

Special Issue: Reflections on post-Marxism: Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy in the 21st century

RESEARCH

Democracy beyond hegemony

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This article asks whether Laclau and Mouffe are the right theoretical partners for thinking about the project of democracy today. It concludes that they still have quite a lot to offer that project, but it also suggests we should be wary of embracing their thought too wholeheartedly, specifically because of their fondness for Gramsci and hegemony, and perhaps also, as a result, their willingness to engage the state and its institutions in the struggle for democracy.

key words democracy • hegemony • Laclau and Mouffe • post-Marxism

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Introduction

I have what I consider to be a long relationship with Laclau and Mouffe. It began in the early 2000s when I embarked on a sustained engagement with the second edition of *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (hereafter *HSS*), and with Mouffe's subsequent solo work. I found both to be extremely useful for making a critique of a Habermasian consensus theory that dominated planning thought back then (for example, Innes, 1995; Forester, 1999). But as my relationship with Laclau and Mouffe developed, they slowly became central to my thinking about democracy, a political idea that is now at the very core of my work.

It is ironic, then, that as I began thinking about this article, I realised that I did not remember very well what their idea of democracy was. Their way of conceiving of democracy, what they call a 'radical and plural democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xv), is not in the front of my mind anymore. That is partly due to age and to my failing memory, but it is more because other writers have stepped forward to occupy my attention when I think about democracy – writers like Rancière, Hardt and Negri, Lefebvre, Castoriadis, Virno, and Butler – and Laclau and Mouffe have, as a result, faded into the background.

And so in a way this paper is an effort on my part to investigate why that shift occurred, why I do not think about Laclau and Mouffe much anymore when I think

about democracy. I think an important part of the reason can be traced to their idea of hegemony, and to their claim that hegemony and democracy must be balanced, or held in tension. I will try to explain why I have trouble with that claim below. But to just sum it up here: I want to move in the direction of democracy, and away from hegemony. You could say that, in a sense, the content of Laclau and Mouffe's politics are to 'blame' for them falling off my radar. But I want to be careful here. This paper is not really the story of how my work moved beyond their outdated ideas. Because in going back through their work while preparing for this paper, I found that their arguments were quite subtle and fecund. While I want to object to some of their political positions, I also want to stress that their work remains vibrant, and it offers considerable theoretical resources that we can and should use in thinking about democracy today.

Some strong points of agreement

Those resources include, but are not limited to, Laclau and Mouffe's effort to save Marxism by radically rethinking some of its key tenets. This rethinking was radical enough that some insisted, including Laclau and Mouffe (2000: 4), that their politics had gone *beyond* Marxism, and should be called 'post-Marxism'. These debates are well known, so I will not linger on them (see Geras, 1987, for an anti-post-Marxist position). But I do want to voice my emphatic agreement with key elements of their argument here.

Economism and reductionism in Marxism

I think it remains crucial to remember, and continually rearticulate, the enduring importance of Laclau and Mouffe's rejection of economism and class reductionism in Marxism. Throughout the 20th century, and right up through 1985 when the first edition of *Hegemony and socialist strategy* was published, there was no shortage of Marxists peddling economism, the idea that economic production is a more important sphere of human activity than other spheres. This error led easily to class reductionism, the idea that economic class is a more important social category than other categories.¹ Taken together, these two ideas produce a workerism that assumes that 'the working class represents the privileged agent' for bringing about social change (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 177). Swirling around these toxic ideas are others, like structuralism, essentialism and foundationalism. Much of what Laclau and Mouffe are trying to do in *HSS* is to articulate a politics that makes these positions impossible. They draw on heterodox thinkers like Lacan, Derrida and Wittgenstein, among others, to insist that political identities and agendas are never given *a priori* but must be forged anew, each time, in the context of political struggle. That is because, for Laclau and Mouffe, there is no transcendent set of forces that oversees and gives meaning to politics. Political subjectivity and meaning must be worked out immanently, by the actors involved.

There is no *unique* privileged position from which a uniform continuity of effects will follow, concluding with the transformation of society as a whole. All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial [and contingent] character, and can be articulated to very different discourses. It is this articulation which gives them their character, not the place from which

they come. There is therefore no subject – nor, further, any ‘necessity’ – which is absolutely radical and irrecoverable by the dominant order, and which constitutes an absolutely guaranteed point of departure for a total transformation (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 169).

As a result, they reiterate, ‘the meaning of each struggle is not given from the start’. Moreover, no group carries any more status or importance than any other into a struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 87). No group can claim, as Gramsci did for the proletariat (1971: 57, 161, 240; see also 2000: 142, 174), to be the ‘leading’ group. All subjects and subject groups, therefore, must start their interactions from a position of parity. While this litany of ontological claims might seem a bit heavy-handed, I suspect Laclau and Mouffe felt they needed a very strong medicine to cure the disease. In that effort I stand with them fully. I am all for the idea of ‘post-Marxism’, if by that term we mean a definitive going beyond the tradition of economism and class reductionism in Marxism, an anti-essentialist Marxism that thinks in terms of a contingent politics of horizontal articulation among multiple groups. I support that way of understanding post-Marxism because I oppose economism and reductionism, but I also support it because it implies there is something *else* about Marxism, beyond economism and reductionism, that is worth recovering. The problem with economism and reductionism is not that they think economic production and class are important political questions, because they are. The problem is that they claim those political questions are *necessarily more* important than other political questions. The question of who controls the means of production, what social effects that control has, what role the State plays in that control, and how we might mobilise to change that control are, for me, all very much *Marxist* questions. Here I would point specifically to the young Marx, to the *Critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right, economic and philosophic manuscripts*, or *On the Jewish question*, where he offers penetrating critiques of both capitalist alienation and State domination, and he suggests ways we might struggle to change those forms of oppression and create alternative ways of life. These issues can and should be understood as *Marxist* critiques, as Marxist political alternatives. At the same time, the disastrous plan of *The communist manifesto*, in which one form of oppression (capitalism) is traded, impatiently and clumsily, for another (workers’ party authoritarianism), is also a Marxist programme, one we are now well aware leads over the edge of a cliff. So I embrace the double movement of post-Marxism, away from economism and reductionism, and towards those still vitally relevant ideas that are also part of the tradition of Marxism. In short, I embrace the post-Marxism Laclau and Mouffe defend, if somewhat vaguely, in the preface to the second edition: ‘the process of reappropriation of an intellectual tradition, as well as the process of going beyond it’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2000, ix).

My lingering concerns

The party and the state

Of course, everything depends on what we choose to reappropriate and what we choose to go beyond. I have already named some of what I think we can discard. Let me add to that list some in this section, before saying more about what we should retain. We should, I argue, move energetically away from the Party and the State as political forms, and move instead towards democracy. Laclau and Mouffe share this

inclination, to some extent. But still, it is fair to say they remain far more willing than I to allow a role for Party and State in their political vision.

In sketching the terrain of this issue, Laclau and Mouffe clearly oppose an extreme pro-State position. They decry what they call 'statism – the idea that the expansion of the role of the State is the panacea for all problems' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 177). While this idea might seem overstated, like they are presenting us with a straw person, I think it is still very much a danger in our current context. Of course the idea has been with us since *The communist manifesto*, but it presents itself to us today as a desire to return to the Keynesianism that preceded the neoliberal era. Under Keynesianism, we imagine, an assertive national State intervened on behalf of the poor and working class in the form of economic redistribution. In our current era, where a dominant neoliberal policy regime produces appalling and worsening inequality, such redistributive interventions by the State are a very alluring option. And so we are faced with something like the statism Laclau and Mouffe decry, since expanding State intervention to redress inequality always presents itself as a more desirable alternative to the neoliberal retrenchment that pervades our political economy.

Though Laclau and Mouffe do not mention it, this statism has a twin, a 'partyism' that insists that a political movement does not have any real impact – it does not really *matter* – until it organises itself into a Party with the goal of taking State power. There are elegant and crude versions of such partyism. The crude versions are typified by those postmortems of the 2011 uprisings (Egypt, Greece, Spain, Occupy, and so on) that complain that the movements were inadequate because they did not take the next step of organising into a strong and decisive Party. Žižek (2011) is the most egregious example:

But even in Greece, the protest movement displays the limits of self-organisation: protesters sustain a space of egalitarian freedom with no central authority to regulate it, a public space where all are allotted the same amount of time to speak and so on. When the protesters started to debate what to do next, how to move beyond mere protest, the majority consensus [sic] was that what was needed was not a new party or a direct attempt to take state power, but a movement whose aim is to exert pressure on political parties. This is clearly not enough to impose a reorganisation of social life. To do that, one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness.

It is important to correct Žižek's false claim about a 'majority consensus' that the goal is 'to exert pressure on political parties', since one of the main thrusts of the movements in Greece, Spain and Occupy was the realisation that the State and its parties are incapable of being the solution.² As a result there was a conscious turning away, by many, from the seats of power, and a conscious turning towards each other in order to explore how *we* might be the solution to the problems we face. But of course the most wrongheaded element of Žižek's argument is this 'strong body' that can implement its 'quick decisions ... with all necessary harshness'. Such a body is precisely what we do *not* need. And even though Žižek's vision is a particularly horrifying instance of this line of thinking, it is broadly in agreement with the more generally shared argument that the 2011 movements ultimately amounted to little because they did not organise into parties and take State power. The more elegant

version of this argument for the Party is exemplified by Jodi Dean's (2016) *Crowd and Party*. Dean realises that in order to defend the Party today, she cannot merely recycle a crude 'strong body' conception. So for her, the Party is not so much a vanguard of leaders willing to make harsh decisions as it is an affective core around which wide and diverse movements can coalesce. While her Party is far preferable to Žižek's, still she presents it to us just in order to prosecute the same complaint, that people themselves – Dean's 'crowds' – can never achieve anything important if they do not develop a Party organisation.

This Party line of thinking has manifested itself in significant practical initiatives as well. Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and the 2016 candidacy of Bernie Sanders in the United States, for example, are all attempts to channel the energies of the 2011 uprisings into organised political parties that can bring about 'real' change by getting candidates elected to government positions so that they can govern differently than the current governments are governing. I think we need to discard this line of thinking, to escape from the trap of both statism and partyism. We certainly need, at the very least, to cease thinking that the State and the Party are *necessary* to our political success. And while I am wary of rushing too quickly in the other direction, to a purist anti-State and anti-Party asceticism, nevertheless I would encourage us to err in that direction. That is because the State and the Party are not neutral tools that can be used for good *or* for evil, depending on who controls them. They are, instead, necessarily relations of domination. Both State and Party, by their normal operation, alienate people from their power, and they vest that power in a subset of leaders whose job is to govern the population. From the point of view of democracy, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Purcell, 2013, 2016), this is a move in precisely the wrong direction, towards oligarchy rather than democracy, no matter what concrete outcomes – greater equality, better services, less war – are achieved.

So where do Laclau and Mouffe stand on these issues? As we saw, they object to statism, and they do so in the same breath as their denunciation of economism. They argue that these ideas have been the two fundamental obstacles to effective social change (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 177). At the same time, their political imagination, rooted as it is in the concept of hegemony, in the dynamic of some coalition of groups imposing their agenda on other groups, presents an obvious role for the State to play. It is difficult to imagine, as a practical matter, how the counter-hegemonic project they advocate does not necessitate at least some significant engagement with the State, if not its wholesale capture. And the same could be said of the Party as well.

That is admittedly circumstantial evidence, but it is supported by the fact that Laclau and Mouffe are, at times, explicitly agnostic on the question of the Party. They insist – and this is again borne of their struggle against economism and class reductionism – that 'it is impossible to specify *a priori* surfaces of emergence of antagonisms'. That is, we cannot assume, before the fact, what outcomes will emerge from a given realm of political contestation. They apply this argument directly to the Party:

The party as a political institution can, in certain circumstances, be an instance of bureaucratic crystallisation which acts as a brake upon mass movements; but in others it can be the organiser of dispersed and politically virgin masses, and can thus serve as an instrument for the expansion and deepening of democratic struggles. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 180)

On that page they make the same claims about the State. In certain circumstances, they say, the State can be ‘transformed into a bureaucratic excrescence imposed by force upon the rest of society’, but in other circumstances it can act to disrupt oppressive, exploitative or abusive relations in civil society in ways that advance the democratic project. In other words, in these passages they are taking the line that the Party and the State are neutral containers that can be used for positive or negative outcomes. It depends on who uses them and how. But here their anti-essentialism has steered them right back into the arms of *The communist manifesto*, where Marx and Engels implicitly adopt the same ‘neutral-container’ view when they claim that once a *workers’* Party controls the State, all our problems will quickly be solved.³ It is the *capitalist* Party and State that are the problem, they think, and the solution is a *workers’* version of both. And so I think it is fair to say that Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism does not really move us beyond this Marxist idea, that the Party and the State are neutral political forms. They fall short of what we need, which is, I argue, a much more clear-eyed theorisation of the Party and State as political relations that are *themselves* oppressive and anti-democratic, irrespective of who controls them and how they use them to govern.

But the situation is, unfortunately, even a bit more troubling than that. Laclau and Mouffe are not simply offering the Faustian bargain of greater redistribution or better services in exchange for an expansion of Party and State authority.⁴ They are going further, to suggest that the Party and the State can, in the right circumstances, deliver a very different good: the deepening of democracy. It is this suggestion that I want to object to most vehemently. The idea that it is possible to use the Party and the State to deepen democracy is a fool’s errand, because it ignores the anti-democratic relation that lies at the heart of both Party and State. The founding political relation that both the Party and the State institute, as Hobbes makes crystal clear in *Leviathan*, is the alienation of power from actual people to an entity that is different from them and is sovereign over them. This political relation is precisely the opposite of democracy, in which people retain their power and use it to manage their affairs for themselves. So, while it is certainly possible to use the Party and the State to effect all manner of desirable outcomes, the deepening of democracy can never be one of them. The only way we can deepen democracy is to do it ourselves.

Their attachment to hegemony

While Laclau and Mouffe are somewhat coy about their position on the Party and State, there can be no doubt about their commitment to theorising politics as a relation of hegemony. The political field, they say, can never be sutured such that universal agreement is achieved, and so that field will always be marked by difference, disagreement and conflict. The social field, in other words, can never be made singular, it must always remain plural. As a result, they claim, achieving any sort of overall social stability must be done through hegemony, through one coalition of particular groups coordinating their actions such that they are able to impose their will on other particular groups. To be clear, this argument is not normative, they are not claiming politics *should* be this way. It is ontological – they are claiming politics *are* this way, necessarily.

Now of course Laclau and Mouffe are very subtle here, and they rely greatly on Gramsci, who is also subtle. Gramsci does not imagine that this imposition of one

group's will on another is carried out entirely, or even primarily, by force. Rather, hegemony involves both coercion and consent. Whenever possible, non-hegemonic groups are cajoled into agreeing that the hegemonic group's agenda is best. In situations where such consent is not possible, of course, coercion can certainly also be used. Laclau and Mouffe add further nuance to these dynamics by distinguishing among three kinds of relations: *subordination*, when group X is subject to the decisions of group Y; *oppression*, when group X considers group Y's control to be illegitimate; and *domination*, when a third party agrees that group X's subordination is illegitimate. So we should not oversimplify and say that in a hegemonic relation some groups dominate others. We could say, using Laclau and Mouffe's terms, that hegemony must always be a relation of subordination, and frequently also involves some measure of oppression and/or domination.

This concept of hegemony, and Laclau and Mouffe's thinking surrounding it, is burdened by State thinking, corrupted by the ideas of sovereignty and subordination that are so central to the political relations that the State institutes. In that way, through this concept of hegemony at the heart of their thinking, their entanglement with the State is deepened, and their willingness to invite the State into their political imagination grows.

A classic example of hegemonic politics is one we have already seen, the hegemony of the Keynesian welfare State. Of course not every group in society will judge that arrangement to be in their best interests, and so a coalition of many groups – workers' organisations advancing a claim for greater equality and employment stability, populist politicians, dirigist economists, and so on – will need to form a coalition that imposes the welfare state regime on other groups. To do so, they must not only in pass legislation to institute welfare policies, but also they must establish a new common sense that the welfare State is in the best interests of the nation as a whole. Many groups will accept this new common sense. Those that do not will need to be marginalised, disciplined and even coerced. The typical concrete outcomes of such a hegemonic coalition are things like national-scale progressive taxation schemes, or massive national government spending to stimulate the economy, or laws that mandate high minimum wages, worker safety or job security – in short, desirable⁵ social outcomes brought about by State mandates. Of course, neoliberals have offered a strident critique of such mandates, arguing instead for minimal government intervention in, and regulation of, economic markets, an arrangement they claim will maximise freedom. But of course the freedom maximised by the neoliberal scheme is the freedom of economically powerful actors, not the freedom of normal people. Laclau and Mouffe offer a long critique of the neoliberal position (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 171–175), but in doing so they gloss over, and even defend, the State mandates of the welfare State model. They could very well have agreed that State mandates are undesirable without accepting the neoliberal alternative of unfettered corporate capitalism. And they do, in fact, worry briefly about 'bureaucratic forms of state power' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 163). But ultimately they defend the dirigist programme of the welfare State. And more than that, they judge the Keynesian hegemonic project of the post-war years to have been, in the end, a 'deepening of the democratic revolution' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 163).

It is true, as Laclau and Mouffe stress, that the era of Keynesian hegemony saw a proliferation of political rights ('positive' or 'social' rights like employment protection, education or health), and that proliferation of rights encouraged a whole suite of new

claims for equality made by marginalised groups. There also emerged, as a result of these claims, a 'proliferation of antagonisms' and subject positions (they are thinking here of the feminist, gay, environmental and peace movements) in the national polities of the welfare states. However, in Laclau and Mouffe's imagination, these new claims, made by these new subject groups, could only be pursued by means of a hegemonic project. The new forms of equality could only be realised, and made to endure, by one coalition of groups successfully subordinating, oppressing and dominating another coalition of groups. In Laclau and Mouffe's mind, any change of regime like this, any 'construction of a new order', will always involve such asymmetrical relations of subordination and control (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 189). They will always involve hegemony.

So what about democracy?

But Laclau and Mouffe are also clear in their commitment to democracy. The subtitle of their book is, after all, 'Towards a radical democratic politics'. Clearly they are interested in theorising – and advocating for – democracy as well as hegemony. At times, it seems Laclau and Mouffe think hegemony and democracy are compatible, or at least can coexist in the same radical democratic project. In Chapter 4, they argue that hegemonic articulations can set us in the direction of either 'right-wing populism and totalitarianism on the one hand', or 'a radical democracy on the other' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 168). The idea that a hegemonic project can move us in the direction of radical democracy suggests that they think it is possible to invent a different *kind* of hegemonic order, a better, non-subordinating, democratic order. This line of thinking would hew to their ontological starting point that all politics are hegemonic politics, but it seems to propose a political order that is qualitatively different than either the current neoliberal State-capitalist order (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xvi), or a right-wing populist authoritarian alternative. Those latter orders would use subordination and oppression as part of their normal functioning. But in suggesting this hegemonic struggle towards radical democracy, Laclau and Mouffe seem to be intimating the possibility of using hegemony to deepen democracy to the point we have moved beyond the subordination and oppression that hegemony entails.

However, there are other times, and I think it is correct to say these times are more prevalent, and more decisive, when Laclau and Mouffe seem to accept the more reasonable position that hegemonic politics and radical democracy are at odds. Democracy for them 'is only a logic of the elimination of relations of subordination and of inequalities' – and so it is 'not a logic of the positivity of the social' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 188). Their unfortunate jargon in that last phrase is trying to say that democracy is not a logic that can construct a new social order. For that we need a hegemonic logic. And so, we can often see them advocating a *balance* between democracy and hegemony, because the two are working in opposite directions, one to end subordination and maximise equality, the other to preserve hierarchy and control; one to destabilise a social order established through subordination, one to preserve that social order. The hegemonic project for the construction of a new order, they argue, must create 'an unstable balance and a constant tension with the subversive logic of democracy' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 189). And so the project is a contradictory blend of opposites, hegemony for-and-against democracy:

This allows us to see ... the project for a radical democracy as an alternative for the Left ... it must base itself upon the search for a point of equilibrium between a maximum advance for the democratic revolution in a broad range of spheres, and the capacity for the hegemonic direction and positive reconstruction of these spheres on the part of the subordinated groups. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 189)

Here, as in many other places, hegemony and democracy are in tension, working in opposite directions, and must be brought into balance in the future social order Laclau and Mouffe envision.

They theorise a very similar relationship of balance inside hegemonic coalitions. Among the various groups, they argue, there must be a balance that mirrors that between hegemony and democracy, a balance between ‘the logic of equivalence’, which draws groups into the hegemonic alliance and ensures its discipline and internal order, and ‘autonomy’, which allows groups to act as they wish without being dictated to by the wider goals of the alliance. Too much equivalence casts us back into the bad old days of dogmatic Marxist movements, and too much autonomy risks a proliferation of unconnected local struggles that cannot advance a counter-hegemonic project (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 184).

In the past I have given Laclau and Mouffe credit for something more than this balance between hegemony and democracy. I have argued (Purcell, 2013) that they envision the possibility of a sea-change, a movement towards democracy that reaches the point of moving *beyond hegemony* into a polity in which democracy prevails. Or, in a slightly less rosy view, I have them imagining a hegemonic project that moves us *ever more* in the direction of democracy, and away from hegemony, even if we can never arrive at a purely democratic form of life. But in re-engaging with their work for this paper, I came to think instead that this position of balance, a stable tension between the two opposing forces of hegemony and democracy, is most true to the political vision that Laclau and Mouffe advocate. They embrace hegemony as the ontologically unavoidable mode of being political, and they see us using hegemony to try to augment its opposite energy, the energy of democracy. But for them democracy can only be augmented so much. It must be balanced by hegemony, by the subordinating-and-dominating force that is capable of constructing a social order. I think this ‘balance’ position is troubling, because it inhibits democracy’s potential. It is troubling because Laclau and Mouffe underestimate democracy by judging it incapable of being a sustainable form of life. But it is also troubling because they think we must use anti-democratic means – hegemonic struggle – to bring about more democracy.⁶ Why not, instead, augment democracy by committing to the project of democracy? Instead of ‘back to the hegemonic struggle’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xix), why not ‘back to the struggle for democracy’?

Democracy beyond hegemony

Such a struggle for democracy would be greatly aided if we had a way to conceive of politics that does not give hegemony – and subordination and domination – pride of place in our political imagination. We could, then, conceive of the possibility of thinking and acting politically without making hegemony the core of our strategy and vision. Such political thinking is not just idle speculation. There are numerous

political theorists who are trying to develop just such a politics beyond hegemony. I just want to mention three, to give you an idea of what such thinking might be like.

Agamben (2016), for example, finishes his *Homo Sacer* series with an attempt to theorise political relations in a way that makes sovereignty, and its associated hierarchy and subordination, impossible, or, better, unsayable and unthinkable. He proposes that we might replace the ‘constituent power’ that, we assume, must found all political communities with a ‘destituent potential’, a power⁷ ‘that never resolves itself into a constituted power’ (2016: 268). Agamben tries to imagine a relation between bodies – he calls it ‘use’ – that always remains immanent to those bodies, that can never be alienated from those bodies, and that, therefore, never allows the emergence of a Hobbesian political power that transcends our concrete lives-in-common. Paolo Virno (2006), for his part, explores something quite similar. He wants us to think how we might mobilise ‘a *power* that refuses to become *government*’ in order to invent radically different ‘forms-of-life’ (Virno, 2006: 201–202). He hopes we might be able to fashion ‘non-State republics’ that develop forms of ‘nonrepresentative and extraparlimentary democracy’, in which we turn ourselves away from the sovereign and begin to work out, together, how we want to live. Both Agamben and Virno⁸ take much inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative work, in which they try, similarly, to theorise non-sovereign relations among agents in a range of spheres, from psychology to geology to music to politics. And they hope, in some sense, that these non-sovereign relations can come to pervade our lives together. Late in *Anti-Oedipus*, they propose the possibility of a ‘revolutionary break ... a sudden and unexpected irruption ... of desire that breaks with causes and aims and overturns the socius, revealing its other side’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 377). They want their schizoanalytic process to develop ‘to a point where the process cannot extricate itself, continue on, and reach fulfillment, except insofar as it is capable of creating – what exactly? – a new land’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 318). When trained on the State relation in particular, this process, if successful, would help individual agents and groups go *beyond* a society in which the State relation predominates, to reach a new land in which sovereignty and transcendent authority are no longer the ways things are done.

Of course there is no shortage of practical efforts in this direction as well, experiments with forms-of-life that do not assume that hegemony and subordination must be a central feature of political relations. Among the many instances of such efforts, I want to make special mention again of the movements of 2011. In Greece and Spain in particular, not only was there a strong sentiment that the Party and the State were lost causes and that people needed to come up with solutions for themselves, there was also widespread experimentation with political practices and institutions – consensus decision-making, assemblies, spokescouncils, affinity groups, non-violent resistance to police, and the like. These practices provided people with a measure of organisation such that they were able to act, but they did not accept hegemony or transcendent authority as necessary features of this organisation. Of course the enactment of these practices was never perfect. An ideal community free from hegemony was not actually achieved. But what I want to highlight here is the clear and conscious *desire* to create political community beyond hegemony, and the concerted, if inexpert, attempts to practice it.

I am aware that both of these accounts, theoretical and empirical, are too brief, and much more could be said about these efforts. I am merely trying to demonstrate

the existence of, and begin to flesh out, a political imagination that is different from Laclau and Mouffe's, to show that we have access to other ways of thinking and doing politics that do not put hegemonic and subordinating relations at the centre of their imagination. In order to develop a fuller account of that political imagination, in the rest of this section I present an account of my own way of thinking about politics today, 15 or so years after the start of my journey with Laclau and Mouffe.

I call this way of thinking politics 'democracy'. Like Laclau and Mouffe, I understand democracy differently from the way it is conventionally understood. That conventional understanding sees democracy as a society that is governed by a liberal-democratic State, a structure that allows the governed to occasionally select who they want to be their governors. I also agree with Laclau and Mouffe that one important alternative, deliberative democracy, suffers from the desire to eliminate antagonism and difference in the drive to achieve a rational consensus (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xvii; see also Purcell, 2009). Instead, democracy is, for me, a popular mobilisation around the desire to govern ourselves. This mobilisation does not turn its face towards the Party or the State and seek to appropriate their power. It does not demand changes in the way the Party or the State is governing. Rather, in democracy people rouse themselves and decide to take on the project of governing themselves.

It is critical to understand that this project is an extremely long-term one. It involves us choosing to struggle every day, throughout our lives, to accept more and more responsibility for managing our affairs for ourselves. We do not take up this project in order to disempower the Party or the State, although that will necessarily be the result, if we are successful. We do not take it up in order to destroy capitalism, although, again, that will be a necessary outcome. We take up this project, instead, in order to develop our own powers. We take up democracy in order to grow stronger, and healthier, in the very long term. We take up this project to more fully realise what we are capable of. This will not be an easy project, of course. It will take practice, work, effort. We are all fully *capable* of democracy, but our *ability* to manage our affairs for ourselves is not always well developed. It must be improved through practice. The project of democracy is the project to become better able to govern ourselves. To do that we have to practise. We must continually engage in the practice of democracy. As we practise, as we grow stronger, more able, and more confident – as we come to recognise and realise our own power – we will depend less and less on others to govern for us. Of course this will mean that the State, and its fundamental relation of sovereignty, will increasingly become unnecessary, and it will fall into disuse. It will not wither away because class has been abolished, as in *The communist manifesto*. It will become a relic, an artefact of a different time, because we have developed, over time, a new form of life in which we govern ourselves.

It is important to reiterate that this project will not be completed overnight, or in the next election cycle, or even in the next generation. It is a long-term project. It is so long term, in fact, that it will not be completed at all. There will be no final condition in which we have become fully democratic. Here I find wisdom in Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralism, in their insistence that society cannot be permanently 'sutured' into a seamless and unified whole. The desire to govern ourselves, however well we develop it, however strong it becomes in us, will always coexist with the desire to *be governed*, with the desire to surrender our power to another who will govern for us. Even if we succeed in building a form of life in which democracy is pervasive, in which democracy is the way things are done, the State form, and its

relation of sovereignty, will always be lurking, always seeking to reassert itself. Even in the new land, for Deleuze and Guattari, we will never cease warding off the State. The project of democracy is a perpetual struggle to develop our ability to govern ourselves and a perpetual struggle to ward off the desire to be governed by another hegemonic understanding of politics. It is not possible to engage in a hegemonic project for democracy.

It would be absurd to suggest that those who have committed themselves to the project of democracy should hegemonically impose that project on those who have not committed themselves to the project. The very point of the project is that we must *decide for ourselves* to take up the project. To have democracy imposed by one group onto another, either by coercion or consent, is absurd. It would not deepen democracy, it would undermine it. Relations of subordination, not to mention oppression and domination, are precisely what democracy turns away from, precisely what it must continually ward off. Democracy must be a joyous project in Spinoza's sense, a project that increases one's power to act into the world. For the project to grow and spread, it must produce a joyous affect in those who have taken it up, and that affect must encourage or inspire others who encounter it to take up the project themselves.

'But that's too passive!' the proponents of hegemony will object. You cannot wait around and hope social change spreads among people to the point that it pervades the social field. You have to act decisively, and impose that change on those who are unwilling to adopt it.⁹ My response is that while such decisive action can, at times, bring about social change more quickly, it will not be social change in the direction of democracy. What I am suggesting is that we should accept *democracy* as the social change we seek, rather than justice or equality or redistribution or rights or climate action and so on. That does not mean that those other questions will be ignored. They just will not be the *point* of our political struggle. For example, democratic communities will certainly grapple with the issue of equality, with how much equality is appropriate, and what kind. But equality will be an open-ended question for those communities to work on democratically, rather than an *a priori* value that is accepted as good without question and pursued by any means necessary. This latter thinking would sum up the Bernie Sanders movement in the contemporary United States and its desire for greatly expanded federal-government programmes to redress inequality. It is a perfectly understandable desire in our era of stark inequality, but it is also a desire to move in precisely the opposite direction from democracy.

To move in the direction of democracy, then, we would not assemble a counter-hegemonic bloc to impose democracy on the hegemonic bloc of not-democracy. Instead, we would commit to the project of democracy and start engaging it immediately. And we would encourage others to join in the project, such that it grows and spreads to involve as many others as possible. This strategy is not so far-fetched as it may seem to the hegemonically minded, because, recall, democracy is necessarily a joyous project. It is a difficult one, to be sure, but it is also necessarily joyous because, as we practise the art of governing ourselves, and we become increasing adept at it, we will, as a result, increase our power to act into the world. That is what it means to produce a joyous affect, again in Spinoza's sense. This affect may not be exactly the same as 'joy' the way we commonly think of it, but still, Spinozan joy will create an affect we experience as desirable, as 'choiceworthy' in Aristotle's terms (for example, 1998: 1333a29–30). We will know it to be good for us, and we will want

to continue our democratic project. If the project does not produce joy in this way, if it produces sadness by sapping our energy, or dampening our will to act, then it is not the right project, and we will abandon it.

The project of democracy, then, will be successful if it can grow and spread by expressing its own strength, if an increasing number of people find it to be more joyful than their current form of life. If democracy is successful in this way – or, rather, if *we* are successful in carrying out the project of governing ourselves – it is possible to imagine democracy proliferating to the point that the system flips, that we spill over into a radically new world in which democracy is a given, a normal way of life, the way things are done. Democracy will not be *dominant* or *sovereign* in this new world; rather it will have spread to the point that it *pervades* this new world, pervades our thinking, pervades our practice. In this new world, it will not occur to us (much) to have a State govern us. We will rarely think of the State at all, because it will seem to us to not be of much use. It will seem obsolete, absurd. To reiterate, democracy's pervading this new world will never be total, and it can never be permanent. It is not as though democracy is our primordial default state, and once we reach it we will remain in that condition forevermore. Even in this new land where democracy pervades, non-democratic ways of life – State, sovereignty, hegemony, domination, capitalism – will always exist and will continually reassert themselves. Democracy is a *perpetual project*: it must always be actively chosen, and practised, and its joyous effect renewed.

Of course, in the short term, a system-flip is not the most likely event. It is not something we should be expecting, and think we have failed if it does not happen soon. It is better to expect noticeable, but still very much incomplete, growth of the democratic project. We might even expect fits and starts: great expressions of democratic desire followed by periods of relative inactivity. This is how I suggest we should understand the mobilisations of 2011. They were a great cry, on the part of many, announcing their commitment to the project of democracy. The result was a remarkable outburst of democratic activity, over the course of a sustained period, sometimes a year or more, in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Spain, Greece, Chile, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, the United Kingdom, and even the United States. This outburst has not led, between 2011 and the present day, to a flip in the system like I sketch above. It has even given way to a reinstitution of authoritarianism in Egypt, and a 'Participation' of democratic desire in Greece, Spain, and the United States. But let me try to say this clearly: it is precisely the wrong reaction to say

well, see, these outbursts died out because democracy is impossible. Society needs to have order imposed on it hegemonically. These movements failed because they did not understand that. They did not develop strong leadership, or form a Party, or seize State power and govern towards democracy.

No. Those are all arguments in the direction of sadness, arguments that move us away from democracy. The project of democracy is ongoing, unfolding out into the long term. And it was *augmented* by 2011, even if it did not produce a system-flip that some – those stuck thinking in the idiom of the Russian Revolution – expected.

Conclusion

In the last section, I seem to drift further and further away from Laclau and Mouffe's politics. I say we should move away from hegemony and towards democracy, while they insist on a position of balance, or tension, between the two. Even though they advocate a politics of 'radical democracy', they do not leave open the possibility of democracy as a way of life beyond hegemony, or beyond the State. I think, instead, that we are capable of pursuing such a way of life, and even, if we are lucky, actually achieving it at times.

But I do not want this paper to leave the impression that there is an insurmountable chasm between my project and theirs. There remain numerous important points of connection, and I want to stress that I think Laclau and Mouffe offer the project of democracy, as I conceive it, a wealth of intellectual resources that are vitally important. We should not lose sight of those connections in the shadow of my (long) discussion of the differences. The first connection is that, in their determined campaign against economism and class reductionism, Laclau and Mouffe adopt a more general stance that politics can never have a privileged point of rupture (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 152). The field of politics is, therefore, radically open and undetermined. They use this theoretical tool in the struggle against economism and class reductionism, to argue, against so many Marxists, that control of the means of production is not, *a priori*, a more important political issue, and the working class is not, *a priori*, a more important political subject. The importance of each political issue and political subject, on the contrary, must be established *a posteriori*, in the course of the actual struggle. As a result, Laclau and Mouffe insist on 'the multiplication of political spaces and the preventing of the concentration of power in one point'. These are 'preconditions of every truly democratic transformation of society' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 178). Amen. But of course both the Party and the State are precisely this: an attempt to concentrate power in one point. I would rephrase their argument only slightly to say that any democratic project must continually ward off the concentration of power in any one point. But the heart of the idea remains. If we are generous here, we can read Laclau and Mouffe's crusade against the *a priori* privileging of one issue/subject over others as a struggle, more generally, against *transcendence*, against the idea of one authority rising above all others. They are suggesting that politics should only ever be a struggle among *immanent* forces, that no force transcends the others *a priori*. Such immanent politics would ward off the emergence of the State, founded as it is on precisely the idea that the State is transcendent *a priori*. Laclau and Mouffe are, without doing so explicitly, making an argument here against the very idea of sovereignty. Even if they never say it out loud, this implicit argument against State sovereignty is borne of their struggle against 'apriorism' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 179). We can, if we want, draw this thread out of their argument and put it to work in our own.

Such threads are numerous in *HSS*, but let me point out just one other. On page 178 they say something very stimulating. They say that workers' self-management is not enough, that radical democracy requires 'true participation by all subjects in decisions about what is to be produced, how it is to be produced, and the forms in which the product is to be distributed' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 178). Here again, of course, they are working on the problem of class reductionism. But what is also interesting in this passage is that the workers' self-management they refer to was, traditionally, a movement apart from (and superior to) the traditional Marxist plan

for a workers' Party to seize the State and abolish property and class. It was, instead, a directly democratic movement by workers to appropriate the means of production and manage production themselves.¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe are merely extending this concept beyond the working class, to everyone. This extension is what people in the 1960s and 1970s (such as Vaneigem, 1974, and Lefebvre, 2009: 193–194) called '*autogestion généralisée*', or generalised self-management. Laclau and Mouffe present this move as part of their project to deepen democracy, to imagine democracy more radically than either aggregative liberal democracy or Habermasian deliberative democracy (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xvii). But it is hard to see how this project of generalised self-management would be carried out by means of Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic projects. Surely it is, almost by definition, a project that cannot be imposed on others, but a project that must be taken up, consciously and willingly, by people who want to manage their affairs for themselves.

And so I want this reflection to end by saying, in the big picture, here's to Laclau and Mouffe. Here's to their crusade against economism, class reductionism, essentialism, and apriorism. These were, and are, crucial resources for our struggle ahead. But also, here's to going *beyond* Laclau and Mouffe. Here's to pushing out beyond their limiting assumption that democracy must always be balanced by hegemony. Here's to going beyond hegemony and farther out in the direction of democracy, perpetually, so that we can discover what we are capable of, and what joy democracy can bring.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ A brilliant demonstration of how dumb this idea is can be found in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Set in the 1930s, it presents a white communist paternalistically lecturing a black inhabitant of Harlem, telling him that if he understood the world more 'scientifically', he would see that racism only *appears* to be what oppresses him, and that class oppression is the *real* problem.
- ² Think of the cries and banners in Madrid: '*que se vayan todos*', and '*no nos representan*'.
- ³ That characterisation may seem unfair and too simple, but I am not sure it is. *The manifesto* is surprisingly ham-handed (not to mention, in retrospect, disastrously wrong) in its thinking about political strategy.
- ⁴ The way Bernie Sanders currently is in the United States.
- ⁵ Desirable to the left, of course, not the right.
- ⁶ This seems to repeat the foolishness of *The communist manifesto*, in which Marx and Engels urge workers to use State power to cause the State to wither away. And, really, it repeats the foolishness of the neoconservatives in the United States in the 2000s, who wanted to invade other countries in order to bring them the gift of democracy.
- ⁷ This is a power in the sense of Spinoza's *potentia*, rather than *potestas*.
- ⁸ I should mention Hardt and Negri's work here as well (2004, 2012). They are a part of the same Italian autonomist tradition as Agamben and Virno, and they are also deeply inspired by the work of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari.
- ⁹ And, recalling Žižek (2011), to do that, 'one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness'.
- ¹⁰ Castoriadis (1997) should also be mentioned here as an eager supporter of workers' self-management over and above a Party/State strategy.

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