lose their identity as they become institutionalized, the inevitable outcome of bargaining for social reform within the

political system” (*The City and the Grassroots*, 328). Herbert Marcuse shared this view, although he became more optimistic after the events of May 1968 that took place in France. In 1964, when “One Dimensional Man” was first published, he was disappointed with possibilities for change and turned to the “Great Refusal” as the only way of resistance against the system. Man, Marcuse warned us, has become one-dimensional, incapable of critical thinking, as a result of a political system which represses and dominates the individual. The “closing of the political universe”, as Marcuse calls it, signifies the unification of opposites, which has the effect of preventing radical social change. For Laclau and Mouffe, on the other hand, it was not the political universe that was closing, but the privileged position of class identity.

Conflict and Democratic Politics

Laclau and Mouffe have challenged the presupposition that class struggle is the dominant conflict in society. Since social identities are articulated around signifiers, which acquire meaning by being incorporated in a discourse, no political actors - such as classes - have an ontological privilege. On the contrary, they argue, contemporary societies are characterized not by one privileged identity or conflict but by a multiplicity of struggles. Class identity is just one among many other identities formed around antagonisms existing in society: “The field of the social could thus be regarded as a trench war in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of signifiers around themselves” (*NRR*, 28). Classical Marxism regarded other sources of identity such as ethnicity and gender as secondary if not detrimental to class identity, the

impetus being the unity of the proletariat. By doing away with the privilege of class identity, Laclau and Mouffe open new possibilities for understanding the proliferation of identity-based conflicts and their political implications for social change.

Although little appears to be left of classical Marxism in the work of Laclau and Mouffe, at its core, their project of radical democracy remains anchored in the Marxist view of history as a history of struggles. By placing conflict at the centre of the social and political field, Laclau and Mouffe remain strongly indebted to Marx. However, Laclau and Mouffe see conflict as decoupled from its material basis, from the “objective” inequality or injustice that it attempts to eradicate. Conflict and oppression, in their view, come into existence only after a relation of subordination has been articulated in the discursive field, being transformed into a relation of oppression. According to them, a relation of subordination is “that in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of the other” (*HSS*, 153). Subordination establishes the differential character of a relation between social agents. At this stage, subordinated identities are not seen as antagonistic, and they can develop fully without interrupting each other’s course. Through antagonism, however, the “positive differential”, to use Laclau and Mouffe’s term, is subverted. Only when subordination is articulated discursively as antagonism, individuals become aware of inequality and injustice, and they begin to see the Other as an obstacle against achieving full identity. Thus, struggle against subordination is not the result of subordination itself, as it

emerges only when subordination is seen as a relation of oppression, being transformed into a site of antagonism (*HSS*, 154).

Decoupled from its material base, conflict is, nevertheless, constitutive of the social field as it is rooted in the radical insufficiency of any collective or individual identity. The impossibility of a full and permanent identity brings social and economic inequalities constantly under scrutiny; discourses are thus formed which reinforce a sense of identification based on conflict and difference from the Other seen as adversary. This is an ongoing and infinite process, and democratic societies ought to have mechanisms in place to ensure that the process is not endangered and power can always be contested. From the practical point of view, conflict encourages the expansion of freedom and equality in society, with more and more groups asserting their identities and demanding their right to equality. Recognizing that conflict is the very fabric of society is the cornerstone of any democracy. Being deeply aware of the fragile character of democracy, Laclau and Mouffe insist on the importance of having a system of checks and balances in place in order to prevent any political regime from closing the discursive field. As we will see in what follows, one of their main concerns is the possible implications of an ultimate political consensus, as advocated by the centre-left position referred to as “the third way”.

In *On the Political*, her latest book (2005), Mouffe takes issue with the idea of a universal consensus grounded in deliberation and dialogue, which she sees as undermining the notion of an antagonistic public sphere. Mouffe traces the diminished visibility of social conflict back to the “post-political” vision of a

universal consensus based on the reconciliation of opposing positions through rational deliberation. She disagrees with Anthony Giddens⁷ who believes class politics has failed to deliver a viable way of dealing with issues such as globalisation, the rise of individualism and ecological problems. Most importantly, for Giddens, class politics has failed to recognize the importance of the transformation of personal life resulting from increased individual freedom and responsibility regarding, for example, one's body or one's personal relationships. The new form of "dialogical politics", envisioned by Giddens, goes beyond the left/right divide, benefiting all sectors of the society (*On The Political*, 60). As counter-argument to Giddens's third way approach, Mouffe reiterates the importance of conflict and antagonism for the formation of social identities, and the functioning of a democratic society. Mouffe disagrees also with the liberal theorists who believe in the possibility of achieving a rational agreement between social actors engaged in a process of transparent communication⁸. What is the meaning of deliberation and dialogue, Mouffe asks, when participants have no real choice at hand? (*On the Political*, 3) With no clearly defined right and left alternatives, a reconciled society is not capable of eradicating conflict; conflict will likely resurface as moral struggle between "right and wrong", as is the case with right-wing populism and terrorism.

In her critique of liberalism, Mouffe focuses on the reasons why social conflict appears to have slipped out of the public eye. Beyond that, the question

⁷ Anthony Giddens is the main proponent of the third way approach, which he describes in his books "*The Third Way*" (1998) and "*The Third Way and its Critics*" (2000).

⁸ Specifically, Mouffe critiques Jurgen Habermas, one of the main advocates of the deliberative model.

that remains so far unanswered is whether it is reasonable to expect conflict to be equally important throughout history. As we will see in what follows, conflict as a timeless principle for the constitution of the political and social field has been questioned by Laclau and Mouffe's critics. The question that was raised is whether conflict can and should be seen as a universal dimension of society, or whether it is a characteristic of contemporary societies.

Conflict as a Universal Principle

The proliferation of social antagonisms has been made possible by the historical context of Western societies, which dates far back to the French revolution. By emphasising the principles of equality and freedom, democracy encourages various forms of resistance to subordination and inequality, which are legitimised by the logic of equivalence, which constructs subjects as equals in terms of rights (*Politics of Truth*, 71). Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge the immediate importance of human rights discourse:

“This break with the ancient regime, symbolised by the Declaration of the Rights of Man, would provide the discursive conditions which made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and antinatural, and thus make them equivalent to forms of oppression” (*HSS*, 155).

In his exchange of ideas with Laclau and Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*⁹, Žižek ponders whether antagonism should be seen as a timeless dimension of the social or as a characteristic of modern times (*CHU*, 107). How are we to think of the progression from class “essentialism” to the full

⁹ Hereafter cited in text as *CHU*.

assertion of contingency in late capitalism? Is this a gradual progression towards “enlightened maturity” Žižek asks, or simply the formal structure of Western capitalism? (*CHU*, 107). In his answer to Žižek, Laclau states his disagreement with the Kantian notion of a universal/transcendental framework. Rejecting radical historicism at the same time, he argues that hegemony and conflict should not be reduced to a distinct feature of contemporary societies as they are present throughout history albeit in other forms, acting through mechanisms other than the current ones (*CHU*, 200).

Laclau’s work is marked by the tension between universality and contingency, by his refusal to recognize any immanent laws of history or transcendental frameworks of society, while, at the same time, defending radical democracy. According to Laclau, plural democracy is the best form of social organisation as it acknowledges and encourages the conflictual dimension of society. The outcome of social struggles is however undetermined: it is not dictated by an immanent law of historical development nor does it embody universal values that are beneficial for the entire society. For Marx, the proletariat acted as a universal subject, aiming not only to achieve its particular goals but also to realize the universal goals of society, that is, the liberation and emancipation of the entire society. In his departure from Marx, Laclau sees class identity as occupying a similar structural position with other identities, which all seek to universalize their claims. Since antagonistic identities imply the exclusion of the Other identified as the oppressor, it is clear for Laclau that a particular group cannot claim to identify its particular aims with the universal values of

society. In addition, total emancipation would entail an essentialist view, that is, the retrieval of a full identity which would be in contradiction to Laclau's view (*CHU*, 46). Every subject position is thus bound to remain particular, but the process does not end here, as the hegemony of each particular sector depends on its success in presenting its aims as universal (*Emancipation(s)*, 50). In a democratic society, change is thus sustained by the attempts of particular subject-positions to hegemonize their claims and present them as universal. Although universality, understood as "something identical", shared by all (*Emancipation(s)*, 57) is an "empty but ineradicable place", each particular position aims at claiming it for itself, thus creating a universality that is contaminated by particularity.

Asserting the absence of a "hard" or transcendental universality that would dictate the values of society raises questions about how to ground ethically the outcomes of the struggles taking place in society. The main condition for the existence of radical democracy is that the open and antagonistic character of the social be acknowledged as such, and therefore no attempts be made to impose a closure on the social by limiting the number of signifiers around which individuals could rally. For Laclau, the absence of a "hard" universality is a source of optimism as it implies that individuals are solely responsible for their future and their claims constitute what society is at any given time. The open and antagonistic character of the social is ultimately the main deterrent for any authoritarian discourse aimed at imposing a particular point of view by eliminating

other discourses. Acknowledging the importance of antagonisms defends the fragile nature of radical democracy and its core values.

Laclau and Mouffe: A Piecemeal Approach to Social Change

Laclau's view that subject-positions are bound to present themselves as universal without ever achieving universality has implications for the scope of social and political transformation. With the death of class as a universal agent, the capacity of social movements to bring about global transformation is significantly diminished. As Laclau and Mouffe point out, the classical concept of revolution implied the foundational character of the revolutionary act, "the institution of a point of power from which society could be 'rationally' reorganized" (*HSS*, 177). In the absence of a common ground, the foundational character of revolutions becomes an impossibility. Since there are no more foundations arising out of historical necessity or transcendental order, the unification of political spaces is only possible through hegemonic discourses that are bound to be partial and contested (*HSS*, 187). At the extreme, the unification of political spaces can lead to totalitarianism, the opposite danger being a total lack of reference, the disappearance of the political: "Between the logic of complete identity and that of pure difference, the experience of democracy should consist of the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation" (*HSS*, 188).

Another important criticism regarding the capacity of social antagonisms to bring about radical social change is the fact that each form of radical opposition involves a sense of ambiguity, asserting part of what it aims to exclude. A

particular claim has to present itself in relation to the society as a whole; otherwise, the difference asserted would be a type of pure difference that would lead to essentialism (*Emancipation(s)*, 58). For Laclau, the idea of a pure particularistic stand with no common framework among social identities is not a viable alternative. As ethnic identities are concerned, a pure particularistic stand would lead to total segregation, as in the case of the Apartheid system in South Africa, which perpetuated oppression through the means of total segregation (*Emancipation(s)*, 27). The principles of equality and freedom function as universal notions that make it possible for new social movements to emerge and put forward new claims for equality, and are thus a defence against social segregation. The demands put forward by members of an ethnic minority are not made in terms of pure difference but in universal terms such as access to education, employment and political participation. Thus, although the realization of full equality and freedom is never complete and is contingent on the historical context, in Laclau's view, new social movements bring about an expansion of freedom and equality in the name of universal human rights. However, this process entails the prior existence of freedom and equality, which made possible the emergence of universal human rights. The human rights discourse is thus a necessary condition for the expansion of radical democracy, a sort of universal without the assertion of which Laclau and Mouffe's project is impossible.

The proliferation of antagonisms based on the principle of universal human rights is also confronted with the following dilemma: given the need for common ground, claims put forward by previously marginalised groups end up

legitimizing the very system that they fight against. For instance, claims for self-determination put forward by ethnic movements legitimise the nation-state as a form of political organization, consolidating the political unit that is being contested. When demanding secession, these movements aim to build a new nation state organised in a similar fashion to the nation state from which the movement attempts to break away. Another example is grass-root movements that, in order to make an impact politically, have to organise as political parties, thus limiting their radicalism. One of the most successful social movements in Europe, the German Green movement, started as a loose network of citizens groups in the late 1970s, and became formally organised as a political party, electing their first representative to the state Parliament in 1980. The party has struggled since then to retain its grass-root form of organisation and consensus decision-making process. As part of the government coalition, the party had to support policies (such as the military interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan) that stood in opposition to their core values.

These example show that, as Laclau put it, “the opposition, in order to be radical, has to put in a common ground both what it asserts and what it excludes, so that the exclusion becomes a particular form of assertion” (*Emancipation(s)*, 30). A similar point is raised by Butler with respect to the lesbian and gay movements which have identified full admission to marriage and military rights, as part of the expansion of human rights and advance of equality. However, Butler asks, what happens to the fractions who oppose the very ideas of marriage and military rights, who question the institution of marriage and military?

Can such conflictual positions be kept alive under present conditions or is the pressure towards universalisation and assimilation wiping out the more radical voices? Are new fields of possibility closing down? (*CHU*, 160-161)

Given the double standard of assertion and exclusion assumed by new social movements, one could argue that Laclau and Mouffe offer a piecemeal approach to social change that is supposed to replace the foundational revolution envisioned by Marx. They hold that social antagonisms are best seen as promoting gradual change, resulting from the compounding effects of localised claims. However, Laclau remains optimistic with respect to the future: he holds that new social movements will strengthen the current political values but will also bring the movement away from Western Eurocentrism through what he calls “a systematic decentring of the West” (*Emancipation(s)*, 34).

As more previously marginalised groups assert their rights to equality and freedom, their increased visibility will challenge the mainstream definitions of social institutions, such as family, education, and religion. In instances when the values of the society are shown to limit the freedom and equality of certain sectors of society, they will have to be reconsidered and expanded.

In addition to questions asked about integration as a side-effect of social antagonisms, another question that has been raised in the literature concerns the perceived inability of social movements to challenge the neo-liberal economic framework that functions as a background of radical democracy. The view that the field of discursive differences is levelled, with no systematically privileged positions, is challenged by the neo-liberal discourse, which has succeeded in

creating a consensus around the idea of free market economy. Changes that take place in other realms of the social (such as the rights revolutions) do not challenge the status quo of the economy, as the main focus remains on the recognition of the universal rights of particular social groups within the existing neo-liberal economic and political framework. In this sense, the social/political and the economic realms appear to be somewhat disconnected, as the rights revolution furthers the demand for equality and freedom without being translated into major challenges to the economic principles that govern our societies.

Let me return for a moment to Slavoj Žižek's discussion of radical democracy in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Radical democracy, Žižek claims, cannot be considered radical since it does not challenge the logic of capitalism; on the contrary, there seems to be an alliance between the two, as capitalism provides the fundamental exclusion that sustains the horizon of radical democracy. According to Žižek, capitalism provides the very background and terrain for the emergence of shifting political subjectivities (*CHU*, 108). Today's politics, Žižek claims, takes place within the "'naturalized' framework of economic relations" (*CHU*, 108). Laclau shares Žižek's concern that identity politics has been accompanied by the abandonment of a more global perspective on social change, and more important of a radical challenge of the capitalist system, but they part ways as Žižek returns to the importance of class struggle and adopts an open anti-capitalist stance (*CHU*, 202-204).

The absence of a viable alternative to capitalism is at the core of the impasse in which the Left finds itself currently. Two of the main reasons

contributing to the absence of a radical alternative have been discussed so far. Firstly, particular claims are aimed at the expansion of universal values thus contributing to political integration rather than radical social change. Secondly, once economic determinism is renounced and the symbolic dimension of the social is recognised in its full importance, economic inequalities are dealt with in terms of identity politics, where the main focus is the universal rights of particular social groups. Capitalism in itself remains unchallenged as it becomes the background of various struggles taking place in the society.

We have now seen that, contrary to what Laclau and Mouffe believed, the radicalism of new social movements is limited, as such movements often reassert the current institutional arrangements of society and do not openly challenge neoliberalism. In the last part of the essay, I will discuss the impact of individualism on social identities, an aspect overlooked in Laclau and Mouffe's theory. Drawing on the works of Michel Foucault, I will argue that one of the reasons for the absence of radical challenges to capitalism is the deep connection between neoliberalism and the view of the enterprising self, which undermines the relevance of antagonistic identities.

Limits of Radical Democracy

Laclau and Mouffe's critique does not address the changes within society that make conflict politics and class struggle less visible today. At the core of these changes, the rise of individualism has negatively affected radical social change by undermining social solidarities. Individualism is deeply rooted in Western democracies that have been founded on the conception of citizens as

individual right bearers. At the centre of democratic citizenship, individual rights contribute to the expansion of freedom and equality. At the same time, individual rights reinforce the “anti-essentialist” dimension of identities, which holds that individuals are the ultimate receptors and processors of meaning, being attached to multiple discourses through a multitude of points of contact.

Individualism poses a challenge to the adversarial model, as individuals come to see themselves as the ultimate locus of change and identity, detached from social and global movements. The transformation of relations of subordination into sites of antagonisms requires a predisposition of individuals to perceive the political space in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed and a commitment to fight to eliminate injustice. With the rise of individualism and the fragmentation of subject positions, individuals are less likely to identify with a cause in terms of “Us” versus “Them”. As issues become fragmented, localised, or increasingly global and abstract, the adversary is often difficult to pinpoint. Examples of “life politics” (to use Giddens’ term) which evade an adversarial model are many: debates over the direction of scientific research (such as cloning, stem cells, etc.), abstract risks (such as world wide pandemics, earthquakes, etc.), life support and euthanasia are just some instances where the line between “Us” and “Them” becomes blurred. In most of such cases, the issues do not relate to economic inequalities; and, although there is conflict or disagreement, opposing positions cannot be attributed to identifiable social groups with a sustained sense of identity.

An additional challenge to the adversarial model is the fact that social and political change often occurs outside the traditional sphere of politics. Take for example the community gardens movement or the Critical Mass movement¹⁰, which represent manifestations of solidarity formed around an identifiable signifier (such as love for organic gardening and protection of nature, or interest in biking). Increasingly popular, such movements push for change at the local level, reclaiming public space. These social movements have been described in terms of Henri Lefebvre's "right to the city", that is the right of social groups, including those previously marginalised, to inhabit and shape the everyday spaces of the city, its neighbourhoods, parks, streets, and buildings. As Holston points out, such movements transform urban spaces into "sites of insurgence because they introduce into the city new identities and practices that disturb established histories" (48). Laclau and Mouffe's adversarial model is at great pains to capture this type of insurgence in which social change takes place at what could be called a "sub-political" level. Their argument for casting aside the consensual model draws on both the antagonistic dimension of the social and the psychological need for collective identities; it remains, however, unconvincing as it does not address the ambiguities involved in identifying an adversary responsible for the faults of the present political and economic system.

We have seen so far that the redefinition of political issues in terms of individual life styles contributes to the fragmentation of political solidarities. The infiltration of individualism in political life does not appear to be a short-lived

¹⁰ "Critical Mass" is a name for biking events that take place on the last Friday of every month in many cities around the world, including Vancouver.

phenomenon. Closely interrelated with neoliberalism, individualism, as discourse, is an enduring and indispensable component of radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe do not dwell on the role of individualism, which, from their perspective, could be considered one among the multitude of discourses that are contingent on historical context and individual motivations. However, the enduring structure of individualism renders it distinct from other discourses, as it is intertwined with the strategies and tactics of modern power.

While Laclau and Mouffe have focused predominantly on the possibilities of freedom opened through the discursive construction of the social field, a deeper look at individualism shows that discourses can also limit the way we see the world and our role in bringing about radical social change. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on a single aspect of Michel Foucault's theory, namely the role of the subject in relation to discourse. Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of the role of human agency differs fundamentally from that of Foucault. At the core of their theory is the belief that individual motivations and decisions are the sole source of the social field (*NRR*, 193). Given the undetermined and contingent nature of the social, the number of possible signifiers is infinite, and so are the possibilities opened up for individuals. The contingent character of the social preserves the radical dimension of democracy, as the construction and reconstruction of the social takes place entirely in the political and discursive field. In Laclau's words, "the social is on the same scale of agents which are historical, contingent and fallible themselves" (*NRR*, 193).

As opposed to this, Foucault proposes a theory that is no longer centred on the subject. According to Foucault:

“discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined” (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, 55).

Foucault has often been accused of writing a history of discourses (or an archaeology of knowledge, as he called it) without placing an intentional subject at the centre of his analysis. His theory was often criticised for viewing discourses as free-floating structures, following their own rules of transformation, without being accountable to individual subjects. However, the core of Foucault’s argument is not the lack of any form of human agency but the need to consider the modalities through which the subject is constituted through discourses rather than given. As Foucault put it:

“What is important for me is to show that there are not on the one hand inert discourses, which are already more than half dead, and on the other hand, an all-powerful subject which manipulates them, overturns them, renews them; but that discoursing subjects form a part of the discursive field ...” (*The Foucault Effect*, 58).

Foucault’s perspective rests on the understanding of individuals as both creators of discourses and subjects constituted in the process of discourse formation. Change, from this perspective, is a more complex process than Laclau and Mouffe would have let us believe, as it builds upon the conception of self, on what is legitimate, on what can or cannot be said. The sense of the self is not solely an individual creation, but it is constituted discursively in relation to technologies of power, to use Foucault’s term. Practices that constitute our sense

of self are found in various discourses that shape the relation with authorities, such as psychology, management, human resources, and statistics. Nikolas Rose, who wrote extensively on the concept of the self in relation to power as defined by Foucault, argues that psychology and social sciences have become part of governmentality¹¹, promoting a neo-liberal vision of the self based on values such as autonomy, initiative, ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility. Here, the self is thoroughly characterized as an individual. Individuals seek to shape their own life, by defining goals and taking control of their actions. This “enterprising” vision of a self values individual life styles and physical bodies at the expense of shared identities.

In Laclau and Mouffe, the extent to which individual subjectivities are constituted through discourse is limited. The only given in the process of identity constitution is the category of lack. Beyond that, individual identity is constituted over and over again in the clash between “Us” versus “Them” without any “essentialist” baggage. Anything that is not directly contingent on individuals’ decisions and motivations is seen by Laclau and Mouffe as postulating an immanent law that would undermine the radical character of the social. Foucault, however, would see this as an oversimplification. Opposing individual decisions/actions to immanent laws ignores for him the fact that discourses “are limited practical domains which have their boundaries, their rules of formation, their conditions of existence” (*The Foucault Effect*, 61). Discourses exist only

¹¹ The concept of “governmentality” put forward by Foucault encompasses “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics” that allow the exercise of power (*Governmentality*, 102).

when they are enacted by individuals; however, no one individual is in control of manipulating and overturning these discourses. Thus, understanding the influence of practices and discourses upon individual subjectivity does not eradicate the contingency of such formations, or the possibilities for change emphasised by Laclau and Mouffe. The interaction between individuals and discourses is always twofold, as discourses attain continuity only through individual actions. Shaped by discourses, individuals also push back and react upon the very structures that influence them. When new descriptions are available, individuals redefine themselves and act in accordance with them, consequently producing new meanings.

Our personal choices are limited by what is seen as legitimate, true, thinkable or desirable. At the same time, our sense of the self shapes our involvement with the social world. As individuals tend to see themselves as creators of their identities, change is redefined at the individual level, but the link between individual and social change is often missing. This atomised vision of society threatens solidarities that are founded on the division between “Us” and “Them”, making the “I” the centre of each individual story. The possibility of a universal consensus, feared by Mouffe, appears plausible, as society becomes a collection of autonomous individuals, each in search of their own individual fulfilment. With individuals being in charge of constructing their own coherent sense of identity, the role of the collective Other in influencing this individual process is minimised. The promise of a consensus is based on individuals

sharing similar concerns about their own fulfillment, at the expense of sustaining an antagonistic sense of collective identity.

The way we see ourselves empowers and limits human agency by casting aside other forms of subjectivity, which would allow us to see the world differently. Without renouncing our role and responsibility in creating social order, understanding the ways in which prevalent discourses mould our sense of self and our intentionality helps us grasp better what is taken for granted, what could or needs to be changed. As Rose put it, we gain the possibility at least to “enhance the contestability of the forms of being that have been invented for us, and begin to invent ourselves differently” (*Inventing Ourselves*, 197). With the withering away of a religious vision of society and the collapse of the Marxist model, the responsibility is solely on individuals themselves to create the type of society they want to live in. Laclau and Mouffe are right in revealing the contingent dimension of the social, but sometimes, the Other that we have to fight in order to change the world is located within ourselves. By changing the way we see the world, we create new horizons and possibilities for radical social change.

Conclusion

My essay aimed at exploring possibilities for social change and challenges faced by democratic societies. By breaking away from Marx's assumption that the proletarian revolution is a historical necessity, Laclau and Mouffe's critique offers a useful analytical tool for understanding radical social change. Their project of radical democracy offers hope for social change in the sense that democratic societies are seen as furthering the equality and freedom of their members. Individuals are endowed with a new sense of agency in articulating new identities, without a privileged class conflict dominating the society. The critique of Laclau and Mouffe eliminates the sense of necessity that comes from the contradictions inherent in the material base of society. With more individual choices and the relativity of subject positions comes the impossibility of a foundational revolution that would organise society rationally according to one point of view. Rather, we are faced with a multiplicity of localised revolutions which articulate new identities based on discursive antagonisms.

Laclau and Mouffe fear the possibility that a unifying and consensual vision could lead to totalitarianism and the annihilation of democracy. However, equally worrying is the fact that radical democracy seems to have lost its radical dimension, as the logic of neo-liberalism continues its course undisturbed by the revolutionary moments in the social realm. Laclau and Mouffe's powerful critique has revolutionised the Left, redefining Marx in terms relevant to today's society.

However, the limit of any conflictual or antagonistic perspective rests in the dividing vision of “Us” versus “Them”, which often prevents us from becoming aware of how our own conception of the self has changed over time and how that impacts our relation to the world. Social change can only be radical if we are free both to envision the world and to invent ourselves differently.

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**EVERYDAY LIFE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S
"BETWEEN THE ACTS"**

Introduction

Through the works of Henri Lefebvre¹ and Michel de Certeau, critical social theory has witnessed a revived interest in the sphere of everyday life. Breaking away from Marxism, Lefebvre saw the everyday as oppressive and relentlessly repetitive, but at the same time, containing the potential to transform itself through moments of intense experience. In a similar vein, de Certeau brought to light the dispersed, creative and often subversive ways in which users reappropriate the forms of cultural consumption. This growing interest in the potential for transformation found in the everyday has been initiated in fiction by modernist authors (such as Woolf, Joyce, Eliot, Proust) who captured the multiplicity and fluidity of everyday moments, moving away from the heroic and the monumental. Rather than concentrating on the grand narratives of history, Virginia Woolf turned her attention to the lives of ordinary people, to the narratives and actions that take place “between the acts” of history. She used her artistic talent to reveal the creativity and complexity encountered in the details of everyday life, such as small actions, routines and passing thoughts. By discussing the everyday in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Between the Acts*², this essay aims to show that modern fiction and critical social theory share a common interest in the creative and subversive potential of everyday moments.

Critical social theory has attempted to capture the essence of everyday as the foundation for cultural forms and social structures. Individual actions are seen

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

² Hereafter referred to as “BTA”.

as forming the fabric of society, enacting but also re-creating the social, economic and political structures of society. Although individual actions are often moulded by the colonizing forces of capitalism and consumerism, everyday life remains, nevertheless, the stronghold of practices that make revival and renewal still possible. De Certeau has been, however, concerned with the difficulty of recording the infinite richness of everyday that often seemed to escape the inquisitive eye of the social researcher. Written text and quantitative methodologies have proved to be unable to capture the plurality of everyday practices. For de Certeau, history, through its archival practices, has displaced orality, hiding from the reader the multitude of voices and tonalities of everyday. The study of everyday thus requires, in his view, a new approach that could bring to light the polyphonic character of everyday practices. Everyday practices or “ways of operating” (to use de Certeau’s term) are characterized by spontaneity, playfulness and creativity which elude a formal definition and localization. Although they may contain the seeds of resistance and outright subversion, everyday practices are more complex than the inverse of power. To capture the complexity of everyday, one would require an open mind, which could recreate the meaning of lived experience, however fragile and improvised.

In *BTA*, Woolf starts from a similar position, using the locality of everyday to raise questions about the role of arts and history in society, about power and patriarchal authority, and, in particular, causes of and resistance to war. The fictional world described in *BTA* is not subject to the constraints prevalent in social sciences. The absence of a singular, apparently objective, inquisitive eye

in Woolf's fictional world allows instead for a multiplicity of voices to be heard, revealing the oscillations between dissonance and harmony, as well as the trivial and sometimes humoristic aspects of everyday life. Along with the complexity and dissonance of everyday life, Woolf reveals the fragile threads of hope and renewal that are buried in "the fertile mud" of the everyday (*BTA*, 144). The everyday emerges from the conversations between the novel's characters, their small gestures and unspoken thoughts, their experience of space through walking and looking at the view of the countryside, but also through daily domestic routines that take place over one day in a country house (Isa ordering fish, the preparations for the pageants, Gilles returning from the city, etc). The novel exposes the multiple connections between past, present and future. During this one day, events are interspersed with scenes from the village pageant that spans over centuries of English history. At the same time, the spectre of the approaching war looms over the quiet life of the countryside, revealing passivity but also the hidden seeds of aggressiveness and resistance.

Before turning the attention to the details of the novel, I will further explore the connections between everyday in modern fiction and critical social theory, as they take shape in the works of Woolf, Lefebvre and de Certeau.

The Importance of Everyday in Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's writings show a constant preoccupation with capturing the evanescent instances of life, and restoring the importance of everyday as a critical object. For her, life "is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged" (*Modern Fiction*, 189), but rather a stream of impressions and moments of

importance that follow no apparent pattern, but nevertheless reveal connections existing between people as well as intimations of the universal and the transcendent. In her essay entitled *Modern Fiction*, Woolf argues that “‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (*Modern Fiction*, 195). Modern fiction should be thus concerned with inventing new methods that do not inhibit creativity and capture the stuff life is made of. And what is life made of? For Woolf, everyday life consists of a myriad of impressions and moments, some trivial and evanescent, some “engraved with the sharpness of steel” (*Modern Fiction*, 189). Life happens as our minds continuously encounter a myriad of instances. Fiction, Woolf believed, should aim at capturing the incessant flow of moments through which life is experienced:

“Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (*Modern Fiction*, 190).

Within the undifferentiated stream of impressions and moments that form the everyday, certain moments acquire meaning and importance while others become lost. In particular, the works of Virginia Woolf draw upon the everyday as a blend between “moments of being” marked by a heightened awareness and intensity of feelings and “moments of non-being” which are concealed beneath a “kind of nondescript cotton-wool” (*Moments of Being*, 70). In her autobiographical writings, Woolf recalls the “moments of being” that have influenced her

personality. Woolf's memories of her childhood include people and vivid sensations – such as bright colours and distinct sounds – surrounded by a vast space in which she was free to roam about and explore; but most importantly she remembers the “violent moments of being” that remained engraved in her memory, standing out from the other everyday moments (*Moments of Being*, 79). These moments, she believed, have influenced her choice to become a writer in search of the pattern hid behind the cotton wool, giving her meaning and a sense of necessity (*Moments of Being*, 73). Looking back at her past, it appears clear that these moments were the “scaffolding in the background”, “the invisible and silent part” of her childhood (*Moments of Being*, 73). Woolf's works draw upon the potential empowerment the everyday has to offer by revealing the interconnections between the part and the whole, between us and the rest of the world. “Moments of being”, as Woolf describes them, reveal the relation of the part to the whole, the interconnection hidden from our eyes by forgetfulness and unawareness:

“I was looking at the flower bed by the front door: ‘That is the whole, I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower” (*Moments of Being*, 71).

The empowering role of everyday moments is reflected in Woolf's new approach to modern fiction that rescues details from obscurity and triviality. The importance of establishing the details of everyday as a critical object has been noted by Naomi Schor in her book, *Reading in Detail*. Here, Schor argues that the masculine canons of Western aesthetic theory have debased the importance

of detail. However, detail, and in particular textual detail, has become crucial to current philosophical thinking, as evidenced by the post-structuralist works of Foucault, Derrida and Barthes. The current valorization of detail has a long history entangled with gender politics, which sought to feminize detail by associating it with the domestic sphere. In *BTA*, Woolf skilfully avoids the exclusive association of domesticity and femininity by placing the domestic at the intersections of village life, nature, war and history. Although centered around feminine characters, the novel goes beyond gender issues to raise questions concerning human nature in general and war in particular. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf notes that the propensity to wage wars has its roots in the patriarchal domestic sphere. As long as the “daughters of educated men” are dependent both financially and morally upon their fathers and brothers, they cannot afford to oppose war, and denounce the masculine desire for domination and aggression. Although lacking the financial means to be independent, the feminine characters described in Woolf’s fictional world are far from being powerless. On the contrary, they resist and evade the conventions of society, whether consciously or unconsciously. The everyday, in its intricate details, is too complex to be moulded into the one-sidedness of the patriarchal society.

The Critique of Everyday Life

Despite their different canons, social theory and modern fiction seem to have found a common ground in the everyday. Shortly after Virginia Woolf wrote *A Sketch of the Past* in 1940, the realm of the everyday started being reclaimed by social and cultural theory, particularly through the works of Henri Lefebvre,

who published the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* in 1947. In cultural theory, the interest in everyday has gained momentum as a counter-reaction to the view that modernity, through the monotony of mechanisation, has moulded the everyday into undifferentiated time, marked by repetition and boredom (see also Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*).

Showing a renewed interest in the everyday, Henri Lefebvre attempted to reconcile the view of everyday as commodified, oppressive and repetitive with the potential for transformation and creativity he saw in people's lives. In Marxist tradition, he drew attention to the fact that everyday is situated at the intersection of two modes of repetition: "repetitive gestures of work and consumption" which, in modern life, tend to overshadow cyclical or natural repetition, such as seasons, nights and days (*The Everyday and Everydayness*, 10). However, Lefebvre departs from this Marxist interpretation by highlighting the importance of moments and their relation to everyday.³ For Lefebvre, moments – such as moments of love, hate, poetry, justice – are tiny epiphanies which reveal the richness or poverty of any social formation, by containing, in their instants, the whole of life (Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*⁴, 61). As a sociologist, Lefebvre saw moments as connected to social totality rather than individual or psychological manifestations. Through moments, individual consciousness opens into social consciousness (*Inventory*, 173). Moments, such as love, play,

³ Lefebvre's theory of moments is elaborated in most detail in his 1958 autobiographical writing "La Somme et le reste", which is not fully translated in English, although some excerpts were included in the Key Writings collection.

⁴ Hereafter referred to as "LLS".

knowledge, are thus cultural forms that individuals appropriate and enact in their own ways.

Similar to Virginia Woolf's parallel between moments of being and the cotton wool of everyday, Lefebvre's critique of everyday is centered on the dialectic of banality and presence. Moments of presence "puncture the 'everydayness' or banality of repetitive clouds", redeeming everyday life (Shields, *LLS*, 60). In other words, life is experienced as a combination of banality and moments of presence, a "bouquet of 'moments' mixed into the banality of everyday life" (Shields, *LLS*, 61). The separation between banality and presence is only conceptual, since "moments of presence" are situated within the everyday life. In Lefebvre's words, everyday is "the native soil in which the moment germinates and takes root" (*Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, 357).

Close to Woolf's recollection of a flower revealing its relation to the entire world, Lefebvre also understands "presence" as an experience of totality (Shields, *LLS*, 60). They share the view that moments are experiences, which reveal the connection of the part to the whole, a vantage point from which life ceases to appear fragmented. The authentic moments of everyday are empowering as they offer a way to the universal, opening the possibility of reconnecting the individual experience to the rest of the world. Woolf sees the universal pattern revealed through moments of being as artistic in nature, a glimpse of the fact that we are all interconnected: "behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this;

that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art”
(*Moments of Being*, 72).

For Lefebvre, everyday life expresses and fulfils “those relations which bring into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner that is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc” (*Critique of Everyday Life*, vol.1, 97). Moments of presence give a dimension of authenticity to everyday life, because they reveal the totality of the social, and, with it, the social forms that can be questioned and changed. The revolutionary potential of everyday life consists in the fact that new modalities of presence can be defined, and moments can be redistributed to intensify experiences contained in everyday life. Moments open a new horizon of possibilities, and break down the cycle of repetition, containing the germs of liberty and renewal. As authentic experiences, moments are appropriated by individuals who recreate and reinvent cultural forms in a way that is valid for themselves (*Inventory*, 74).

De Certeau and the Polyphonic Nature of the Everyday

The French social theorist, Michel de Certeau has reformulated the perspective on everyday put forward by Lefebvre. In his volume, *The Practice of Everyday Life*⁵ (1980), de Certeau focuses on how the everyday is “produced” through daily practices that reveal the centrality of human agency. Departing from the understanding of everyday as a realm of repetition and routine, he positions the everyday as a space for creativity and obstinacy to conformism,

⁵ Hereafter referred to as “PE”.

where enunciation and appropriation become possible even if only momentarily. For de Certeau, the everyday resists assimilation as individuals appropriate the meaning of their routines, creating and sustaining their own “ways of operating”, such as walking, reading, speaking, cooking, and other everyday procedures. According to de Certeau, “making do” represents a set of rules and procedures that “have their own formality and inventiveness and that discretely organize the multiform labor of consumption” (*PE*, 30). As “ways of operating”, reading and speaking are seen as activities in which meaning is actively produced. When a reader approaches a text, writes Certeau, “he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also an ‘invention’ of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories” (*PE*, xxi). “Conversation,” observes Certeau, “is a provisional and collective effect of competence in the art of manipulating ‘commonplaces’ and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them ‘habitable’” (*PE*, xxii).

Voices of the Everyday

In his investigations of everyday, de Certeau establishes the importance of orality, of voices and murmurs that have been displaced from the archives of history. As an act of enunciation, speech represents an appropriation of the language by the speaker, an act tactical in nature (*PE*, xiii). Similar to other practices, the act of speech is based on the continuous transformation of language by its users who seek to adopt it to their interests. But first and foremost, de Certeau is concerned with how text, which has displaced the

speech act as a method of recording history, has often obscured the multitude of voices through which the everyday speaks. Excluded from the text “on the grounds of economic neatness and efficiency, the voice appears essentially in the form of the *quotation*”⁶ (*PE*, 156). The relation between text and voice is a rather uneasy one, as the narrator attempts to detach herself from the object of her studies, but nevertheless ends up invoking other voices to support the text. The voice figures as both absence and potential intrusion into the organisation of the text. While the voice is supposed to inform and structure the text, at least in the pre-text stage of analysis and commentaries, the text also returns to orality through the use of quotations. As de Certeau argues, in the first case “quotations become the means by which discourse proliferates; in the second, it lets them out and they interrupt it” (*PE*, 156).

De Certeau and Woolf share the desire to understand the voices through which the everyday speaks, and to restore the capacities of the literary text, avoiding its dominant and repressive tendencies. Described as the opposite of “working, pushing, striving, earning wages” and obeying “the infernal, age-long and eternal order issued from on high” (*BTA*, 82), the everyday in Virginia Woolf’s fictional world is poetic and polyphonic in nature. As Melba Cuddy-Keane points out in her Introduction, *BTA* is a novel of voices. The multiplicity of voices that resonate throughout the novel include human and non-human (birds, sheep, cows, mice), natural and mechanical (gramophone and loud speaker), public and inner (*BTA*, xlvii). Meaningful silences speak through a voice of their own.

⁶ Italicized in the original text.

Reminiscent of Greek drama, the chorus insinuates the voices of villagers in the text of the pageant. In the intermission, the tick of the gramophone holds the audience together, while the silence is interrupted by voices that are ubiquitous, without fixed location, bodiless, continually shifting: “Over the tops of the bushes came stray voices, voices without bodies, symbolical voices they seemed to her, half hearing, seeing nothing, but still, over the bushes, feeling invisible threads connecting the bodiless voices” (*BTA*, 103). The bodiless voices come to embody the spirit of the present, as the “anonymous bray of the infernal megaphone” followed by the dissonant tune of mixed records, leave the participants wondering: “Was that voice ourselves? Scraps, orts and fragments, are we, also, that?” (*BTA*, 128) The multiplicity of voices that surfaces throughout the text recreates the everyday as a space for individual expression existing in interconnection with history and nature.

The Pageant and the Everyday

Virginia Woolf traces everyday life as it takes place “between the acts” of the pageant, which brings together individuals otherwise dispersed into the multiplicity of everyday activities. The action in the novel takes place over twenty-four hours, on a summer day in June 1939. At the centre of the story is Pointz Hall, an English country house inhabited by old Bartholomew Oliver, the head of the house, his sister Lucy Swithin, his son Giles and his wife Isa. As the war was drawing near, the villagers are preparing for the annual pageant, written and directed by Miss La Trobe. When Mrs. Manresa and her friend William Dodge drop in unexpectedly, they are invited to stay for luncheon and attend the annual

pageant. The family daily routines are interspersed with events leading up to the pageant. The pageant brings together the Elizabethan, Restoration and Victorian eras, depicting scenes from the times of Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Anne and Queen Victoria. It presents the comic dramas of three romantic stories unfolding under different historical circumstances, and revealing different aesthetic and moral values. The effect of parody is stronger as the pageant approaches the present. The Victorian piece, "The Picnic Party" is a satire of Britain's colonial past, picturing two lovers who leave to marry and become missionaries as they both longed "to convert the heathen", while the gramophone is playing Rule Britannia and Home and Sweet Home (*BTA*, 116).

Instead of describing monumental battles or the ascension of Kings and Queens, Woolf chooses to portray in the pageant everyday lives and scenes. The familiarity between actors and audience is amplified by the fact that characters are played by ordinary people from the village (Queen Elizabeth is portrayed by Eliza from the tobacco shop; Lady H.H is Mrs. Otter from the End House). Interruptions and hesitations deconstruct the usual heroic representation of history only to bring it closer to the audience. Throughout the duration of the pageant, the audience struggles to fill in the gaps of the plot, as voices are partly covered by the sounds of nature, and rhymes are sometimes forgotten. Intrigued and sometimes confused by Miss La Trobe's representation of English history, the audience members find themselves engaged in deciphering the message of the play.

The last part, entitled “The Present Time. Ourselves”, turns the attention towards the audience, revealing disunity (“scraps, orts and fragments”) rather than a sense of historical destiny. At the end of the pageant, Miss La Trobe feels she has failed to reach out to the audience, and participants are left wondering what the meaning of the play was. Reflecting on the message of the pageant, Reverend Streatfield then takes the stage. The choice of Mr. Streatfield as a spokesman for the audience appears “grotesque”, and embarrassing as he is described as a “piece of traditional church furniture; a corner cupboard; or the top beam of a gate, fashioned by generations of village carpenters after some lost-in-the-mists-of-antiquity model” (*BTA*, 129). Rather than a culminating moment of success, his speech is marked by interruptions and a lack of consistency; his words are cut by the zoom of aeroplanes flying above the audience, a brief and sombre reminder of the war (*BTA*, 131). Speaking about the pageant, he mentions the desire for belonging he saw transpiring throughout the play: “we are members one of another. Each is part of the whole” (*BTA*, 130). His thoughts are rather unconvincing, as he fails to see that what holds them together as a community is not as much the acts of the play, or the grand narratives of history, as life happening “between the acts”.

The contrast between the historic dimension of the play and the quotidian activities taking place “between the acts” reveals the overlapping lines of agency and history, everyday tactics and strategies, domestic spaces and “other” spaces, such as the pageant stage. The condensed time frame of the novel (the action takes place over twenty-four hours) encapsulates the chronological and

parodic reading of English literary history. The pageant leaps chronologically through historical ages only to arrive at the present time when mirrors are turned towards the members of the audience who thus find themselves participating in and rewriting history. The play alludes to the power of tradition and history but also undermines and questions its representation through its compelling omissions of the Church, the Army, and the Union Jack (*BTA*, 122). As the pageant builds up to the scene about “Present Time”, attention is drawn once more to the audience and their everyday life which connects the past to the future.

While Miss La Trobe’s representation of English history fails to create a long lasting moment of unity, the characters of Pointz Hall remain connected through a hidden pattern of interactions. When the last echoes of the play die out in the silence of the evening, the only thing that continues to bring the “scraps, orts and fragments” together is everyday life. Uniting and dividing at the same time, everyday interactions reflect the ebb and flow of the two universal emotions Woolf talks about in the novel - love and hate. Juxtaposed with emotions are “ways of doing things”, such as daily rituals of family life (ordering fish, sitting at tea, sewing, reading letters, paying bills), and ways of experiencing the space of Pointz Hall (walking, admiring the view of the countryside). The rhythm of daily routines and the emotional tension between characters are intertwined with the life of the village and the sounds and cycles of nature. Although the pageant comes to an end, the everyday continues to exist in the interstitial spaces of history and politics as well as in connection to nature. It continues to carry the

seeds of aggression (i.e. Bart pouncing on little George), and gender inequalities that mirror the aggressiveness of war.

De Certeau and Tactics of Resistance

De Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics can be used to further examine the flow of interactions and thoughts in *BTA*. According to de Certeau, strategies require the isolation of the subject from the environment and assume a "proper" spatial or institutional localization. While strategies are linked to institutions and structures of power, tactics do not assume the existence of clearly defined boundaries: "The tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at distance". In addition, "...because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time ...whatever it wins, it does not keep" (*PE*, xix). Tactics are actions that emerge spontaneously as individuals deal with environments over which they have little or no control. Similar to the "age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise themselves in order to survive" (*PE*, xi), tactics represent the individual response to the inflexible and often oppressive character of social institutions. De Certeau's examples of tactics imply a certain kind of action (for instance, la perruque, the worker's own work disguised as work for the employer) or a decision (such as the decision to buy food at the supermarket, which involves a multitude of variables including tastes, appetites, cost, products already available at home, etc.) (*PE*, xix). The essential aspect of tactics is the active engagement of individuals who, rather than being passive consumers of cultural and commercial goods, are continuously engaged in creating diverse ways of doing

things, rejecting the strategies society has put in place for them. Tactics cover a broad range of practices and “ways of operating”, from speech acts to reading, talking, waking, and cooking, and can be extended to any kind of inventive employment of possibilities such as disguise, surprise, discretion, secrecy, wit, play, and bluff (*Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 159).

As the pageant unfolds and the war draws closer, Woolf’s characters articulate their own momentary tactics of dealing with issues of domesticity, patriarchal authority and war. Faced with fluidity and dissolution, her characters resist or evade the social and political challenges of their time through the “small tactics” of everyday life. One common thread for both the masculine and feminine characters in the novel is that resistance is manifested predominantly in their unspoken thoughts and gestures. Woolf senses that everyday resistance is inert and latent, lying, partly, in the “opaque and stubborn life buried in everyday gestures” (de Certeau, in Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 152).

As Highmore points out, the resistance of the everyday can be expanded “from subversive ‘poaching’ to a brute facticity of a body that is not a machine” (*Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 160). When Robert Linhart describes his experience of working on the assembly line, he explains how the organism, its muscles and nerves, resist and brace themselves against repetition and nothingness (in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 160). Similar to Linhart’s recollection of how the organism resists the repetition and nothingness of the assembly line, Woolf employs examples of silent bodily movements, showing their subversive potential. A twitch of jealousy, a frown, a sudden jerk surface to

the exterior, like icebergs, small signs of the turbulent emotions her characters experience. Isa twitches as jealousy and anger pierce her skin (*BTA*, 39); Giles purses his lips and grips the arm of his chair as he perceives a moment of intimacy between Isa and William Dodge (*BTA*, 42); Lucy flushes and shrinks and cowers when her brother strikes her faith (*BTA*, 17).

Domesticity and the Everyday

While *Mrs Dalloway* explores the urban everyday bringing to life the portraits of the pedestrians walking on an ordinary day through the streets of London, *Between the Acts* locates the everyday in the sphere of domesticity, unfolding within the larger context of a manor house and village life, nature, history and war. A central theme in the novel, domesticity, or rather resistance to domesticity, is articulated around Isa's resistance to Giles. The most complex character in the novel, Isa is difficult to pin down as she creates her own hidden – but also playful and creative - ways of evading the strict conventions of the patriarchal society. Her secret love for Rupert Haines, on which she does not act, her secret poetry hidden in the account book show a part of her that rarely surfaces in conversations. She rebels against the forces that try to peg her down “on a chair arm like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity” (*BTA*, 13). But when Mr. Oliver teases Isa about her son being a coward, she feels the conflict between her maternal instincts and her desire for freedom: “She frowned. He was not a coward, her boy wasn't. And she loathed the domestic, the possessive; the maternal. And he knew it and did it on purpose to tease her, the old brute, her father-in-law” (*BTA*, 14). Though hurt, she looks

away and says nothing. Her tactics of tacit resistance transpire only in the details of her actions, such as meeting the guests in her dressing-gown (*BTA*, 4) or rising last from her chair in front of Mrs. Haines, the wife of the gentlemen farmer Isa was in love with (*BTA*, 5).

Mrs. Swithin is also teased by her brother for her religious beliefs. Similar to Isa, she resists tacitly, and without openly questioning the authority of her brother, she remains unrelenting in her faith: “Lucy flushed. He had struck her faith ... She half covered the cross with her fingers. She shrank; she covered...” (*BTA*, 17); “She flushed ... as once more he struck her faith” (*BTA*, 18). Although she does not speak out against her brother, Mrs. Swithin does not concede, and Isa admires her courageous defiance: “to beat up against those immensities and the old man’s irreverences her skinny hands, her laughing eyes! How courageous to defy Bart and the weather!” (*BTA*, 17)

The domestic realm is protective and nurturing, but also confining, exposing the participants to suffering and humiliation: “Isabella felt prisoned. Through the bars of the prison, through the sleep haze that deflected them, blunt arrows bruised her; of love, then of hate” (*BTA*, 46). Isa’s feelings towards her husband are a mixture of love and hate, of fight and embrace (“Before they slept, they must fight; after they have fought, they would embrace” (*BTA*, 148)). She admires his physical appearance, his fierce and untamed expression “which incited her, even at forty-five, to furbish up her ancient batteries” (*BTA*, 33). Although aware it is just an old cliché, the thought of him being the father of her children made her feel pride and affection (*BTA*, 33). In the psychological games

that take place between Isa and Giles, words are far less important than gestures, facial expressions, and thoughts. Unspoken exchanges reveal the catalyzing tension between love and hate, controlling the ebb and flow of their bodily interactions:

“Giles then did what to Isa was his little trick; shut his lips; frowned; and took up the pose of one who bears the burden of the world’s woe, making money for her to spend.

‘No,’ said Isa, as plainly as words could say it. ‘I don’t admire you,’ and looked, not at his face, but at his feet. ‘Silly little boy, with blood on his boots’” (*BTA*, 77).

Giles and Isa’s tactics are those of avoidance and tacit resistance, where feelings of jealousy, admiration, and hate come to the surface only as a twitch, frown, pursing of the lips or silent gaze. As Isa’s gaze is redirected down at her husband’s blood-stained shoes, Giles responds by shifting his feet (*BTA*, 77). Her conjugal relation being strained, intimacy is replaced by secrets and stifled attractions: “Didn’t she write her poetry in a book bound like an account book lest Giles might suspect? She looked at Giles” (*BTA*, 35).

While Isa and Giles are estranged, bonds of friendship and sexual attraction form outside the conjugal relation. Isa feels a sudden familiarity with William Dodge, Mrs. Manresa’s friend. They become “conspirators” sharing the knowledge that they both have their own secrets, that they are “seekers after hidden faces” (*BTA*, 78), filling in each other’s phrases, smiling, each murmuring the same song (*BTA*, 72). They are both rebels who conceal their real thoughts and desires, conspirators who tacitly resist the conventions of the patriarchal

society. The bond between them is silent, as they secretly guess each other's thoughts without openly articulating their moments of intimacy or frustration.

Giles, on the other hand, feels attracted to Mrs. Manresa whose open sexuality challenges the stifling conventions of society. Mrs. Manresa is a controversial character, described as both vulgar, over sexed, and over-dressed (*BTA*, 28), but also "goddess-like, buoyant, abundant" (*BTA*, 82). The sexual tension between her and Giles adds to the complexity of his conjugal relation, stirring emotions and passions (she even "stirred the stagnant pool" of Bartholomew's heart). The sexual tension between characters undermines and sustains at the same time the smooth functioning of the patriarchal family. Woolf remarks the inequality in extra-conjugal relations. Isa knows that "It made no difference; his infidelity - but hers did" (*BTA*, 77).

Though little is revealed in the novel about his sentiments and inner struggles, Giles is the only character who appears to be genuinely concerned about the war situation. Through his tactics of small and ordinary gestures, he reveals desire and frustration:

"Giles nicked his chair into the position with a jerk. Thus only could he show his irritation, his rage with old fogies who sat at views over coffee and cream when the whole of Europe – over there – was bristling like ... He had no command of metaphor" (*BTA*, 37).

Since Giles "had no command of metaphor", his thoughts remaining silent, Woolf reveals his inner struggles, his attraction to Mrs. Manresa, his irritation with William Dodge through the use of Free Indirect Discourse. The following paragraph is an excellent example of how Woolf employs FID for this purpose:

“William Dodge caught it as it fell. He held it for a moment. He turned it. From the faint blue mark, as of crossed daggers, in the glaze at the bottom he knew that it was English, made perhaps at Nottingham; date about 1760. His expression, considering the daggers, coming to this conclusion, gave Giles another peg on which to hang his rage as one hangs a coat on a peg, conveniently. A toady; a lickspittle; not a downright plain man of his senses; but a teaser and twitcher; a fingerer of sensations; picking and choosing; dillying and dallying; not a man to have straightforward love for a woman—his head was close to Isa's head - but simply a -- At this word, which he could not speak in public, he pursed his lips; and the signet-ring on his little finger looked redder, for the flesh next it whitened as he gripped the arm of his chair” (*BTA*, 42).

The paragraph starts with a description of William Dodge catching the coffee cup that Isa knocked over, only to change narrators part way through. The author turns then to Giles' inner voice, whose feelings of anger and irritation come to surface as William's head is getting closer to Isa's. From the outside, the only thing visible is the pursing of his lips, the grip on the arm of the chair, the red finger. While the patriarchal family life might appear smooth in the eyes of a distant observer, Woolf delves deep into her characters' thoughts and gestures to reveal that life is more than what is articulated or said out loud.

To capture the multiplicity of dissonant voices leading to sporadic and evanescent moments of harmony, Woolf uses innovative narrative techniques such as Free Indirect Discourse (FID), in which the voice shifts back and forth almost imperceptibly from the narrator to the character (see also *BTA*, xlvii). As Briganti and Mezei point out in their analysis of the interwar novel, Woolf is among the writers who self-consciously remain in the territory of the quotidian and who are committed to give visibility to everyday (*Domestic Modernism*, 34). The spontaneous and complex character of everyday is revealed through

techniques such as “clever focalization, free indirect discourse and dialogic exchange in form of unexpected glance, ironic speech act, narrative sleight of hand with which the gaze of the reader is deliberately redirected or even misdirected” (*Domestic Modernism*, 34). Free Indirect Discourse is used in *BTA* to reveal the richness and complexity of everyday interactions that cannot be reproduced by classical narrative strategies such as dialogue or narrator summary. Through the use of FID, Woolf succeeds to convey “not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is” (*Jane Austen*, 183). By shifting the voice from the narrator to the character, without the use of quotations, Woolf overcomes what de Certeau saw as the inability of the text to write or reproduce voices, without oppressing, displacing or eluding their meaning.

“The stuff life is made of” can only be observed if one is willing to go beyond the surface, to uncover what is messy and painful, loving and accepting, certain or doubtful, all mingled with the ennui of everyday life. By alternating between first and third-person direct speech, Woolf captures the flow of impressions and passing thoughts, recreating the plurality and tonality of everyday life. Woolf brings her characters to life by giving voice to their inner thoughts and their reflections in the eyes of others. As ways of individual expression, words manipulate “commonplaces” making them “habitable”, de Certeau reminds us (*PE*, xxii). Through her use of words, interrupted conversations, snippets of overheard conversation, Woolf creates characters

who are full-fledged personalities, agents who reflect upon the conventions of society and choose their own ways of making them “habitable”.

However, de Certeau also reminds us that everyday is more than small gestures, conversations and unspoken thoughts. Everyday is also about “ways of doing things” and “ways of operating”, such as reading and walking. In *BTA*, the novel’s main characters also appropriate space and text as lived experience. While Mr. Oliver is consulting the Encyclopaedia on the origins of the expression “touch wood”, Mrs. Swithin is reading an “Outline of History” that takes her all the way back to the times when the entire continent was not divided by a channel (*BTA*, 6). When the pageant has finished and the darkness has descended upon the house at Pointz Hall, she returns to the times when “we were savages” (*BTA*, 21), and England was a “swamp” (*BTA*, 148). The reading frames Mrs. Swithin’s day and provides her with a personal reflection upon the question of what is civilization. By taking us back to the beginning of humanity, her reading amplifies the expansion in time and space of one day at Pointz Hall achieved through the historical compression of the pageant.

Walkers and Voyeurs

“Ways of operating”, such as reading and walking, are critical to understanding the everyday practices described in the novel. Walking is particularly important for de Certeau. Rethinking space as poetics of walking, de Certeau has rescued it from the anonymity imposed by the modern fascination with maps and views. He starts the discussion of spatial practices by contrasting the panoptical view of Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center

with the experience of walking in the city. While the panoramic view of the city resembles the panoptical, “all seeing power” described by Michel Foucault, ordinary people, de Certeau claims, have a profoundly different experience of the city. As walkers, they experience and engage with the city at the street level rather than in a top-down manner. As a mode of everyday expression, the act of walking is similar to the act of speech as it involves “a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian” (*PE*, 97). Walking is defined by de Certeau as a space of enunciation (*PE*, 98), which creates shadows and ambiguities within the geometrical space of urbanists and architects (*PE*, 100). The simple act of walking “speaks” about how we perceive space and create meaning. The walker “condemns certain places to inertia or disappearance and composes with others spatial ‘turns of phrase’ that are ‘rare’, ‘accidental’ or illegitimate” (*PE*, 99).

The shortcuts and detours taken by passers-by are similar to “deviations relative to a sort of ‘literal meaning’ defined by the urbanistic system” (*PE*, 100). The tourist map, for instance, urges people to follow commercial routes, selling a pre-fabricated experience of the city that is remote from the everyday experiences of its dwellers. Tourists, however, create their own tactics of discovering the city, straying away from the “prescribed” route. Whether the detour is planned or accidental, individuals assemble their own experience of the city. While their route can be traced and re-traced on paper, interactions with other people, stopping to chat with a stranger, window shopping, or sitting on a bench in a park cannot be captured on a map. Pedestrians’ criss-crossing

movements and trajectories leave no traces that can be recorded but compose the manifold stories of everyday life.

The everyday in *BTA* is expressed also in ways of doing things, such as the way characters experience the space of Pointz Hall, through walking and looking at the view. Their choice to abandon or pursue an action creates endless possibilities for new experiences of the surrounding space. Throughout the novel, the two modes of experiencing space - the all-encompassing view of the landscape and the intimate experience of walking - are intertwined. Walking is contrasted with the reoccurring moments when the Pointz Hall residents sit together, in silence, admiring the view of the surrounding country. While walking is an intimate and individual experience, the view brings the participants together in a way that paralyses the flow of daily interactions. The fixed viewing point is similar to that of the audience as they sit separated from the actors on the stage. Woolf shows the inquisitive power of the fixed gaze in a creative way, by reversing the roles of the audience and the actors. In the last scene of the play, when the audience and the actors are facing each other, Miss La Trobe turns the fixed gaze upon the members of the audience themselves, making them feel exposed and uncomfortable. Feeling “caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle” (*BTA*, 120), they try to “shift an inch or two beyond the inquisitive insulting eye” (*BTA*, 126).

A different modality of experiencing space, the view from the garden, brings their multiple, separate points of view together. Shared by members of the family and guests alike, the all-encompassing view appears unchanged and

permanent. The beautiful view is surveyed “aloofly” and with “detachment” as the repetition appears “senseless, hideous, stupefying” (*BTA*, 46). Vast and out of their reach, the view reminds them of their own mortality, as Mrs. Swithin remarks with sadness that the view will still be there even when they are not (*BTA*, 37).

While Europe was “bristling with guns, poised with planes”, the view remains unchanged showing no warning signs of war. Through the use of FID, Woolf shows the uneasiness the view provokes in participants. Failing to triumph over their minds, the view leaves them feeling close and yet fragmented, unchanged and yet fleeting.

“They were silent. They stared at the view, as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company. Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough. We aren't free, each one of them felt separately to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We're too close; but not close enough. So they fidgeted” (*BTA*, 45).

Walking reveals the subtleties of the novel's characters, their inner struggles and preoccupations, their moments of self-awareness and intimacy. At the beginning of the book, Mrs. Swithin shows William Dodge the house. As she climbs the stairs, she introduces William to the history of the house, her family ancestors, as well as her own personal history (*BTA*, 47). The conversation alternates between the personal and the historic perspective, from “I was born. In this bed” (*BTA*, 49) to the nursery becoming “the cradle of our race” (*BTA*, 50). Opening doors and climbing the stairs becomes an “invisible procession” (*BTA*,

48) that takes them to the origins of it all, to the bedroom where everything started, Mrs. Swithin's life, the human race.

One of the most intimate moments between Isa and William Dodge takes place during a walk through the garden, Isa showing him the way to the greenhouse:

"The path was narrow. Isa went ahead. And she was broad; she fairly filed the path, swaying slightly as she walked, and plucking a leaf here and there from the hedge. ... Dodge had lagged behind. She waited" (*BTA*, 77-78).

Through turns and timed moves, the dialogue of bodies that emerges between Isa and William creates intimacy. As they walk together on the narrow path, they feel they had known each other all their lives, that they were "conspirators", sharing a moment of closeness.

When Giles walks across the fields to the barn (*BTA*, 68), he takes a shortcut, a path "hard as brick", and "strewn with stones". He begins playing the stone-kicking game, alone, and each stone being kicked, reveals more about his obsessions, fears and desires. "The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward)..." Lust, irritation with William Dodge's perceived perversion are entangled with the feeling of frustration from not following through on his attraction with Mrs. Manresa and his aversion towards war. Frustrated with inaction, Giles finds relief in his solitary walk. He stamps on the snake that was trying to swallow a toad, the lingering blood on his shoes being the only proof that action was taken, and violence was committed.

Some of the most intimate and revealing moments of the novel occur when characters venture to walk and experience the space of Pointz Hall. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf describes two nurses walking with children under the shade of the trees, “rolling words, like sweets in their tongues” (*BTA*, 8). It is in this intimate context of walking in nature that Isa’s son, George, is filled with light as he clutches a flower, digging off the roots. Similar to the moment of being Woolf experienced as a child, George senses the beauty of everything that surrounds him, the completeness of each element but also the interconnections existing between them: “And the tree was beyond the grass; the grass, the flower and the tree were entire. Down on his knees grubbing he held the flower complete” (*BTA*, 8).

George’s moment of being is interrupted abruptly by Mr. Oliver (Bart) who leaps out from a hiding place behind the trees, with the paper crumpled into a beak, using a hollow voice to address the child: “Good morning, sir” (*BTA*, 9). For George, Mr. Oliver’s “little game” is a frightening appearance of “a terrible peaked eyeless monster” that pulls him out of his reverie and makes him burst into tears. Exposing the brutality of the war, a similar episode interrupts Isa’s morning routine, as she reads in the newspaper the description of soldiers raping a woman (*BTA*, 14). These episodes are cruel reminders that the sheltered life of Pointz Hall is not insulated from the kind of male aggressiveness that Woolf feels portends the war itself.

The everyday in *BTA* is constructed as a tapestry of conversions, small gestures and unspoken thoughts and tactics that form a connective pattern.

Juxtaposed to the world of interactions and emotions, there are practices and ways of doing things. As de Certeau points out, it is through these practices that individuals poach on the territories of others, redefining the rules and procedures that exist in a certain culture. This tactical and spontaneous reappropriation of space, text, speech and everyday life in general, contains the germs of renewal and freedom Lefebvre wrote about. The poetic language of Virginia Woolf reveals the many-sidedness of everyday as well as the difficulty of capturing “the stuff life is made of”. Her aim is to understand the “lives of the obscure”⁷, to unveil what remains of individual lives once the grand narratives of history are set aside momentarily. Rather than focusing explicitly on the political circumstances of the time, Woolf reveals the catastrophe of war through the lens of the everyday. It is in the individual characters of the novel that one can find the quest for individual and collective identity, the seeds of aggression as well as the resistance to war.

Tuning in to her characters’ thoughts, Woolf becomes the ideal narrator, registering the intricate flow of thoughts, and fleeting moments of interactions. Although the result is disturbingly complex, the polyphonic character of everyday is preserved, and the multiple intersections between domesticity, locality, nature and history are revealed. The novel abounds with dissonant voices and silences, rhythms and contradictions, unity and disunity, written into the literary text without displacing their orality and complexity.

⁷ The name of one of Virginia Woolf’s essays published in the volume entitled “The Common Reader”.

Conclusion

The attempt of critical social theory to bring to the foreground the importance of everyday life could find inspiration in the modernist works of literature and, in particular, in this novel. Virginia Woolf's poetic sensibility exposes the rich experience of the quotidian as common ground, where individuals connect to each other and, at the same time, reinforce, contest, evade, or simply remain immune to the various forms of power imposed upon them. At least within the realm of fiction and imagination, Lefebvre's fear that modernity has brought about a "flattening out" of the distinctions, depth and complexity of everyday life proves to be unfounded. Nevertheless, as de Certeau warns us, without a certain sensibility and proper techniques of investigation, the poetic and complex nature of the everyday can be easily overlooked, as it is often the case in the predominantly written economy of today.

By revealing the multiple ways in which individuals reappropriate space, text, speech and gestures, Woolf defines the everyday as a place for renewal and freedom. She rewrites history through the lens of ordinary people, focusing on the emotions, thoughts and daily routines that lie beneath the individual search for identity.

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