

Reappraising the Political

Radical democracy

Politics between abundance and lack

edited by

ars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen

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RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Politics between abundance
and lack

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Radical democracy

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REAPPRAISING THE POLITICAL

Simon Tormey and Jon Simons · series editors

The times we live in are troubling, and as always theory struggles to keep pace with events in its efforts to analyse and assess society, culture and politics. Many of the 'contemporary' political theories emerged and developed in the twentieth century or earlier, but how well do they work at the start of the twenty-first century?

Reappraising the Political realigns political theory with its contemporary context. The series is interdisciplinary in approach, seeking new inspiration from both traditional sister disciplines, and from more recent neighbours such as literary theory and cultural studies. It encompasses an international range, recognising both the diffusion and adaptation of Western political thought in the rest of the world, and the impact of global processes and non-Western ideas on Western politics.



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Rethinking radical democracy between abundance and lack

CONTRARY to predictions at the time, the fall of the Berlin Wall did not signal the end of history, nor did it indicate a new period of peace and prosperity. Instead, recent years have seen new challenges to democracy, for instance cultural and economic globalisation undermining the nation-state as the unit of democratic government, the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic discourses, and, since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the curtailment of civil liberties. Faced with these challenges, political theorists have become increasingly dissatisfied with existing models of democracy, which have difficulties capturing the stakes of these new challenges. Moreover, a significant number of theorists have turned their attention to radical democracy, making it one of the most promising areas of contemporary democratic theory.

Inspired by so-called 'post-structuralist' theories of language and power¹, theorists of radical democracy have distinguished themselves from Marxism, liberalism and communitarianism on a number of issues. One example is the rejection by radical democrats of the possibility of founding democracy on a pre-established universality, such as human rights, principles of rational discourse or the teleology of history. Another example is their insistence that social identities are always incomplete and subject to contestation and subversion. However, contrary to popular interpretations of radical democracy, these arguments do not entail an outright rejection of either universality or identity. Rather, radical democrats have reworked the assumptions structuring classical democratic theory, many of which are ontological in nature, outlining a new approach to universality, identity and democracy.

Behind this new approach lies the claim, common to radical democratic thought as a whole, that there is always some difference escaping subsumption to identity or to any simple dichotomy between identity and difference. In the following, we refer to this difference as a 'radical difference', and argue, in agreement with the existing literature on radical democracy, that it entails a view of universality and identity as 'a process or condition irreducible to any of its determinate modes of appearance'.² However, we also argue that the existing

literature has failed to appreciate the way in which the conceptualisation of radical difference has led to significantly different versions of radical democracy – what we refer to as the ontological imaginary of abundance and the ontological imaginary of lack respectively. These two imaginaries share the idea of a radical difference and the critique of conventional conceptualisations of universality and identity; yet they also differ in the manner in which they approach these questions. For instance, they disagree on whether political analysis should start from the level of signification or from networks of embodied matter. And they disagree on the kind of politics that follows from the idea of radical difference: whereas theorists of lack emphasise the need to build hegemonic constellations, theorists of abundance emphasise never-receding pluralisation.³

The purpose of this volume is to examine these disagreements in the context of philosophical considerations as well as concrete concerns about politics and ethics. In what follows, we outline the main features of this context. While radical democracy is not the name of a new political programme, it is nonetheless possible to situate it in relation to, first, Marxism and, then, contemporary liberal and communitarian theories of democracy.

The Marxist legacy: a radical difference

The inspiration that radical democratic theory draws from Karl Marx stems from the way in which Marx discloses the shortcomings of modern democratic theory. The shortcomings concern the very *raison d'être* of democracy. What matters, Marx famously argued, is not the ability of the state to protect individual property, but whether society serves the true purpose of human existence, namely the free and equal development of a self-determining community. Moreover, given Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production, this argument suggests that the liberal state is too disconnected from the embedded life of citizens, thus setting the stage for a radical democracy based on principles of economic equality and social justice. As Marx and Engels argued: 'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.'⁴

Nevertheless, this convergence between Marx's thought and contemporary radical democracy has not stopped the latter from being critical of not only Marx but also twentieth-century Marxism. Accordingly, radical democrats declare themselves to be 'post-Marxists' or 'post-structuralists' – that is, they object to the Marxist tendency, often expressed in the name of scientific laws or historical necessities, to turn politics into an epiphenomenon of economic structures. Theorists of radical democracy object to three things in particular.⁵ First, they criticise Marxism for its economic determinism, which not only forecloses human agency, but also eliminates the autonomy of political organisation. The proletariat does not have a privileged status as the agent of

social change; instead, radical democrats look to other constituencies, such as the new social movements. Second, they criticise Marxism for its essentialism, disputing the possibility of defining human existence with reference to necessary laws about the centrality of labour. And, finally, they criticise Marxism for eradicating historical and philosophical heterogeneity – in short, all that which cannot be subsumed to Marx's conceptual categories – claiming that this risks aligning Marxism with the paradigms of thought that it sought to overcome.

All of these objections hinge on what we earlier called radical difference, that is, a difference that goes beyond the dualism of identity and difference. One way to explain this is with reference to the class-analysis defining most of the Marxist tradition. On the one hand, the class-analysis identifies the capitalist class as those who, as owners of the means of production, seek to maximise surplus value. On the other hand, the same analysis identifies the proletarian class as those who, as a result of the exploitation that comes with the maximisation of surplus value, seek to overturn capitalism. On the face of it, this reveals two clearly demarcated identities, both of which justify themselves with reference to objective but mutually exclusive interests. However, radical democrats argue, the line between the two identities is in fact blurred: although the proletarian and the capitalist appear to be mutually exclusive, they both rely on a difference between what they are and what they are not (that is, the proletarian is *not* capitalist, and the capitalist is *not* proletarian). What is more, this difference is not simply yet another difference, in the sense that it would be possible to subsume it – through a dialectical resolution – under an all-inclusive identity such as a future communist society. Rather, it is a radical difference that – without itself being stable – constitutes the difference between the two identities. This destabilises the identities of both the capitalist and the proletarian, and indicates the futility of searching for an ontological centre that could guarantee the completeness of any social identity. Moreover, radical democrats conclude, it points to the primacy of difference over identity, asking us to accept what is the slogan of radical democracy, namely, that *difference constitutes identity*.⁶

This conclusion has wide-ranging implications for democratic theory. First and foremost, it means that the political is ubiquitous; that is, that the blurring of social identities makes political struggles and conflicts prevalent. In addition, it means that the idea of democracy is inherently open-ended, and that – to paraphrase Jacques Derrida – it is always 'to come', subject to new amendments and untimely contestations.⁷ Both of these consequences make radical democracy easy to identify in the context of contemporary democratic theory.

Radical democracy and contemporary democratic theory

While most textbooks define contemporary democratic theory as a debate between liberals and communitarians,⁸ the emergence of radical democratic

theory as a mature field of study makes it not only possible, but also necessary to add radical democracy as a third element to this debate. In this context, radical democracy resuscitates Marx's critique of modern democratic thought, revealing the shortcomings of both liberalism and communitarianism.

With regard to liberalism, radical democrats do not reject liberal democratic values such as liberty and equality, but argue that we must deepen and radicalise these values. Moreover, radical democrats argue that liberals misconstrue liberty and equality by turning them into abstract rights beyond dispute. The problem with doing so, radical democrats assert, is that it makes difference dependent on a prior commitment to liberal democracy, thereby excluding those political constituencies that challenge liberal interpretations of liberty and equality. In contrast, theorists of radical democracy argue that the foundations of democracy are political 'all the way down', and that this warrants deep contestation of both social identities and political formations in the name of liberty and equality.

Likewise, while radical democrats agree with communitarianism about the context-dependence of democracy, they nonetheless refuse to ground democracy on the identity of a community. Doing so, radical democrats argue, not only overlooks the plural, fluid and criss-crossing character of identity, but also risks stifling the pursuit of democratic pluralism. Rather than simply allowing for different communities to co-exist side-by-side, radical democrats continue, one must put into question the very notion of a community with stable limits. This turns democratic pluralism into a field of contestation, thus making it possible to recognise the existence of differences that escape subsumption to any identity. As Lars Tønder and Simon Critchley argue in their contributions to the volume, radical democracy emphasises identification as an ongoing process rather than fully constituted identities. Like deliberative models of democracy, and against aggregative and communitarian models, radical democrats hold that the political process is constitutive of identities and interests. However, they also object to the deliberative model's assumption that procedures can be rational and can produce rational decisions.

As described above, for radical democrats, democracy is a never-ending process, always to come, and not simply an end-goal or the promise of a perfect democratic society. Yet, the politicisation of its foundations does not undermine democracy *per se*, radical democrats insist, for it entails the pluralisation of perspectives, identities and values, thereby energising democratic practice in a way that other models of democracy are unable to do. Moreover, radical democrats add, the pluralisation that contestation and openness facilitate hinges on the cultivation of agonistic respect; that is, the simultaneous welcoming of radical difference and the questioning of the violence that this welcoming may entail. As the contributions to the volume suggest, this cultivation can take many forms. For instance, in her contribution, Chantal Mouffe argues that an

agonistic public sphere may revitalise democracy in a way that deliberative and Third Way approaches are unable to. And in his contribution, Romand Coles looks at alternative ways to organise and influence decision-making procedures and thereby combining the cultivation of agonistic respect with the invigoration of democracy. For both Mouffe and Coles, as for radical democrats generally, politics cannot be reduced to the rational or procedural, but contains an irreducible element of passion.

Even so, although we find a shared commitment to the virtues of contestation and incompleteness, there are also important disagreements among radical democrats, some of which concern the very agenda of radical democracy. In the following, we argue that these disagreements stem from different views of the specific nature of radical difference, reflecting two ontological imaginaries of lack and abundance.

Radical democracy and the ontology of lack

Theorists working within the ontological imaginary of lack conceive of radical difference in terms of a non-symbolisable lack operating at the heart of any subject or system of signification. This idea is most explicitly developed in the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan whose thought is the focus of several other theorists of lack, such as Ernesto Laclau and Yannis Stavrakakis.⁹

Lacan's most fundamental claim is that identity is simultaneously constituted and decentred by a constitutive lack. The subject, who is only a subject in language, is constituted through identification with a signifier in language, for instance 'white' or 'male'. However, while this serves to fill the lack and thus constitute the identity of the subject, the filling of the lack is always incomplete and temporary. Identification always fails, the Lacanian argument goes, because it comes up against the limit of signification, which cannot itself be signified within language. Moreover, the limit of signification is not something lying beyond the realm of language, but a lack inherent to language itself. So, while the identity of the subject is constituted through the endless process of filling the lack, the lack itself arises from the failure of this process, thus securing that the identity of the subject remains decentred.

As a consequence of the link between identity and signification, theorists of lack take signification as their starting point for political analysis. The critical aim of political analysis is to show that there is a lack – that is, a radical difference – at the heart of any identity or signification. What is more, theorists of lack argue that, like identity and systems of signification, any political regime is organised around and simultaneously subverted by a constitutive lack. Democracy is a special kind of regime, however, because it institutionalises the continuous reoccupation of the lack in political practices such as periodical elections.¹⁰ Radical democracy, as conceived from the ontological imaginary of

lack, radicalises this idea, first, by extending it to every aspect of society and, second, by acknowledging that at the heart of democracy there is no universal principle or stable identity, but only an ineradicable lack. Accordingly, radical democrats inspired by this view of radical difference criticise discourses that seek to cover up the constitutive lack, such as nationalist discourses that construct an essence of the national community, thereby suppressing the inherent contingency and historicity of its identity.

Yet, theorists of lack not only see radical democracy as a source for continual critique; they also seek to articulate hegemonic alternatives, even if these are ultimately destabilised by the lack at the heart of them. Hegemony – the articulation of different constituencies into a whole – describes the formation of political projects such as radical democracy.¹¹ Although radical democracy foregrounds lack and openness, theorists of lack also argue that this is only possible through some – always partial and temporary – hegemonic closure. In this sense, no democratic project or institution can claim to be beyond contestation, and theorists of lack conclude that the radical democratic challenge consists in finding ways to institute contestation, even if this, paradoxically, always involves some closure.

Radical democracy and the ontology of abundance

There is little doubt that the ontology of lack has become a significant pillar in contemporary radical democratic theory. However, an equally important strand of radical democratic theory is what we call the ontology of abundance, which emphasises networks of materiality, flows of energy, processes of becoming and experimenting modes of affirmation. Moreover, the ontology of abundance points to a second vision of radical democracy, which, inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze,¹² has become increasingly important to theorists such as Jane Bennett, William E. Connolly, Paul Patton and Nathan Widder.

Deleuze's most important contribution to the theory of radical democracy lies in his insistence on approaching difference in such a way that it involves no necessary connection with notions of failure and lack. The problem with these notions, Deleuze argues, is that they are too constrained by what they negate. For example, in the case of lack, Deleuze suggests that Lacanians are caught by a spectre of structuralism, which does not appreciate the complexity and depth of social life, but instead reduces the experience of difference to a question of failure.¹³ Deleuze seeks to avoid this reductionism with the idea of 'the rhizome'. The rhizome adds two new dimensions to the conceptualisation of radical difference. On the one hand, it enables us to see how radical difference operates within contingently defined networks that are capable of synthesising existing differences into something radically new and different. On the other hand, the idea of a rhizome also enables us to make sense of the many outcomes

of this synthesis – some of which may be hegemonic in nature – making it appear as if the creation of new differences is governed by the need to fill a pre-existing lack. However, Deleuze stresses that the appearance of a lack is merely secondary to radical difference, which, existing below the threshold of lack and hegemony, keeps propelling new things into being. In his words, the appearance of new things ‘presupposes a swarm of differences, a pluralism of free, wild or untamed differences ... one which is determined as an abstract and potential multiplicity’.¹⁴

So rather than interpreting radical difference in terms of a structural failure, theorists of abundance point to its potentiality when it comes to the empowerment of alternative modes of life. This sets the stage for a radical politics that differs from the one inspired by the ontology of lack in three ways. First, theorists of abundance interpret ethical injunctions and moral commands in light of a sensibility of enchantment, which not only discriminates between those who resent and those who affirm the incompleteness of social life, but also seeks to cultivate an ethics of joy.¹⁵ Second, they outline a critique of existing hegemonies, especially capitalism, and commit themselves to economic reforms based on equality and collectivism, nurturing those components of contemporary societies that are ripe for transformation. Finally, theorists of abundance link the commitment to alternative life-forms to a strategy of pluralisation, which emphasises the virtues of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness.¹⁶ That is, they experiment with those minority groups that, although operating below the radar of existing social codes, may contribute to the deepening of democratic government.

Radical democracy between abundance and lack

The preceding discussion shows how radical democracy stands at a critical junction between two different ontological imaginaries – abundance and lack – each of which conceptualises difference in distinctive ways. One way of summarising the stakes of this discussion is to say that, whereas the ontology of lack conceptualises radical difference in terms of a non-symbolisable lack, the ontology of abundance approaches radical difference as an abstract multiplicity from which contingently defined networks emerge, adding both depth and stature to the flows of experience. As we have seen, two different versions of radical democracy follow from this: one that emphasises the hegemonic nature of politics, and another that cultivates a strategy of pluralisation.

Nevertheless, the discussion about radical democracy should not stop at this point, because the distinction between abundance and lack may itself be contestable. First of all, one may ask what status we should assign to the distinction itself. A modest interpretation would be to see the abundance/lack distinction as a heuristic tool that makes explicit the ontological assumptions of