

# Radical Democracy in Contemporary Times

Written by Lincoln Dahlberg

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## Radical Democracy in Contemporary Times

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LINCOLN DAHLBERG, FEB 26 2013

What is radically democratic, if anything, about the political struggles and events that have occurred around the world over the last few years, and how might radical democracy be further extended? To answer this question, we need to take a moment to reflect on what exactly is meant by radical democracy. Here I provide one particular definition of the term, and then suggest a number of contemporary democratic practices that might embody it. My aim is to offer a resource for further discussion and activism.

Radical democrats argue that we can draw out two central, inter-twined and historically constituted root meanings or conditions of democracy: first, the free and equal participation of 'the people' (the *dêmos*) in power (*kratos*); and second, that democracy – including any of its criteria, institutions, and decisions – has no grounds, justifications, or guarantees outside of the people, that is, outside of itself. The second condition tends to be stressed less in discussions about democracy than the first. However, the second condition – democracy's self-grounding, self-legitimation, and indeed its self-constitution – is equally important to democracy according to radical democrats. Self-grounding leads to constant anxiety and self-reflexive questioning, making democracy the only political system with a self-revolutionizing logic. Indeed, self-grounding is the condition of *impossibility* of finally specifying democracy's true or ultimate form (apart from the two minimal conditions set out here). At the same time, democracy's self-grounding is the condition of *possibility* for liberty and equality, that is, for the first condition. In other words, the absence of external legitimation or foundation is the basis for a participant's positive freedom and equality: subjects of democracy are autonomous from external gods and equally qualified and responsible for governance (Rancière, 2006: 41).

Yet, these two intertwined and historically constituted root meanings and conditions of democracy have largely been forgotten in contemporary (i.e. 'liberal') institutionalizations of democracy. Hence, radical democratic theorists have added 'radical' as a supplementary term to 'democracy' so as to draw out the two root conditions. Moreover, as a supplement, 'radical' does not just add to our current understandings and practices of democracy, but problematizes them, showing them to be not all encompassing: always incomplete and thus always revisable.

The drawing out of these root conditions has been undertaken by a range of radical democrats. This has resulted in an array of interpretations and conceptualizations of what goes under the name of 'radical democracy.' While some of these conceptualizations stem from the Habermasian and other deliberative democratic bodies of theory, many now draw upon poststructuralist influenced political thought, including the work of Jacques Rancière (2006), postmodern anarchism (e.g. Simon Critchley, Todd May), contemporary Marxist philosophy (e.g. Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek), autonomist Marxism (e.g. Antonio Negri), Deleuzian theories of abundance (e.g. William Connolly), and post-Marxism (e.g. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe).

But what does it mean to institutionalize radical democracy, that is, to institutionalize these two conditions?<sup>[1]</sup> Starting with the second condition, self-constitution or self-grounding means that 'politics goes all the way down' (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005: 4). Thus, the institutionalization of this condition involves the institutionalization of contingency and openness to contestation, ensuring that no social arrangement or identity is taken as extra-political. This contrasts with some other radical theories of democracy that envision a utopia where contestation is overcome, for example Rousseauian and Marxist understandings of democracy that see the possibility of conflict being eliminated through the realization of a general will or a communist revolution. It also differs from liberal democratic theory in that

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it does not try to limit or contain political contestation within certain (formal political) spheres (Ingram, 2006). Rather than confined to parliaments and periodic elections, radical democracy politics is appropriate to and hence constitutive of, all spheres of social life, even when politics is hidden by social norms and everyday practices (within which previous political decision is sedimented). Radical democracy involves making the constitution of social life by politics explicit, and thus exposing the potential for the politicization, contestation and reformulation of identities, systems, and norms in all areas of social life, whether workplaces, educational institutions, community groups, religious organizations, or homes.

However, this call for the institutionalization of contingency and of openness to contestation should not be read as an unrestrained embrace of conflict, but rather a shaping of it (when it occurs) in accordance with, or in the name of, extending free and equal participation of all citizens in the people's self-constitution (that is, in extending the first condition of democracy). The institutionalization of radical democracy thus involves what Chantal Mouffe (2005) refers to as the transformation of antagonism (and potential violence) into 'agonism' via the 'shared ethico-political principles' of 'liberty' and 'equality.'

But how can such a radical or agonistic democratic culture – of openness to contestation framed by equality and freedom – be instituted in the first place? Developing radical democracy from a culture of limited political participation requires not just winning and instituting legal protections (such as freedom of speech), but the formation of a politically active citizenry that comes into being through successful democratic political activism, where citizens see their engagements as contributing to their own and societies' self-constitution (in contrast to a discouraged and passive citizenry).

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) see this radical democratic citizenry and culture developing via hegemonic politics that embrace and fight for democracy. In other words, they see the need for the articulation of diverse democratic struggles, with otherwise differentiated demands, into a movement of 'we radical democrats' that can then effectively challenge existing liberal and other discourses and regimes that limit democracy. The hegemonic struggle politicizes society, while the normative embrace of democracy ensures this politicization works towards democratic processes and ends rather than antagonistic politics that is simply aimed at destroying the Other (e.g., violently retaliating police violence). Here Mouffe and Laclau develop on earlier thinking of the democratic politics of the 'new social movements' (e.g. Macpherson, 1977; Pateman, 1970). That is, popular struggles aimed at changing society through cultural politics, for example the women's movement, environmental movement, anti-war movement, and so on, in contrast to the politics of political parties aimed at taking centralized state power. However, against the earlier new social movements that often departed from economic concerns, radical democracy embraces the need to politicize and democratize the economy (Laclau, 1990; Žižek, 2000).

A contemporary example of such a hegemonic project aimed at democratization and that politicizes society in the process of struggle, can be seen in the 'alter-globalization' politics of 1989-2001, where a wide range of groups – farmers and other local producers, radical environmentalists, indigenous peoples, feminist groups, socialists, anarchists, and so on – with a wide variety of (sometimes conflicting) demands were articulated through their common negative relation to capitalist globalization and positive association with calls for 'democracy' and 'justice.' We have more recently seen a similar politics within the Occupy movements, where students, unemployed, anarchists, social democrats, unionists, etc., came together around 'democracy' and against finance capital and 'the one percent.'

The Arab revolutions of 2011/12 have also involved a range of previously unarticulated, and sometimes hostile, groups (Muslim, Christian, secular, women's, and youth) coming together, and modifying themselves in the process, around the demand for 'democracy,' politicizing societies that were largely apolitical. While it remains uncertain as to how radically democratic these revolutions may be with respect to the definition given in this essay, they do provide a practical illustration of the hegemonic politics that Mouffe and Laclau, amongst others, see as necessary for a political system to move towards radical democracy. They have, however partially, brought into being a nascent democratic culture, opening space for political contestation that has been expanded to many previously marginalized or excluded voices. The next step is the institutionalization of this culture through media organizations, civil society, law, and official decision-making bodies. Such radically democratic struggles need to be differentiated from

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hegemonic politics performed by coalitions like the Tea Party in the United States that may contribute to politicization through their activism but at the same time act to shut down politics through the promotion of the privatization of the social and economic aspects of life.

I want to conclude by highlighting two questions that need careful investigation with respect to the effective institutionalization of radical democracy. First, what is the role of communications media, and particularly digital media, in supporting agonistic engagement? The democratizing effects of digital social networks have been extensively celebrated. However, such networks must not be assumed to be unquestionably positive for advancing radical democracy, particularly given their increasing colonization by dominant political forces and capitalist exploitation. This leads us to the second question: what is the relation of radical democracy to global neo-liberal capital? In other words, can agonistic struggle effectively challenge contemporary capitalism? Or, as might be suggested from the limited impact of the alter-globalization and Occupy movements, will such politics at best lead to narrow reforms of liberal democracy, which ideologically legitimates the form of contestatory and pluralistic politics associated with capitalist markets and their 'free' competition (Žižek, 2000). The answer to these questions, I believe, lies in the nature and extent of future political struggle. For the extension and institutionalization of radical democracy, there needs to be a hegemonic political formation committed to liberty and equality and the extension of political contestation into all spheres of society.

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## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> I am here largely drawing upon post-Marxist radical democratic thought, which reads neo-Marxist (Gramscian in

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particular) understandings of radical democracy through poststructuralist lenses.

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