

Post-Marxists and “Young Marxists”. Two Conflicting Visions of Radical Democracy

Keywords

Democratic theory – radical democracy – Karl Marx – Miguel Abensour – Chantal Mouffe – Ernesto Laclau – State – conflict

Abstract

Radical democracy was, at its inception, a polemical alternative to the hegemony of Marxism over the political discourse of the far Left. This is particularly striking in the early work of two of its figureheads, Miguel Abensour and Chantal Mouffe. Rather than define positively what “radical democracy” is or would entail, both thinkers have first opted to construct it negatively, introducing it as a response to their sharp critique of Marxism. But the inner logics of their respective critique differ widely. Whereas C. Mouffe advocates for radical democracy to break free from the rigidity and the determinacy of Marxism, M. Abensour goes back to a text of the young Marx to emphasize its intriguing reference to a “*real democracy*”. This illustrates two distinct strategies in the critical relation to Marxism: either *go beyond* an inspiring but obsolete school of political thought or *recover* its original intuitions, obfuscated by decades of interpretation of Marxism as a State’s official ideology.

This article contends that this difference in approaches between post-Marxists and “Young Marxists” has substantial political consequences. For it results in committed democrats locating differently the *radicality* of their own approaches. While post-Marxists emphasize the crucial and dynamic role of divisive conflicts within the political community and consequently grant the State a role as their arbitrator, “Young Marxists” lay the emphasis on a constant struggle against an abusive institutionalization of the State. As a result, they advocate for a form of political spontaneity that is complicated to reconcile with a consideration for the political community’s inner conflicts. This opposition indicates *at the very least* that radical democracy is far from being a monolithic school of thought and that the regrouping of disparate critical works under a single label may make us shortsighted to some of its internal contradictions.

Post-Marxists vs. “Young Marxists”. Two Visions of Radical Democracy

Introduction

It is by now a truism to claim that democracy is an empty signifier. No definition, regardless of how refined or exhaustive it may be, will ever capture the multiplicity of its usages (Sartori, 1962). In that respect, democracy is a prime example of an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie, 1985) about which there can be no definitive or consensual agreement, even though the question of its constitutive features remains a pressing question whose tentative answers have left deep historical marks (Dupuis-Déri, 2013). This polysemy does not imply that one must abdicate all pretence to understand democracy, but it is a clear invitation to theoretical modesty. In this article, I will attempt to avoid falling into the trap of meaninglessness that threatens any work on democracy by focusing my attention on one of its most peculiar definition that came to prominence in the late 1980s (and has since then inspired many political actors). Uncomfortable with the reduction of democracy to the mere institutionalization of multiparty competition (Aron, 1965), or to a negotiation between elites (Dhal, 1956), several political theorists chose to specify its content by granting it an epithet. In their writings, democracy became “feral” (Lefort, 1979: 23), “anarchic” (Rancière, 2005: 48), “insurgent” (Abensour, 2004: 5) or “insurrectional” (Balibar, 2010: 339). Which is perhaps best summed up by the claim that democracy is fundamentally “radical” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 3).

The goal of this article is to explore the content of this “radical democracy” by means of a comparative study of the work of two of its spearheads: Chantal Mouffe and Miguel Abensour. Besides their parallel and early efforts to define radical democracy, what allows this comparison is a striking resemblance in their method to introduce their readership to this concept. Rather than defining positively what they mean by “radical democracy”, both opted to elaborate it negatively through a critique of Marxism. Our comparison of those bodies of work has a twofold aim. First, it will underscore the fact that, though both authors share a critical approach of Marxism, they nevertheless distance themselves in very distinct manners from their original theoretical inclination. While Mouffe advocates for democracy to break free from the rigid mould of Marxism, Abensour chooses to go back to a text from the young Marx (*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*) in which the latter makes repeatedly some intriguing references to a “real democracy”. Secondly, I argue that this theoretical divergence is by no means devoid

of political consequences, which I illustrate by pointing out the different ways in which Mouffe and Abensour articulate the relations between democracy, State, and political conflicts.

Two (or three?) models of radical democracy

Radical democracy appears to oscillate constantly between an injunction to go back to the roots of democracy (but which ones, assuming it has any?) and to radicalize its logics (which, again, would need to be further specified). Additionally, the term can be used to refer to different currents in political theory that share some family traits but are nonetheless far from homogeneous. To solve that conundrum, Samuel Chambers suggested to introduce an analytical distinction to dispel some of the ambiguities associated with the term (2004). Schematically, radical democracy can be construed in two different ways: one very specific and the other much vaguer.

According to the narrow construal of the term, the project of radical democracy is tied to the names of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who both became famous for co-authoring in 1985 a book with a rather cryptic title (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*) but whose political intention is made more explicit by its programmatic subtitle: *Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge therein, drawing their inspiration from the work of Claude Lefort (1981), that the democratic revolution is irreversible. According to Lefort, the French Revolution proved to be an historical tipping point since it overhauled entirely the symbolic order of the political community. Not only have the French revolutionaries overthrown the King, they also withdrew the right for the sovereign (be it a people or a monarch) to claim a legitimacy derived from a higher order. It is only through a performative speech act, that is the mutual recognition of their equal liberty enshrined in the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, that the citizens instituted collectively a new social order. Owing its existence to nothing but its political activity and the commitment of its citizens, democracy cannot rest its authority on a Law or a Science located above or beyond the social world. Democracy must therefore concede that it lacks foundations. Nobody is entitled to *own* power, resulting in an irreducible struggle for its *exercise*. The symbolic order's revolution is thus twofold: the paradoxical foundation of democracy on its lack of foundation results in an irreconcilable division of the social.

Laclau and Mouffe refer themselves to those two key features (a fundamental indeterminacy and an irreducible conflict) to describe democracy. But they transpose them into a distinct theoretical grammar, heavily influenced by poststructuralist linguistics, that compels them to revise Lefort's conclusions. The keystone of their theoretical structure, at times unhelpfully technical, is that the social world is a discursive construction, inheriting some of the language's features – starting with the imperfect overlap between signifier and signified (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 107). Laclau and Mouffe, drawing their inspiration from Derrida, argue that a signifier always bears a surplus of signified. Any identity (signifier) is affected by a symbolic excess (signified) that eventually subverts it (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: 111). Any moral value (signifier) finds itself at the centre of a conflict of interpretations (that pits against each other a myriad of signifiers.) The social world is thus affected by an indeterminacy fuelled by a practice of conflict, as in Lefort's work. However, Laclau and Mouffe intend to move beyond Lefort's diagnostic by arguing that any political practice presents itself, in the fragmented discursivity constitutive of the social world, as an *articulation*, that is as the attempt to promote certain interpretation that fixate partially the meaning of the social world and provide as a result a temporary stability to it (2000: 113). This attempt is precarious but, if successful, it orientates the political community's collective project, at least until it is overthrown by a new articulation. With the advent of political modernity, the open nature of the social world is subjected to a reflexive examination. Social actors break free from a naturalistic understanding of the social world and grow more aware of its contingent nature. In this context, articulation turns into a self-conscious political practice. Laclau and Mouffe call this politically loaded attempt to provide a meaning to a disarticulated social world a *hegemony*: a discursive construction of reality, aware that it operates in a contingent context, and that it rests on the strategic articulation of various positions within the social world. Defined as such, hegemony fulfils a double function regarding democracy. First, it establishes its very possibility by exposing how the Ancient Regime naturalized and therefore legitimized social inequalities. Secondly, it turns it into a perennial regime since democracy needs the conflict of competing hegemonic practices to fuel its permanent reinvention (Vitiello, 2009).

By contrast with this first definition of the content of radical democracy, there exists a second construal of the concept that proves to be both vaguer and more flexible. In Chambers' words, this second understanding of radical democracy would rather present itself as: “an important tradition in political thought that aligns a Marxist critique of capitalism with a

republican emphasis on political participation” (2004, 191). Defined as such, this intellectual tradition regroups under the term “radical democracy” a wider spectrum of authors and can claim a much longer history, within which the publication of Laclau and Mouffe marks perhaps an important milestone but is just one contribution amongst many. The constellation of the radical democrats does not however amount to anything like a “school”, in the sense that it is not organized around a journal, internally structured or embodied by a figurehead. Rather it bears testimony to the simultaneous appearances of a similar concern across various individual research perspectives (Breugh et al., 2015). It reflects a shared anxiety at the idea, actively promoted throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, that most democratic practices would have safely distanced themselves from the idea of popular sovereignty and would now observe respectfully the constitutional constraints (Furet, Julliard and Rosanvallon, 1988). Democracy would have been tamed and its occasional outbursts would now be channelled and mitigated by moderating institutions. Radical democrats, united by their fundamental disagreement with this sketch of democracy’s future, have begged a question that provides the basis of their dialogue: how can we honour the initial promises of the democratic revolution, that is the promises of granting an effective power to the people and of levelling the positions between governed and rulers? How can it be brought beyond the model of a representative liberal democracy?

It is worth noting that the term admits a third understanding, mostly in the English-speaking literature. Radical democracy refers sometimes to theories of deliberative democracy (Cohen and Fung, 2004). However, this use raises a few issues and rests partly on a misunderstanding. Supporters of deliberative democracy emphasize, marching in Habermas’ footsteps, that communicative reason can reconcile a committed participation of the citizen to the public life (republican model) with the protection of the individual’s private freedoms (liberal model) (Habermas, 1994). According to Habermas, democracy is thus the continuation of the Enlightenment philosophy in at least two respects. First, it ensures the stability, and possibly the improvement, of the product of political modernity (that is the liberal constitutional democracy) by, secondly, illustrating that the better argument can prevail in a public deliberation under certain conditions. Mouffe delivered a stinging critique of this approach, guilty in her eyes of two related conceptual mistakes: deliberative democracy would rest on a thin rationalism (1) and its aim would be to build a consensus overcoming pluralism (2). As a result of those two capital sins, the deliberative approach would grant an ultimate foundation to democracy, denying that the latter is precisely a postmodern and therefore postfoundational

regime (Mouffe, 1989) and would also get rid of conflict in favour a hypothetical and homogenizing consensus (Mouffe, 2005). The argument here is not that this criticism would point out some real weaknesses in the model of deliberative democracy – as a matter of fact, one could argue that Mouffe’s argument is misguided since it overlooks the important role granted by Habermas to disagreements in public deliberation (Brady, 2004) – but to highlight that the two approaches are at odds with each other. It seems therefore quite unhelpful to classify them under a unique label concealing their severe divergences.

Radical democracy: beyond or against Marxism?

If we adopt a broad approach of radical democracy, Mouffe and Laclau’s work constitutes but an episode of its conceptual genealogy, it bears nevertheless one of its most striking feature: it is elaborated through a critical dialogue with Marxism. To a certain extent, one could say that this is a prerequisite for every radical democrat and, on closer observation, there are indeed few exceptions to that rule. Since radical democracy can be construed as a critique of capitalism respectful of the imperative of a large popular participation to civic life, it *must* start by condemning the oligarchic appropriation of the exercise of power in the name of Marxism turned into a State ideology. However, this critical departure adopted two distinct strategies. While Laclau and Mouffe claim that their political model goes *beyond* Marxism (post-Marxism), many thinkers of radical democracy broadly construed rather opt to *go back* to the original work of the German revolutionary to give a new radical impulse to democracy (hence our suggestion to refer to them as “Young Marxists”). This return to Marx is not acritical but is nevertheless driven by the conviction that Marx’s thought could provide the required stimulus to rejuvenate democracy. In what follows, I will give a closer look at those two strategies of departure from orthodox Marxism.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe quickly lay their cards on the table: “It is no longer possible to maintain the conception of subjectivity and classes elaborated by Marxism, nor its vision of the historical course of capitalist development, nor, of course the conception of communism as a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared. But if our intellectual project in this book is *post-Marxist*, it is also evidently *post-Marxist*.” (2000: 4) By their own admission, it is thus within the element of Marxism – from its concepts and vocabulary – that was built their own model of democracy, though it was eventually meant

to overcome that legacy. Furthermore, this quote offers a glimpse into the direction their criticism takes. Herein, Marxism is chastised for its economism, its historical determinism and its utopianism, three features that would prevent the development of a genuinely democratic socialism.

The two authors recycle a relatively classic critique of the economic determinism that permeated the orthodox Marxism of the Second International (Castoriadis, 1975 ; Korsch, 2012). Its economism would have rendered impossible any independent thinking on the political within the orb of Marxism since it turns politics into the mere by-product of socio-economic conflicts. This economism is also guilty of ignoring the contingency of history, since it claims to unearth the historical laws embedded in socio-economic conflicts. This theoretical short-sightedness would have made orthodox Marxism inapt to grasp the dynamics of conflict in modern democracy. Which would account for Marxism having no recourse but to predict the definitive achievement of history in a communist abundance reconciling society with itself (Mouffe 2010). Conflicts having no motive to occur, politics would have to withdraw from the public stage and make way to a simple administration of things. Since it sees no other cause to political conflict than the unequal positions of the social agents within relations of production, Marxism lacked the conceptual tool to make sense of recognition claims (by opposition to redistribution claims) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xviii) and failed to perceive that politics is a constitutive and irreducible dimension of the social world.

Having rejected economism categorically, Laclau and Mouffe invited the democratic Left to project itself into a “*post-Marxist*” era (2000: 4) or, in other words, to consider the political struggles to come outside of the rigid conceptual framework of class struggles. For the latter ties any prospect of collective emancipation to the political activism of the one and only historical subject: the proletariat. Concerned not to relegate to the roadside of history the new social movements (feminism, post-colonialism, civic right struggles, minorities, etc.) whose demands had nothing to do with a collective ownership of the means of production, Laclau and Mouffe unearthed Gramsci’s concept of *hegemony*. The latter, as we saw, was then used to describe the necessary articulation between converging but disparate demands emanating from those new activist groups in order to stabilize a political order striving to materialize, as best as it could, the values of equality and liberty. However, Laclau and Mouffe were at pains to point out that no articulation would ever look anything like a definitive reconciliation of the political community, since this construction would always be contingent, imperfect, and consequently open to contestation. This political model presents itself as a way to come out of Marxism on

top, preserving Marx's strongest intuitions while submitting its whole theoretical structure to a fierce critique.

Next to this call for a post-Marxism, another strategy is possible: a call to rediscover its original roots. Rather than getting rid of Marx *and* Marxism, it sees in Marx the first "critique of Marxism", in Maximilien Rubel's words (1974) and claims, as does Michel Henry, that "Marxism is the sum of all the of the misinterpretations of Marx" (1976). Politically, this sinuous path was taken by the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Directed by Claude Lefort and Cornélius Castoriadis, it relentlessly castigated the soviet regime, not for its illiberalism but for its failure to live up to its egalitarian promises - putting to good use the *critical method* developed by Marx (Howard, 2002). Nowadays, there are numerous authors that invite us to unearth, from under the rubbles of the "dialectic materialism" taught in the soviet textbooks, a portrait of Marx as a young philosopher, experimenting with the concepts and fumbling in the dark in search of a theoretical bedrock (Balibar, 2014). This implies first to rediscover the complexity in Marx's text, that is to consider them as inconclusive thought experiments that prove more valuable for their developments than for their conclusions. This strategy is what I call in this article "Young Marxism". For it owes its original impetus to the late rediscovery by Ryazanov of a few texts written by Marx in his youth, in which he makes some intriguing references to a "real democracy".

Democracy against the Political State? The Risk of a Holistic *Demos*

Miguel Abensour's best known book, published in 1997, is in this respect quite exemplary. Titled in English *Democracy against the State. Marx and the Machiavelian Moment* (2011), it seeks to correct the misconception – shared amongst others by Laclau and Mouffe – according to which the political would never be thought on its own terms by Marx (Cervera-Marzal, 2013: 86-99). To achieve this demonstration, Abensour unearths a text from the young Marx that is both famous and poorly known (for it is seldom read, even by Marxists): *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, also known as the *Kreuznach Manuscript*. Written in 1843, that is before Marx engaged in his critique of political economy to unveil the roots of alienation, it is a collection of unedited working notes in which Marx criticizes fiercely his own philosophical mentor – Hegel – for misrepresenting one issue in particular: the relationship between the State

and the civil society. In this text, introduced by one of its finest reader, with quite an understatement, as “not a model of transparency” (a less generous reader speaks of its “fearsome inscrutability” and describes it as “written in the murkiest Hegelian jargon” (1974: 50)), Marx puts forward several elliptic formulas regarding democracy – ultimately depicting the latter as the “resolved mystery of all constitutions” (Marx, 1970 : §279). Abensour interprets the text as providing the model of an *insurgent* democracy, built through a constant opposition to the State.

In his *Critique*, Marx comments paragraph after paragraph the section of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* devoted to the “internal political right”, scrutinizing the articles §261 to §319. According to David Leopold, Marx’s text interweaves two different critiques, making its interpretation even more complicated. Marx castigates Hegel both for his *speculative method* and for his *assessment of the relationship between the State and civil society*. The methodological critique undertaken by Marx would make no concession. It would systematically point out Hegel’s speculative approximations as well as his idealistic reversal of reality that turns the empirical facts into the output of an ideal truth (when, for Marx, the exact opposite is true.) But, Marx would be much more appreciative of Hegel’s socio-political observations, praising him for his sharp insight with regards to the social division between rich and poor generated by civil society’s individualism, or for his astute observation that the respective logics of the civil society and the State are at odds with each other (Leopold, 2007 : 47-74, see also Mercier-Josa, 1999 ; Balibar and Raullet, 2001 ; Papaioannou, 1976).

As far as he is concerned, Abensour does not find in Marx’s *Critique* this presupposed amiability towards Hegel’s political acumen. He rather reads therein a radical critique of Hegel’s vision of the State, leading as a result to a strong endorsement of democracy. Marx’s controversy would be by no means limited to the methodological elements of the text. It would rather encompass a dismissal of the artificial divide between civil society and State (Marx, 1970 : §261, §277, §303), a rejection of the monarchic principle (§279-280), and a scathing criticism of both the assumed rationality of the bureaucratic class (§295) and the representative function allocated by Hegel to the corporations (§308). Neither does Abensour want to uncover in the *Critique* a burgeoning and still inchoate materialist theory, though he admits that such a reading is possible (Lukacs, 2012). Acknowledging that he works from a « reading hypothesis », Abensour prefers to see in the text “an anti-Hegelian political philosophy built on the political experience of modern freedom” (2004 : 77). Marx would condemn Hegel for trying constantly

to establish a dummy match between the empirical political reality and his idealistic dialectic, resulting in him squashing politics under a pre-existing theoretical model and therefore missing its peculiarity.

According to Abensour's reading, Marx would contend that this peculiarity of the political thrives in democracy better than anywhere else (2004: 87). To provide substance to that claim, Abensour clarifies at length the following quote: "The modern French [Papaioannou suggests that Marx refers himself to Joseph Proudhon and Victor Considérant here (1976 : 37)] have conceived it thus: in the true democracy the *political State disappears*. This is correct inasmuch as *qua* political State, *qua* Constitution it is no longer equivalent to the whole" (Marx, 1970 : §279). This excerpt is taken from a paragraph dedicated to Hegel's defence of the benefits of a unitary political will in a constitutional regime, embodied by the monarchy. Faithful to his own method, Marx turns Hegel's proposition upside down: "The sovereignty of the people is not due to him [the monarch] but on the contrary he is due to it" (1970 : §279). This allows Marx to turn democracy into the *telos* and the principle of all political communities and to present, as a result, monarchy as one of its corrupted forms: "Democracy is the truth of monarchy, monarchy is not the truth of democracy. Monarchy is necessarily democracy in contradiction with itself [...] Monarchy cannot, while democracy can, be understood in terms of itself" (1970 : §279). More fundamentally, what is at stake here is a redefinition of political unity that oscillates between Hobbes (the Sovereign is One) and Arendt (coming together is sovereignty). If, like Hegel, we draw inspiration from Hobbes and we look at politics through the lens of domination, that is if we consider politics to be made of relations between command and obedience, sovereignty must as a consequence be the prerogative of a single power, or even a single person, located at top of the hierarchical pyramid: the King. However, if we consider, like the young Marx, politics as a collective activity (anticipating somehow Arendt), it is the *unification* of the people in a *demos* that becomes sovereign (Abensour, 2004 : 95-96). What comes first is thus the activity of a community that sublimates its private interests to the benefit of the general interest.

Exploiting the same theoretical vein, Abensour puts thus forward what will be the conceptual pivot of his innovative reinterpretation of the text. Democracy's sovereign subject – the *demos* – must become *objective*, according to the Young Hegelian vocabulary used by Marx. In other words, the *demos* must not only reach the status of a shared collective identity, it must also produce an object materializing its existence. This jargon means that the people, to give substance to its existence as a people, must first produce a Constitution attesting of its

status as a politically organized community. Democracy being a peculiar State form, its Constitution bears some striking features: “Here the Constitution [...] is returned to its real ground, the actual man, the actual people, and established as its own work.” Put differently: “the specific difference of democracy is that here the constitution is in general only one moment of the people’s existence, that is to say the political constitution does not form the State for itself” (Marx, 1970 : §279). To explicit this specific difference of democracy, Abensour coins a term that will prove decisive for the remaining of his reading: the *reduction* (2004 : 97). What singles out democracy is that its constitutional moment is constrained. It must repress the inclination of State’s institutions to expand and spread. Since the constitution is but a « moment » of democracy, juridical formalism and power institutions cannot substitute themselves to the political activity of the people. Anything like a petrification of the political community into an unaccountable institution – and behind the constitution, the real target is here the State – should thus be resisted tooth and nails in democracy. The scheme of alienation, coming from Feuerbach’s work, obviously influenced this description (Papaioannou, 1976 : 26). The political community must avoid being dispossessed of its predicates by projecting them onto an external object. Hence Abensour’s central thesis, that calls immediately for some qualifications: *democracy would build itself against the State*. Or, to be more accurate, the self-constitution of the people can be called democratic on the strict condition that it struggles relentlessly to contain its supporting institutions within their appropriate boundaries. It is thus not the State that determines the people but the opposite: “Hegel proceeds from the State and makes man into the subjectified State; democracy starts with man and makes the State the objectified man. [...] So it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution” (Marx, 1970 : §279). Although Abensour’s reduction principle invites democracy to resist any autonomization of the State, it does however not call for the straightforward abolition of the State. It presents itself rather as a healthy distrust of the State, whose suspected expansionist ambitions need to be kept in check (Abensour, 2004 : 110). The State, in other words, cannot pretend to be the matrix of the political. This explains why politics – whose *telos* is democracy according to the young Marx – cannot be contained within the State. In that sense, democracy overflows the State and spills over to other spheres, which accounts for the State being only a “moment” or a “part” of a more general whole: the activity of the *demos* (Abensour, 2004 : 112).

Going back to the main argumentative arch of the *Critique*, focused on the quintessentially modern split between State and civil society diagnosed by Hegel, Abensour is

at pains to stress that Marx did not advocate for the State to be dissolved into civil society, or the political to be absorbed by the social, as Engels would later do by claiming that: “The first act by which the State constitutes itself the representative of the whole of society – the taking of possession of the means of production in the name of society – this is, at the same time, its last independent act as a State. State interference in social relation becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies out of itself; the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of production” (Engels, 1947 : 199). For it is by asserting himself as a generic being, as a “man” untied from all social allegiances, that the individual realizes his essence, namely freedom. Marx does not yet denounce the dualism between bourgeois and citizen, as he will do a year later in *On the Jewish Question* but he rather exploits it to point the political as a way out of the social. In *On the Jewish Question*, political emancipation will be accused of not constituting the end point of human emancipation (which should include the overcoming of *all* alienations without exception) for the political subject is still alienated by the projection of a fictitious legal personality (the citizen) at odds with its concrete being (the socialized individual) (Dardot, 2014). The sharp distinction between both texts is that in the *Critique* the true democracy, though it looks nothing like a consummated reconciliation between the socialized individual and the citizen, is nevertheless a first step in the right direction. Whereas in *On the Jewish Question*, democracy is depicted as a dangerous sham bringing man further away from his emancipation.

In the *Critique*, there is a positive reappraisal of politics as the site where unequal social conditions can be turned into a generic political identity. Nowhere is this more obvious than in its discussion of political representation. Marx reprimands Hegel for suggesting that corporations should shoulder the responsibility of representing the myriad of private interests of civil society (1970 : §303). For it amounts to admitting that politics is nothing but a crude conflict between selfish interests. It denies that politics can be a space disjointed from the social in which man has the opportunity to escape its social allegiances (Abensour, 2004 : 99-100). The State should be understood as the institution of a political community able to transcend civil society by means of a universal (by contrast with a particularized) representation. It is also, as a result, a prerequisite of democracy in the eyes of the young Marx. But the State cannot be allowed to indulge its natural inclination to expansion and autonomy. For it would then develop as an independent body suppressing and squeezing life out of the actual people. Which is why

“in true democracy the *political State disappears*” (Marx, 1970 : §279). For the political community perpetuates its activity (namely, true democracy) only inasmuch as it resists the hypertrophy and the empowerment of an institutional body (the political State). This requires replaying ceaselessly the “moment” of its self-constitution (Abensour, 2004 : 121). As suggested by Nicolas Poirier, Abensour locates thus Marx “at equal distance between the Jacobin positions, turning the State into the people’s tool for emancipation, and Saint-Simon’s tradition, picked up by Engels, in which the State is condemned to vanish into a mere administration of things.” (2014: 58) Abensour sees in this conception of the State more than a fleeting thesis and concurs with Rubel that a libertarian vein runs through all of Marx’s work. This would resurface from time to time into certain texts (newspaper articles mostly) and would eventually have occupied the front stage of his thought 40 years later. During the Paris’ Commune, Marx celebrated the activity of the Parisian revolutionaries and singled out for praise their efforts to proceed to a constant “reduction” of the State (Marx and Engels, 1972).

However, Abensour makes no mystery of the fact that this conception of democracy is problematic. For, according to Marx: “In democracy, none of the moment obtains a significance other than what befits it. Each is really only a moment of the whole *demos*” (1970 : §279). Being himself a student of Claude Lefort, Abensour does not see democracy *only* as a constant struggle against an abusive autonomization of the State’s institutions and against its corollary, the withering away of people’s power. He also considers democracy to be affected by an original division of the social driving its conflict-ridden dynamic.

As we tried to show above, he concurs in this regard with Mouffe for whom democracy is fuelled by an inextinguishable internal conflict that prevents any hegemony from sustainably holding onto power. It must be noted that Marx, focused on his condemnation of the State’s abusive claim to be the institutional embodiment of the political activity, is cornered by his own approach into turning the “total *demos*” into the political subject *par excellence*. In so doing, he positions democratic life under a unitary banner. Democracy should make coincide the people with itself in a dynamic that turns the *demos* both into the subject and the end goal of politics (Abensour, 2004 : 124-126). It makes little doubt that Lefort would have seen in such a dynamic the premises of a totalitarian logic or that Mouffe would observe therein a damaging

denial of the political. According to Abensour, perfectly aware of this issue, the discovery of the proletariat will provide Marx with a theoretical way forward and allow him to reintegrate the question of conflict. For, class struggle is far from being solely a social question since Marx repeatedly presents the proletariat as a “non-class” whose identity and solidarity must be built through a political activity. In other words, class struggle would be the remedy to the unitary inclination of insurgent democracy. Except that, as Abensour himself concedes, this answer cannot be fully satisfying since it steps outside the democratic framework and considers the political from the vantage point of a distinct political project, namely communism. The young Marx’s true democracy, relying on the opposition of the total *demos* to the State, cannot be squared with a post-totalitarian approach to democracy.

Conflict vs. total *demos*? The assumption of the State

Interestingly, Mouffe’s post-Marxist approach presents itself as an almost perfect negative to the young Marx’s model of democracy. Though Laclau and Mouffe are keen to claim, in a quote reminiscent of some of Marx’s formulations, that: “Today, the Left is witnessing the final act of the dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary” (2000 : 2). Or again that radical democracy: “requires the autonomization of the spheres of struggle and the multiplication of political spaces, which is incompatible with the concentration of power and knowledge that classic Jacobinism and its different socialist variants imply” (2000 : 178). At first glance, it would be tempting to read into those quotes a stark condemnation of the Jacobins’ desire to turn the State into the people’s emancipatory tool, surprisingly similar to the young Marx’s critique as construed by Abensour. This would come as no surprise since it has already been shown above that Mouffe reconciles a post-structuralist understanding of the social word (seen as a discursive construction whose signified always overruns its signifier and can therefore never be sustainably stabilized) and a political critique of Marxism that, in reason of its economism, would not be able to accommodate the diversity of contemporary demands. The State, with its universalism, its inclination to centralize, and its concentration of power, appears particularly ill-equipped to deal with this new diversity and seems rather to be an obstacle on the road towards a radical democracy. Shed in this light, radical democracy could seamlessly concur with insurgent democracy and struggle for a necessary *reduction* of the political State.

But, on a closer examination, this interpretation does not hold water. Though they castigate “*statism* – the idea that the expansion of the role of the State is the panacea for all problems” (2000 : 177), Laclau and Mouffe nevertheless make a theoretical U-turn two pages further: “In recent years much has been talked about the need to deepen the line of separation between State and civil society. [...] It would appear to imply that every form of domination is incarnated in the State. But it is clear that civil society is also the seat of numerous relations of oppression” (2000: 179). Hence their conclusion: “the State is an important means for effecting an advance, frequently *against* civil society” (2000 : 177). It would be misleading to depict Laclau and Mouffe as idolizing the State. But on the basis on those excerpts, we can sense that their assessment of the State’s role is not neatly aligned with Abensour’s. The State as such is not seen as a threat to democracy. It is one of the surfaces upon which agonistic relationships can play out, but so is also civil society. If Laclau and Mouffe show a certain amount of distrust towards the State’s concentration of power, they do not however depict it as an abusive outgrowth of democratic activity permanently on the brink of depriving the people from its power.

And in many respects, one is entitled to ask whether it could be any different. If the young Marx can easily dismiss the State, it is because his model of democracy is devoid of conflict and rather focused on making the people coincide with itself. Laclau and Mouffe cannot resort to that theoretical trick. Since they turn conflict into democracy’s fuel, they must consider a political framework and an authority able to arbitrate its inner struggles. This also explains the persisting theoretical unease (Rummens, 2009) surrounding Mouffe’s claim that a neat dividing line can be drawn between a democratic *agonism* (opposing adversaries that recognize each other as legitimate, notably because they both adhere to the founding values of liberal democracy, namely equality and freedom) and the fundamentally anti-democratic *antagonism* (opposing foes willing to go to the extremes to get rid of each other) (Mouffe, 2000). In addition to this distinction being a lot blurrier than Mouffe is ready to acknowledge, it presupposes an institutional matrix of politics powerful enough to police democracy’s conflict in order to purge them from antagonistic conflicts. In short, it cannot be thought outside of a statist perspective.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, at the risk of passing for a pessimist, radical democracy appears to be ensnared between two mutually incompatible demands. Those two demands come from theoretical approaches concurring in their attempt to recover the peculiarity of politics, previously obfuscated in that political tradition by a temporary hegemony of orthodox Marxism. However, they adopt two distinct strategies to distance themselves critically from Marxism, either dismissing it altogether and inviting to move beyond its framework or advocating for its rejuvenation through a rediscovery of some of its early political intuitions. As a result, they lead to different conclusions. Politically speaking, both approaches associate – almost in spite of themselves – democratic conflicts and the necessity of the State. Abensour confesses that the democratic practice can be depicted as a struggle against an abusive institutionalization of the State only under the condition that we consider as political subject a total *demos*, whose unity is both the aim and the principle of the true democracy. Laclau and especially Mouffe in her later work insist that the State is an inescapable prerequisite to the sustainability of an agonistic democracy.

In that sense, “radical” democracy is not always *radical* in the same way. Post-Marxists will be content with the State as long as the latter provides the institutional framework for an intense democratic confrontation. Whereas the “Young Marxists” emphasize democracy’s spontaneity in its struggle against all forms of bureaucratic or institutional intrusion into the *demos* unmediated activity. But we would be wrong in thinking that those two options will be easy to reconcile.

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