

The Contribution of Postmodern Theory to Democracy

A Critical Assessment

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First examining Laclau and Mouffe's postmodernist 'radical liberal democracy' in contrast with 'modern' conceptions of democracy as well as other radical models of democracy, and then going on to compare it specifically to deliberative democracy as promoted by Habermas, this essay assesses the contribution of postmodern theory to the concept and practice of 'democracy'. Laclau and Mouffe articulate a new ontological and political, but not normative, approach to democracy. This essay will outline the definition of democracy and the role of postmodern theory before exploring Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical contributions to the concept of 'democracy' by exploring criticisms of their theories and the influence that postmodern thought has had on contemporary politics.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory represents a strain of 'reconstructive' rather than 'extreme' postmodernism (Best and Keller, 1991) which specifically theorises and presents a thorough articulation of 'democracy'. Influenced by post-structuralist conceptions of power and the subject (see, for example, Foucault and Derrida) and contrasting and overlapping with other postmodern theorists, Laclau and Mouffe's approach is an example of how postmodern theory has been utilized to explore democracy. The emphasis of their theory is the extension of democracy to all spheres and a pluralistic conception of political struggles as exemplified by New Social Movements (NSM).

'Democracy' can generally be understood as 'a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making' (Christiano, 2006). Debates around democracy are often centred on conceptions of equality as well as the levels of equality and liberty required for its legitimization (for a discussion on modern democracy see Ketcham, 2004).

The effect of postmodern thought on our conception of democracy should be understood in relation to the theory's intent. This analysis focuses on an approach which is characterised by its practical and ethical intent, aimed at combining theory with practice and writing with politics in a 'reconstructive' manner (Best and Kellner, 1991:22). The theory emulates that of the early theorists of the Frankfurt School in its insistence that theory must have the explicit objective of enhancing freedom in the sense of positioning people as 'producers of their own historical

forms of life' (Horkheimer, 1993:21). For example, Deleuze proclaims theory as worthless or inappropriately timed lest it be 'used' in support of struggle and against domination (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977:208).

Postmodern theory is generally thought to be defined in opposition to modernity. In contrast to the metanarrative of democracy presented in modernity, there is an argument that postmodernism proclaims the end of democracy along with the concept of a unifiable political community. At the end of the 20th century, 'provoked and horrified by the hegemonic language and the global intentions and institutions of both sides in the hot and cold wars', some postmodern theorists rejected all the powers and forms of government (Ketcham, 2004:205), insinuating the end of democratic politics as we know it. Moreover, though it represents a diverse and often conflicting body of theory, postmodernism is generally understood to be distinctive in its anti-essentialist, anti-structuralist, anti-universalist and anti-humanist approaches. The modern conception of democracy, as the ideal form of social organisation due to modern conceptions of human nature, is greatly undermined by postmodernism. However, in other respects, postmodernism has contributed to a new and broader conception of democracy which will be explored here.

Laclau and Mouffe's approach, articulated in 'Hegemony and Socialist Strategy' (2001) and in their later work, represents what they call a 'post-Marxist' position claimed to be intrinsically postmodern and distinguishable from all other radical and participatory models of democracy. As in many postmodern approaches, they emphasise a shift away from the primacy of economic relations to focus on multiple forms of power and domination (Best and Kellner, 1991:25). It centres around the investigation of 'hegemony' as a condition whereby a '*particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:ix) [italics in original]. They frame the democracy debate with a new question: what sorts of relations between entities make possible hegemonic relations?

They theorise power, claiming that power is constitutive of identity and that society is constituted as an unstable system of differences (Mouffe, 1995:42). They use postmodern discourse theory to emphasise the necessity of the 'struggle over meaning' of a concept such as 'democracy' and 'rights' in order to articulate new political meanings (Laclau and Mouffe in Best and Kellner, 1991:198-200). Democracy is understood as a 'floating signifier', which needs to be articulated as socialist, and defined by the 'empty signifiers' of liberty and equality (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:171). Despite rejecting a universalist or normative understanding of democracy, their approach takes an explicitly political stance, unlike Foucault and others, maintaining that a radical and pluralistic democracy can be defended pragmatically within the context of a particular moral tradition (Best and Kellner, 1991:200) by revisiting the liberal tradition.

They reject the radical or extreme postmodernist theory of indeterminacy, of the social field as radically disconnected, expressed by 'extreme' postmodernists such as Baudrillard. They describe instead 'nodal points' around which there exist temporary stabilisations of meaning and identities, drawing on the Foucaultian theory of 'regulation in dispersion' (Best and Kellner, 1991:195). They suggest that capitalism should be reacted

against from multiple perspectives through plurality and unity enabled by these objective points of contact. This, they argue, is most fully realised in democratic discourse and through socialist institutions and relations.

Democracy is constituted here as a situation whereby no single group or struggle is privileged over another and can be extended to all aspects of life. They reject the neoconservative position on democracy asserting that democracy needs to be libertarian and *egalitarian*, thus it is inherently anti-capitalist as capitalism is seen as a repressive social system (Best and Kellner, 1991:197), an idea reiterated by Foucault (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977:216).

Mouffe rejects the communitarian, and in general the political Left's, resistance to liberalism, deconstructing and refuting the concept of liberalism as a single doctrine (Mouffe, 1996), in line with other postmodern thinkers such as Skinner. She thoroughly critiques liberal individualism and the infusion of politics with morality via the conception of a 'common good', arguing however that the language of liberalism is necessary to ensure pluralism. Drawing on Gramscian ideas of a 'war of position' she calls for alliance and difference and for the elimination of the 'enemy' to be understood in terms of the struggle against subjugating processes. Processes based on, for example, a sexist subject position or institution in which this position is embodied, rather than a physical enemy.

This critique bolsters an alternative view of 'the common good' which acts as a 'social imaginary' based on the idealism of total representation, and a 'grammar of conduct', which coincides with the constitutive ethico-political principles of modern democracy. This in turn entails a particular conception of 'political community' defined by: pluralism, a lack of definitive shape and a state of continuous re-enactment. This conception allows for the acknowledgment of its own condition of impossibility as 'there will always be an exterior to the community that is the very condition to its existence' (Mouffe, 1995:36-37); this is in line with postmodern theory emphasising particularism.

In this context, Laclau and Mouffe assert that citizenship should be based on liberty and equality for all; it cannot be neutral but must challenge existing relations of domination. Mouffe disagrees with the 'total pluralism' of more extreme postmodern theory, but insists that a common identity based on pluralism and liberty is necessary to enable a struggle against relations of subordination (Mouffe, 1995:40). She presents democracy as representing a logic of identity and equivalence while liberty represents a logic of pluralism and difference (Mouffe, 1995:42). It is the clash between these two ideals which Mouffe argues allows for a radical democracy suited to the indeterminacy of modern society.

Though Foucault generally promotes no specific political position, Laclau and Mouffe's stance runs parallel to his message that we need to liberate ourselves from the state and from the 'individualisation which is linked to the state' (Rabinow, 1991:22) and approach politics by asking what it has to say about a specific problem, and on what basis there can be a 'we' (Foucault, 1984:385).

While Laclau and Mouffe present an approach arguing for the retention of certain emancipatory aspects of the enlightenment, they also assert that in contemporary society, only by embracing postmodern theory can democracy be realised. Mouffe (1996) argues that the postmodernist philosophical critique of essentialism is crucial to democracy:

‘without abandoning the idea of a unitary subject, such a project cannot be formulated for it requires conceiving the social agent as constituting a multiplicity of subject positions whose articulation is only precarious and temporary’ (pg 25).

Moreover, relations between social agents will become more democratic ‘*only* as far as they accept the particularity and the limitations of their own claims [italics in original] (Mouffe, 1995:42). Likewise, Foucault insinuates that only through self-determination and a radical understanding of power, can we move towards emancipation or at least struggle against oppression (Rabinow, 1991).

In order to further assess what Laclau and Mouffe’s postmodern theory has contributed to ‘democracy’, it is useful to turn to some of the key critiques of their approach and the alternative discourses of democracy.

One of the better known counter arguments to postmodern theory is presented by Habermas, who views postmodernism as anti-modernism (Habermas, J., Ben-Habib, S.1981), asserting that it undermines the project of developing an immanent critique of modernity. Instead he presents a model of deliberative democracy (1990, 1984) based on the belief that ‘democracy’ can be ensured through ideal discourse, in line with his notion of universal communicative rationality and the Ideal Speech Situation (ISS) (Blaug 1994: 54). Habermas, and others such as Arendt, focus on consensus, intersubjectivity and common action, criticising postmodern thought for its emphasis on fragmentation and perceiving it as anti-democratic due to its rejection of the ideal of collective struggle (Best and Kellner, 1991:222).

This normative approach, culminating in a philosophy of communication and consensus, has been widely influential. However, it is criticised for being semi-foundationalist (Rasmussen in Best and Kellner, 1991:240) and for glossing over the repressive and terroristic heritage of the enlightenment (Lyotard et al, 1987 in Best and Kellner, 1991:240).

In term of its contribution to ‘democracy’, Mouffe presents ontological barriers to the possibility of Habermas’s ISS and political consensus in general. She argues, in line with postmodern thought, that there can be no ideal discourse and that all forms of consensus are based on exclusion (Mouffe, 1995:36). As Foucault puts it: ‘consensus does not liquidate the problem of the power relations’ (Foucault 1984:378).

Drawing on Wittgenstein, Mouffe (1999) claims that procedure only exists as a complex ensemble of practices and involves substantial ethical commitments (pg 749 -50). Furthermore, utilizing a Lacanian analysis of the ISS as Zizek has done, she claims that discourse is in itself authoritarian, therefore the idea of the possibility of

communication being free from constraint through an ideal discourse is self-defeating (ibid, pg 751). Following this logic, at the end of reasonable discussion comes persuasion, and, or, a power struggle which undermines the presupposition of the ISS; that consensus represents a neutral process rather than a moral point of view.

From this ontological position Mouffe pursues an approach centred on the recognition of the dimensions of power and antagonism, and their 'ineradicable character', as central to politics and the formation of collective identities. According to this view, democratic society is characterized not by harmony or transparency but by the fact that 'no limited social actor can attribute to herself the representation of the totality and claim in any way that they have the 'mastery' of the foundation' (Mouffe, 1999:752).

The clash between an understanding of social objectivity as political rather than normative characterises the postmodern nature of this position and asserts that the traces of exclusion which govern the constitution of social objectivity must be elucidated. Procedural politics needs to reconnect to the political or ethical (Mouffe, 1996).

If power does not 'happen' between pre-constituted identities but rather *constitutes* identities then political practice should not consist of defending rights but rather of constituting identities. In order for us to re-evaluate the debate surrounding democracy with the contribution of postmodern thought, democracy needs to be grounded in the 'purely constructed nature of social relations' complemented by 'purely pragmatic grounds of the claims to power legitimacy' (Mouffe, 1999:753). Thus allowing us to reframe the democratic debate and ask not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power which are compatible with democratic values. We need to acknowledge and transform power not free ourselves from it.

This postmodern de-universalisation of the subject enables what Mouffe and Laclau call radical pluralistic democracy, which Mouffe (1999) refers to as 'agonistic pluralism' in direct reference to its position as an alternative to deliberative democracy. In relation to the arguments put forward by deliberative democracy theorists, such as Habermas, Mouffe (1999) distinguishes between 'the political' (antagonisms) and 'politics' (practices, discourses and institutions), construing that 'politics' consists of domesticating hostility. With this understanding she supposes that the fundamental question for politics today is not how to reach a consensus but how to create a unity, and therefore by definition an us/them distinction, in a way which is compatible with a pluralist democracy (1999:754-5).

For Mouffe, (1999) the enemy is not a competitor, as is insinuated by the deliberative democracy model, but a legitimate adversary with whom we have in common a 'shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy' (pg 755). The acceptance of the position of the adversary entails a radical change in political identity whereby consensus is seen as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion. She calls for a 'holistic mode of social organization' which refuses to suppress conflict by imposing an authoritarian order in the belief that ethico-political principles can only exist

through many different and conflicting interpretations in opposition to deliberative democracy (Mouffe, 1999:756). This anti-naturalizing and anti-essentialist stance acknowledges its real frontiers and the forms of exclusion they embody. In contrast to Habermasian theory, this postmodern influenced theory seeks to institutionalize rather than resolve tensions in democracy between liberty and equality (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xvii).

Another key critique of the postmodern conceptions of democracy promoted by Laclau and Mouffe is that they have developed highly complex discourses but failed to adequately explain what sort of institutions or practices they might lead to. Blaug (1999) argues that theories of discursive democracy across the spectrum, including postmodern conceptions and Habermasian ones, have a 'missing tier' with regard to the 'assistance they afford to participants in an actual discourse' which makes them utopian; he specifically criticises Mouffe for failing to provide legitimate and practical forms of action (Blaug, 1996:50).

However, Laclau and Mouffe describe the potential for institutions based on the defining characteristics of liberty and equality for all, most fully articulated in democratic discourse, and realized in socialist institutions (Best and Kellner, 1991:195). They describe the potential for a liberal democratic state, morally and ethically agnostic, but explicitly political because by definition it postulates certain ethico-political values that constitute its principles of validity (Mouffe, 1995:41). They do not prescribe anymore than this, as their approach relies on the understanding that its principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations (Mouffe, 1999:756). This is typical of postmodernist thought. Deleuze (1977) proclaims that Foucault has taught us the fundamental principle of the 'indignity of speaking for others' (pg 209).

A final criticism of this postmodernist conception of democracy is that it fails to relate these ideas to the relationship between political economy and society, and the impacts of this relationship, e.g. the effects of consumer culture. This is due to the failure to provide an analysis of the extra-discursive elements of domination and resistance, for example the effect of the state, economic structures and existing political movements. Thus, they fail to confront how some agents or practices may be in a better position to attain political hegemony than others (Best and Kellner, 1991:203-4). To this end, Žižek (2000) argues that radicalising liberal democracy doesn't adequately challenge capitalism.

Giddens (1992) offers a more nuanced understanding of a 'post-traditional order', claiming that prophecies of postmodernity are premature and that we live in what is better described as 'high modernity' where

'the systematic weakness of a rationality based order is increasingly apparent, yet the grip of a industrialised capitalism on everyday life is as vigorous as ever, and the capacity of national governments to control a technology of violence and to use increasingly sophisticated methods of social control is also evident' (Giddens in Taylor-Gooby, 1994: 168).

This criticism reflects postmodern theory's disavowal of the concept of the social system in micro-analysis. This is a weakness as it could be said to undermine its ability to recognise the trend towards centralisation, totalisation and new social organisation in contemporary society, focusing instead on fragmentation (Best and Kellner, 1991:221).

Though this last criticism is valid, it is undermined by the contribution of postmodern theory to democracy in real terms, best represented by the identity politics, e.g. the feminist movement of the 1960-70s. Clearly these movements and the postmodern theory that they entail have had a radical impact on society and politics particularly in the West.

Laclau and Mouffe assert that this 'democratic revolution' represents forms of resistance which have assumed the character of collective struggles due to the existence of an 'outside discourse which impedes the stabilization of subordination as difference' (2001:159). NSMs, defined by their differentiation from 'class' struggles, are described as novelty in that they call into question new forms of subordination affected by the extension of capitalist relations and growing state intervention penetrating the social field. This process of commodification and bureaucratisation has led to 'equality' being characterized by our capacity as consumers, however NSMs reject the real inequalities that continue to exist (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:160). For Laclau and Mouffe this represents a broadening and radicalizing of democracy and its proliferation into different relations.

They call for a strategy of construction rather than opposition (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:189). While it assumes a somewhat analytical or descriptive role, this theory ties in with Foucault's ideas of political struggle as based on unearthing 'secret' power dynamics rather than the 'unconscious' human rationality (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977:214).

Postmodernism remains a very contentious theoretical approach. For example, its implications for feminism are contradictory; it is widely claimed that postmodernism undermines women's ability to enhance their subjectivity in the struggle against patriarchy by undermining the importance and validity of shared experience. Flax highlights the importance of the gendered and social self *as well* as intersubjectivity in regard to the feminist struggle (in Best and Kellner, 1991: 209). Also, as mentioned it is criticised for failing to provide a comprehensive strategy to combat capitalism.

To conclude, this conception of democracy, and the parallel theme of the 'end of representation' (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977: 206), has the potential to support a radically different ontological and political discourse of democracy, which avoids the representation of totality by 'accepting and transforming power; a process specific to radical and plural democracy' (Mouffe, 1995:42).

Even if this conception of democracy is not sufficient to support social transformation on the scale which some postmodern theory alludes to, in moving democracy away from centralizations of power and toward a more pluralistic understanding of struggle it succeeds in enhancing the struggles of previously stigmatized or marginalized groups (Ketcham, 2004:205). Laclau and Mouffe's approach represents a different way to frame the democracy debate, rather than a radically new model of democracy. However the acknowledgment of antagonism inherent in 'democracy', and the understanding that without emphasizing the importance of power relations in politics there can be neither liberty nor equality, contributes greatly to the concept and practice of democracy in contemporary society.

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