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Marxism-Leninism, Radical Democracy and Socialism

Stephen Louw

Democracy, as Keith Graham recently noted, is a concept which, until the eighteenth century, was understood by all, but favoured by few. Nowadays, the position has been reversed: 'Everyone is in favour of it but no one has a clear idea any longer what it is' (Graham 1986:1). The aim of this essay is to try to examine some of the theoretical assumptions which inform two influential theories of democracy, namely the Marxist-Leninist and Laclau-Mouffeian or radical democratic approaches. Both are, I argue, inherently flawed, although the latter contains the seeds of a more fruitful and democratic form of socialist politics, which, if seen in the light of Bob Jessop's concept of Strategic Selectivity, and recent reflections on autopoieticism – neither of which are attempted in this paper – provide the seeds for a more fruitful and realistic form of socialist politics.¹

As such, the essay stands in opposition to recent pronouncements on the 'failure of socialism' which seek to deny any relationship between socialist theory and the Eastern European experience, and which place an almost exclusive blame on the rulers of these states (Miliband 1989; Slovo 1990; Nash 1990). In contrast, we maintain that the theoretical foundations upon which the theory of socialism rests are inherently flawed, and as such are unable to provide a basis for a post-capitalist project. As a result, the argument is that the concept of socialism will have to be re-thought and that the best way to do this is by celebrating and defending the 'egalitarian imaginary' against the attempts at closure which underlie the positivist assumptions of Marxism-Leninism.

The Marxist-Leninist concept of democracy²

It is not a question of what this or that proletariat, or even the whole proletariat at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of *what* the proletariat *is*, and what in accordance with this *being*, it *must* historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1975:37).

Theoria, October 1991, pp. 139–158

The Marxist conception of democracy rests on an anthropological conception of man which guarantees the realisation of the higher order of society known as communism. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in the above quotation from the *Holy Family*, which unambiguously privileges the endogenous development of history over rational choice. (The same logic underlies Engels's famous distinction between 'Utopian' and 'Scientific' socialism.)

In this schema, the subjectivity of agents is derived from the economy. By virtue of their position in the relations of production a class-in-itself – whose interests are inherent and known in advance – can be identified. During a process of political struggle – which emerges from the *inherently* antagonistic nature of the relations of production – class location is transformed into class consciousness and we can talk of a class-for-itself. Here the influence of Hegel is clear,³ as is the origin of a politics of substitution which is given practical expression in Lenin's *What is to be Done?*⁴ Of course classes can misconstrue their true interests, but this is the task of the revolutionary party to correct.

The endogenous conceptualisation of 'the economic' has recently been criticised by Louis Althusser (1982). Rejecting what he terms the false 'theoretical unity' of *Capital*, Althusser points to the way in which this conception of politics is reinforced by the structure of Marx's *magnum opus*. By beginning his analysis of capitalism with a presentation of the arithmetic calculability of surplus value 'in which labour power figures purely and simply as a commodity' in isolation from the chapters detailing its historical conditions of existence – chapters which 'stand outside of the *order of exposition*' – Marx endorses a purely economic theory of exploitation. This, Althusser continues, has helped reinforce false and restrictive divisions between 'economic' and 'political' forms of struggle which 'is today hindering the broadening of the forms of the whole working class and struggle of the masses' (Althusser 1979:233–4). Seen in this light, Marx's decision to start with the abstract commodity is a reinforcement of the conception of history as a process which is internal to itself. (It was Stalin, of all people, who recognised this and expunged the concept of *Aufhebung*, i.e. the 'transcendence-preserving-the-transcended-as-the-internalized-transcended' (Althusser 1982:182), from Marxist thought.)

Abstracting from the terms in which Althusser framed his discussion, the logic of the argument is clear. If historical processes, and class-interests, can be determined in isolation from their conditions of existence, and if these interests, like the secret of commodities, can only be understood through the *application* of the *science* of Marxism-Leninism, then our conception of democracy

must be one which allows for the exclusion of ‘various forces from the political process, and [the] relegating [of] political *problems* to the status of conflicts between those who knew the truth and those who, out of ignorance, malice or self-interest, refused to acknowledge that truth’ (Polan 1984:117).⁵ In this context, it comes as no surprise to hear Marx proclaim that the question of democracy is a question of *being* and historical compulsion, not choice.⁶ Flowing from the assumption that there is an essential homogeneity of interests among structurally defined classes, and Lenin’s notion of the vanguard, we are forced to acknowledge the myth of ‘the general will’, which Claude Lefort dubs the ‘People as One’ hypothesis.

What remains is a limited conception of a politics which has been reduced to an expression of already determined interests. This has devastating effects for Marxism’s ability to provide a framework for a democratic society. If ‘class interests’ derive from ‘class position’, then it follows that the end of the latter means the end of politics. Relations under communism will be ‘transparent in their simplicity’ (Marx 1976:172).⁷ A practical demonstration of this conception of politics can be found in the Soviet Union’s inability to ‘think’ gender relationships, or to concede the possibility of a form of consciousness not reducible to class. In Stalin’s time the *zhenskii vopros* (women question) was declared solved. It was only in the context of potentially devastating demographic changes that Brezhnev acknowledged the possibility of such a contradiction, officially regarded as a ‘non-antagonistic contradiction’ (cf. Buckley 1989).

This anti-political impulse is the key to an understanding of the conceptual bankruptcy of Marxism-Leninism and its (however implicit) responsibility for the monstrosities which are beginning to crumble in Eastern Europe. Let us now turn to the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat and examine the ways in which it gives further content to the totalitarian impulse mentioned above.

The dictatorship of the proletariat

Lenin is correct when he proclaims that ‘it has often been said and written that the main point in Marx’s theory is the class struggle, but this is wrong. . . . Those who recognise only the class struggle are not yet Marxists; they may be found to be still within the bounds of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois politics. . . . Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat’ (Lenin 1977a:261–2; Marx 1978b:220). The dictatorship of the proletariat is indeed the logical extension of the concept of class interest just discussed.

In Marxist theory, the dictatorship refers to the political transition period which corresponds with the ‘revolutionary transformation’ of capitalist society into communist society. In this phase, the state can ‘be nothing but the *revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*’ (Marx 1978a:538) which ‘itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes and to a classless society*’ (Marx 1978b:220).

Having seized state power, the goal is to use the power of the state, which was previously the exclusive preserve of the (representatives of) the minority, to further the *historically inscribed* goals of the (actively participating) majority i.e. the abolition of class society. As such, the intention is to consolidate the insurrectionary process by using the power of the state ‘both to crush the resistance of the exploiters and to *lead* the enormous mass of the population – the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, and semi-proletarians – in the work of organising a socialist economy’ (Lenin 1977a:255). Because we know, *ex ante*, that this *is* the true goal of the proletariat, there can be no questioning the need to endorse, or verify support for the dictatorship,⁸ or for qualms about the use of force to achieve these objectives. As such, the dictatorship of the proletariat ‘is rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws’ (Lenin 1977b:23).

In his treatment of ‘the state’, Lenin refers to a body which is separate from society, and which, by its very nature, reproduces that from which it arises, i.e. class antagonisms. Here Lenin is endorsing the view that the failure of the Paris Commune demonstrated that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’, but must smash it (Marx 1977:217–8; 1983:98; Lenin 1977a:257, 263–66). Accordingly, the argument is that the state – as institution, not the functions performed by the state – is fundamentally oppressive, and must be smashed in order to give way to full communism: ‘. . . it is clear that the liberation of the oppressed class is impossible not only without a violent revolution,⁹ *but also without the destruction* of the apparatus of state power which was created by the ruling class and which is the embodiment of this “alienation”’ (Lenin 1977a:242).

In this phase, the state operates (initially) as an almost mirror image of the bourgeois state. The difference between the two is that its purpose is (ultimately) to destroy its own political functions, and to turn itself into ‘a non-political state’ where its remaining administrative functions can be directly performed by ‘The People’. By transforming the state from an organ separate from society into a series of administrative functions performed by society itself, the

(non-political) state becomes subordinate to society, and not the other way round as it is under capitalism (cf. Lenin 1977a:283). The manner in which such direct management is to be performed is never clearly elaborated, but the intention is clear. To paraphrase Lenin: each will govern in turn such that ultimately no one will govern.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two dictatorships. The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie is subject to the constraints of parliamentary democracy, to the rule of law, and to constitutional checks and balances. The communist model of politics, by contrast, rejects the bourgeois separation of executive from legislature, and calls for the transformation of 'talking shops' into 'working bodies' (Lenin 1977a:270). The former's insistence on a separation of powers presumes a celebration of multi-interest politics and a concern to prevent the monopolisation of power. The latter treats these as non-problems. Communism is the end of multi-interest politics. The essential homogeneity of wills, and the depiction of the workings of society as 'transparent in its simplicity' means that there is no need to keep institutional checks on representatives. In the event that people shirk their responsibilities, or try to abuse their power – a possibility which neither Marx nor Lenin denied – they would simply be recalled from office.

At this point, it will be useful to examine the philosophical assumptions on which the concept of the dictatorship rests. We have already referred to Lenin's reliance on an instrumentalist view of the state as 'a product of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms', which is 'a power standing *above* society and "*alienating* itself *more and more* from it"' (Lenin 1977a:242). This conception of the state has been increasingly regarded as inadequate, and the criticisms thereof are too well known to bear rehearsing.

A more interesting critique relates to the way in which this conception of the state allowed Lenin to equate the rule of the bourgeoisie with a dictatorship based on force. This only holds water if we, like Marx in *On The Jewish Question*, dismiss the individual freedoms and rights which the parliamentary *form* makes possible as little more than an attempt to provide legitimation for the capitalist state. This is, however, an untenable assumption. The nature of 'the bourgeois revolution', the constitutional state and the defence of individual rights, is a complex one which will be discussed at a later stage. For the moment it is sufficient to point to the way in which the absence of constitutional mechanisms for a change in government has often allowed otherwise corrupt and unpopular leaders like Mobutu Sese Seko and Fidel Castro to remain in power.

However this is to attack Marxism-Leninism at its weakest point. There is no inherent reason – there are plenty of probable reasons¹⁰ –

why such constitutional arrangements could not be used in communist societies. To understand the depth of the gulf between Marxist-Leninist and multi-interest democracy, we need to examine the critique of the parliamentary *form*.

Parliamentary democracy, which Lenin equates with bourgeois democracy, is inherently limited and stifling, and must be dispensed with. Instead of a form of democracy which allows citizens the chance to make simple candidate-based choices every five or six years, a form of Soviet or Council style 'direct' democracy is defended. Although Lenin calls for a combination of representation and direct rule, this is very different to the kind of *institutionalized* arrangements to which people like Poulantzas refer (Poulantzas 1980:261). Rather it involves 'the transformation of public functions from political into simple functions of administration' (Lenin 1977a:283), which is ultimately a continuation of the theme of de-politicization.

Here we see the importance of the conflation of communist politics with administration. For essentially practical reasons, representative organs will continue to be necessary, but they will not be removed from society and will not involve specialist or permanent representatives. These representatives will be ordinary men and women, who are paid 'workmen's' wages. (In opposition to the conflation of politics with administration, and to the belief that multi-interest politics will 'wither away' under communism, Weber believed that 'while the political sphere acts as a restraint on the administration, the administration is also necessary to defuse the dangerous tendencies of the politicians (a term which may mean the *whole* of the citizenry)' (Polan 1984:109).)

Perhaps the most important critique relates to Lenin's belief in the progressive simplifications of tasks under capitalism, and the notion of an homogeneity of wills as an essential foundation for the communist project. Although it could be argued that the simplification thesis is a retreat from the more grandiose claims of all-round development contained in *The German Ideology* – claims that would be equally impossible to sustain in contemporary society (Elster 1985: 521–28) – this seems to be the issue upon which the continued relevance of Marxism-Leninism, as a philosophy for the management of a post-capitalist society, will stand or fall.

According to the simplification thesis,

Capitalist culture has *created* large-scale production, factories, railways, the postal service, telephones, etc., and *on this basis* the great majority of the functions of the old 'state power' have become so simplified and can be reduced to such exceedingly simple operations of registration, filing and checking that they can easily be performed by every literate person, can

quite easily be performed for ordinary 'workmen's wages', and these functions can (and must) be stripped of every shadow of privilege, of every semblance of 'official grandeur' (Lenin 1977a:269).

Because these tasks are so simple, they can be performed by almost anyone, and do not require a specialised administrative-governmental apparatus for their completion. At the same time, and in order not to overstate our case, it must be acknowledged that Lenin was no fool, and that he recognised the need for bourgeois specialists to assist in the construction of the new order. This was, however, to be a temporary feature only, and one which would be under the direct control of the armed workers.

Once again we see the importance of Marx's belief that communist relations would be 'transparent in their simplicity' (Marx 1976:172), which made possible a system of comprehensive nation-wide planning with no contradiction between general and particular interests, or problems related to technical coordination and calculability (Selucky 1979; Nove 1983). These are not viable assumptions on which to base a political project. The idea of the capitalist state simplifying itself, and of the progressive dispensability of the bureaucratic stratum, is a misreading of the nature of the state form, and of the nature of bureaucracy. Modern states have become progressively more complex, whilst their tasks become more specialised. Lenin's theory ultimately rests on the idea that 'the particular *form* of the state is immaterial, epiphenomenal and insignificant, and what counts is a supposed essence' (Polan 1984:91). There were good reasons for criticising the state form in Imperial Russia, Polan continues, but the argument that the *essence* of the Tsarist state was the same as all others in Europe is mistaken. By making this assumption the introduction of those very features which determined the specificity of the bourgeoisie state, as opposed to the direct rule by one class over another – eg. the separation of state from civil society, freedom of the press, the right to form political parties, separation of powers etc. – is downplayed, allowing us 'to elide the differences between liberal democracies and other authoritarian and repulsive regimes of a fascist or totalitarian nature' (Polan 1984:91–2).

The implications of such a critique are both devastating and depressing. If tasks are not simplified the need for a (political) state remains. Even with the best will in the world, the conceptual weaknesses of this argument mean that we have no sound principles on which to govern, and we are once again forced to take refuge in the world of class interests and the *scientific* status of Marxism-Leninism in order to maintain any semblance of ideological coherence. We have thus returned to the original point of my exposition, the logic of

substitution, to use Trotsky's phrase, and the need for a vanguard party to interpret the 'general will'.

At this point it is necessary to distance ourselves from the argument that the concept of the one party state cannot be found in the original Marxist texts (cf. Slovo 1990:19). It is not denied that the Marxist-Leninist call is for class rule, not rule by a single party. However if we acknowledge that the conceptual basis on which such claims rest are false, then we have little choice but to admit the close relationship between the two. Given the assumption of an essential homogeneity of interests amongst the working class, it is difficult to see a continued need for different political parties. As a result of the emphasis which is placed on the need to scientize workers, to make them aware of their class interests and historical destiny, the existence of different parties could easily be dismissed as an attempt to confuse the workers and to prevent the *realisation* of *their* interests (Polan 1984:117; Hirst 1990).

In short, the argument is that it is this essentialization of the social that is used to give theoretical justification to the centralisation of authority and power. As Terry Eagleton notes, the practical consequences of the (false) assumption of the universality of the working class's 'objective interests' is that for as long as it is an emergent social class it is unlikely to consolidate any sectional interests, and will try to win as wide a support base as possible. Once they have seized power, however, the falseness of their claim to universalism will soon manifest itself and selfish interests will cause it to concentrate on particular interests. More importantly, this lapse will increase the need for an ideological justification of the proletariat's right to rule (Eagleton 1991:56–7). In his characteristically succinct manner, Claude Lefort sums up the effects of this process as follows:

It does not matter that, for a while, the people is confused with the proletariat: the latter is then conceived mythically as the universal class into which all elements working for the construction of socialism are absorbed; it is no longer, strictly speaking, a class within a stratified society, it has become the people in its essence and notably includes the bureaucracy. This image is combined with that of the Power-as-One, power concentrated within the limits of the ruling apparatus and, ultimately, in an individual who embodies the unity and will of the people. These are two versions of the same phantasy. For the People-as-One can be both represented and affirmed only by the great Other; in the initial period it can be so only by that great individual whom Solzhenitsyn has so aptly called the *Egocrat* (Lefort 1986:287).

To conclude, the argument is that in the Marxist-Leninist conception of consciousness 'the outcome of the decision procedure is

smuggled in with the hypothesis of the nature of the deciding agent' (Hirst 1990:167). This is a flawed, and ultimately authoritarian, form of democracy. It grants no legitimacy to personal, 'racial', ethnic, national, or gender based forms of political conflict – none of which can be said to exist autonomously, each overdetermining the identity of the other – and provides no institutional arrangements for the expression of such interests. By equating politics with the administration of an essentially conflict free society, 'society turns out to be an amorphous matter to be organised, something which is organizable and which lends itself to the constant intervention of the engineer, the builder of communism' (Lefort 1986:287; Arendt 1960).

Let us now turn our attention to the second form of democracy under discussion.

Radical democracy

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 character, and can be articulated to very different discourses. It is this articulation that gives them their character, not the place from which they come . . . This means that any politics with hegemonic aspirations can never consider itself as *repetition*, as taking place in a sphere delimiting a pure internality, but must always mobilise itself on a plurality of planes.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985:169).

The concept of radical democracy rests on a very different conception of social relations to that embraced in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. It is explicitly anti-humanist, and is not content to assert that the inherently rational character of communism will enable us to reduce the question of communist politics to a matter of administration. Instead, radical democracy rests on a defence of the 'egalitarian imaginary', and is an attempt to extend the democratic logic into the text of a socialist project.

In this regard, the philosophy of radical democracy arises out of two related concerns. The first is the desire to reject any attempt to depict 'society' as unified along an essential class axis. Traditional socialist theory is criticised for being reductionist and essentialist. Radical democracy, by contrast, rejects the idea of an *a priori* determinant of history, or the identification of a fixed axis along which social conflict takes place. There are a number of contingent axes of antagonism, and potential antagonisms, any combination of which may dominate.

The second involves the positive affirmation of this contingency. If society is not organised along essential class lines, and is not determined by the laws of motion of an endogenous 'economic level', then it is possible to develop a form of politics which celebrates and defends such openness. (It is in this context that the 'egalitarian imaginary' which lies at the heart of 'liberal democracy' needs to be discussed.) History provides us with a number of attempts to privilege a particular organizational principle, be it God, class, or gender. The task of radical democracy is to reject such attempts at closure, and to seek to articulate alternate social pacts, or 'chains of equivalence', in order to contest 'the social' in a way which is simultaneously liberatory and democratic.

As radical democracy, at least in its Laclau-Mouffeian form, is not simply an extension of traditional democratic theory, but rests on a very different philosophical conception of (the regulation of) 'the social', it is essential to examine each aspect in turn.

Critique of Marxist reductionism

Laclau and Mouffe, by far the most important representatives of the school, begin by tracing the 'crisis in Marxism' and identify the key-necessary role played by economism (as epiphenomenalism *and* class reductionism) in Marxist theory. Here they explicitly reject the notion that subjects are able automatically to translate a (non-discursive) experience in the relations of production into a class subjectivity, and argue that the process of subjectivization is far more complex than Marxist theory originally envisaged. Drawing on the work of post-Saussurean discourse theory,¹¹ they argue that the identity of agents, like language, is never 'fixed', and that for this reason identity is permanently open to change.

By radicalizing Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe argue that subjectivization is not the result of one's position in the relations of production *alone*. The social has no unifying logic, rather it is always open, and consists of a number of competing discursive formations. In Gramsci, position in a 'hegemonic bloc', that is to say a contingent discursive formation organised along non-class grounds, is seen as a determinant of political identity only in so far as it articulates *already constituted class subjects* towards one or other *class pole*. Laclau and Mouffe reject this, arguing that such articulation is not limited to times of crisis, and that there is no *a priori* reason why it should take place along class lines. Such dual determination is ultimately little more than a sophisticated attempt to defend class reductionism.¹² Instead, the identity of subjects is

established through their position in these (competing) discursive formations. (This is what Ernesto Laclau means by the 'constitutive character of difference' (Laclau 1983:39).) Hegemonic struggle will thus modify the identity of both (or all) discursive formations involved. As such, their belief in the centrality of discourse in the constitution of identity stands in opposition to the empiricist assumptions underlying Marx and Engels's references to 'real active men' in *The German Ideology*; and to the theory of commodity fetishism articulated in *Capital* – which argues that our perception of reality is inherent in reality itself, and thus ignores the different ways in which human beings discursively construct and interpret their beliefs and interests (Eagleton 1991:88).

As regards the question of the economic organisation of society, Laclau and Mouffe insist that they are not simply asserting the primacy of the idea. Instead, they affirm the centrality of the need to reproduce material life, only rejecting any *a priori* social division stemming from such activity (Laclau and Mouffe 1982:93; 1985:75–85).¹³ Unlike Marx and Lenin, they acknowledge that economic activity is itself a political activity, and that its conditions of existence are not incidental to its form. For this reason, 'the economic' cannot be treated as an endogenous self regulating 'level'. At the same time, Laclau and Mouffe insist that they are not retreating into an absolutely relativist framework, and argue that existing discursive processes act as *point de capiton*, or the locus of an overdetermination of effects, as their identity rests on the ability to suppress the constitution of other identities. As such, existing discursive processes – for example a discourse of Islamic Fundamentalism – partially limit the field of signification. However such centrality is the result of historical struggle and is never predetermined (Laclau 1983:40).¹⁴

There is thus no privileged political practice. Because we have rejected the idea of a basic human nature that responds to experiences in an essentialist fashion, it must be acknowledged that the signifier 'worker' can just as easily be articulated into a capitalist discourse which defines it as someone with limited market value, as could it be articulated to an anti-capitalist discourse which defines it as the producer of unpaid surplus value (the example is taken from Hudson 1987).¹⁵ Whilst it is possible to identify contingently defined limits to the field of signification, it must be acknowledged that there is no *a priori* guarantor of Truth, or possibility of 'false consciousness' – in the sense of an illusory phenomenon which is unable to produce material effects: we do not deny that ideology may involve falsity, distortion and mystification (Eagleton 1991:26).

To summarise, the point is that all aspects of the social should be seen as discursively articulated, not the product of an endogenous

process of causation. As a result, the field of politics is incomparably broadened. By rejecting the idea that class can be identified as the (*a priori*) central political antagonism, and thus the need for the (representatives of the) working class to express their 'objective interest' by seizing power and, via their dictatorship, articulate other classes to their position, more democratic forms of political practice become possible.

Let us return to the second point of my definition, the celebration of liberal political discourse.

Liberal political discourse and the egalitarian imaginary

Growing out of the belief in the essential indeterminacy of social relations, radical democrats stress that 'liberal democracy' is a specific political form of society. As such, they are concerned to examine the ways in which liberal discourse is constituted, and the possibility of articulating its various 'elements' into a socialist project (Mouffe 1990).

At the outset it should be stressed that this *is not* an unambiguous celebration of liberalism, or liberal democratic 'societies', *per se*. A central theme running throughout the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Norberto Bobbio (1987, 1988, 1990), who should be seen as the original advocate of radical democracy, and Bowles and Gintis (1986), is that an ongoing critique of liberal democracy in capitalist societies should seek to expose its limitations, and demonstrate that its complete realisation is impossible outside of a socialist framework. Unlike liberals, radical democrats are not willing to limit their attention to the allegedly separate and autonomous worlds of 'the political', 'civil society' and 'the state'. Instead, they vehemently deny any sharp distinction between these 'areas', and insist on the need to democratise all aspects of 'the social'. It is through this broad definition of democratization that radical democrats re-establish contact with the socialist tradition, or at least the left-Eurocommunist variant thereof (cf. Poulantzas 1980:259–65), although they are insistent on the fact that socialism is only one, albeit important, aspect of the struggle for human liberation.

Although there are significant differences between the various authors who either consciously place themselves within the radical democratic tradition, or who are (perhaps problematically) appropriated by it, a central feature of their overall analysis is the belief that 'liberal discourse' cannot be treated as a political practice which necessarily includes a number of essential elements, all of whom are linked to the capitalist economy. The philosophy of liberalism

consists of many different discourses which do not necessarily form a single doctrine. In contemporary capitalist society, as Chantal Mouffe observes, the dominant discourse tends to be individualism, but this need not be the case. Because of the contingent nature of all discursive formations it is possible to talk of, and to struggle for, different forms of liberalism: 'to value the institutions which embody political liberalism's principles does not require us to endorse either economic liberalism or individualism' (Mouffe 1990:58). As such, it is important to try to disarticulate the link between the egalitarian impulse contained in the philosophy of liberalism, discussed below, from the many different forms of private property, and to seek to re-articulate this impulse in a system where the different forms of ownership have been, to varying extents, socialised. This should not, however, be taken as an endorsement of the revolution first, democracy later, position which we discussed in an earlier section. Instead, the argument is that the logic of egalitarianism is constrained under a system of private property, and that a struggle for an expansion of democracy can (potentially) involve us in a challenge to these limits. It is not, *pace* Marx and Engels, an attempt to replace one form of democracy with another *in toto*.

In a similar vein, Zillah Eisenstein (1981, 1984) argues that the egalitarian impulse contained in the discourse of liberal feminism is (potentially) subversive to both capitalism and patriarchy in so far as it is able to demonstrate the disparities between the claims of liberalism and the experience of women in America. (We should, however, be careful not to make any cavalier distinctions between a (discursive) world of ideology and a (non-discursive) world of experience.)

To return to the question of the egalitarian imaginary, the important aspect of 'liberal discourse' which radical democrats wish to appropriate lies in what Claude Lefort calls 'the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*'; or its challenge to the phenomenon which Pierre Bourdieu calls *doxa*. The egalitarian imaginary should be contrasted with any closed system of beliefs, for example the discourse of a God ordained hierarchy in a feudal order. This challenge to the idea of a sutured universe, Lefort argues,

inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law, and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between *self* and *other*, at every level of social life (at every level where division, and especially the division between those who held power and those who were subject to them, could once be articulated as a result of a belief in the nature of things or in a supernatural principle) (Lefort 1986:19).

It is this (ongoing) process of dissolution of the ‘markers of certainty’ that underlies the concept of pluralism in ‘liberal democracy’. Without a positive endorsement of difference, our attempt to abandon the idea of a privileged form of political practice would be meaningless. As Mouffe argues, pluralism is a complete rejection of the ‘dangerous dream of a perfect consensus, of a harmonious collective will’ (Mouffe 1990:58–9). It is because of this challenge to the idea of a ‘People-as-One’ – which we have already argued takes us down a one way street into a philosophy of substitution – that radical democrats maintain that the goals of the *socialist* project cannot be achieved outside of the liberal democratic framework. As such, radical democracy prioritises liberal democracy over socialism. Not because of the niceties of electoral politics, but because it is the ability of liberalism to challenge the fixity of a closed discourse which makes democracy, and socialism, possible.

Radical and plural democracy thus involves the recognition of the centrality of conflict in modern societies, and the plurality of political antagonisms in all areas of life, on the one hand, and the attempt to extend democratic principles to these areas on the other, for example struggles around ‘racial’ and sexual oppression and the discrimination against minorities. Most importantly, it is an affirmation of the constitutive character of these struggles.

In particular, liberal political values, for example representative multi-party democracy, the right to work and freedom of the press should be upheld, and shown to be fully realisable only under a socialist system. (Knee-jerk attempts to equate them with the liberal economic defence of private property and class rule rest on the idea that these are, *ab initio*, fixed class values which cannot be re-articulated along alternative discursive lines (cf. Engels 1978:23).) Instead of treating *institutional arrangements* in an essentialist and ahistorical fashion, we have to recognise their essential indeterminacy, and the many different ways in which they can be articulated into a variety of political projects.

At this point, it will be useful briefly to refer to five important critiques that can be levelled against the radical democratic project in general, and against Laclau and Mouffe in particular. Whilst not wishing to underplay their significance, or the extent to which they have exposed important obstacles which any radical democratic theorist would have to cross, we will make no attempt to provide answers to such critiques. This is, we hope, justifiable on the grounds that the purpose of the essay is to identify the philosophical starting points of both traditions, and not to engage in a discussion of the intricacies thereof.

The most common critique of Laclau and Mouffe concerns their belief that all identities are relational, and that they resist a final closure. If identity is continually open to (re)negotiation, and if the transition from 'element' to 'moment' is never complete, how is it possible for stable systems of communication to exist, and how do we account for institutional durability? We can, as already noted, refer to the existence of temporary nodal points which 'quilt' the process of signification (cf. Žižek 1989), but the details of this process are obscure. For radical democracy – at least in its Laclau-Mouffeian form – to have any political (and electoral) attractiveness, this problem will have to receive serious attention.

Of equal importance, is the need to recognise the existence of societalization processes, that is to say the 'complex social processes in and through which specific institutional orders and their broader social preconditions are secured' (Jessop 1990:5). Without a notion of 'society effects' it becomes impossible to theorise the kinds of institutional mechanisms needed to give rise to a radical democratic society. Laclau and Mouffe are correct to point to the contingent nature of different institutional arrangements, and to the way in which their character is overdetermined by other discursive formations, but they cannot deny that once in place these arrangements will produce effects which cannot be ignored – hence my earlier remarks on the importance of recent reflections on autopoieticism. As it stands, Laclau and Mouffe's dismissal of any notion of 'society' is without substance.

A more serious critique has been made by Paul Hirst, who points out that the work of radical democrats is, in many senses, 'an attempt to revitalise the concepts of common citizenship, civic virtue, and active participation by individual citizens in the public sphere' (Hirst 1990:161–2). Drawing on his analysis of the French revolution, Hirst argues that attempts to create a 'new republicanism' soon failed, and gave way to representative governments and mass electorates. In this regard, both Hirst and Bobbio argue that we cannot presuppose an electorate which is willing to contest all aspects of 'the social', and believe that calls for active political participation have continually proven to have little electoral appeal. Although Hirst's critique is stilted and ignores many of the more radical aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's work, there is much merit in his claim that proposals for electoral reform and for legally guaranteed civil rights become 'isolated panaceas' in the absence of 'a doctrine of government that addresses the problems of modern representative democracy and proposes a solution to them' (Hirst 1990:161). This scepticism is shared by Hannah Arendt, who believes that 'extraordinary adaptability and absence of continuity are no doubt [the] outstanding

characteristics' of the totalitarian personality, whilst the success of the totalitarian movements in Europe demonstrated that 'politically neutral and indifferent masses could easily be the majority in a democratically ruled country' (Arendt 1960:306, 312).

This is not an endorsement of the view that democracy should be curtailed in any way, or to suggest that there is a relationship between the project of radical democracy and the totalitarian project. Indeed, as we have seen, Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the need to make the 'friend-enemy distinction' central to our understanding of politics, and to articulate political alliances or 'chains of equivalence', rests on a very different objective to that of the totalitarian project which 'depended less on the structurelessness of a mass society than on the specific conditions of an atomised and individualised mass' (Arendt 1960:318). It does, however, serve as a warning of the dangers inherent in the combination of an insistence on perpetual challenge and change and a (potentially) indifferent electorate.

The argument is thus that a more feasible form of socialist politics must not take the existence of an active electorate for granted, and would not be undermined if there were a low level of active participation. This point is related to the observation that we need to take societalization processes and 'society effects' seriously, and leads us directly onto the question of legitimacy.

The fourth, and perhaps most important critique that we want to advance, relates to the effects of this conception of a (potentially) foundationless society. Whilst the rejection of the concept of an *a priori* referent has indeed made politics possible, it has also made it difficult to conceptualise the question of political legitimacy and stability. Once again it is useful to refer to the work of Claude Lefort, and to his cautionary warning that, taken to its extreme,

There is always a possibility that the logic of democracy will be disrupted in a society in which the foundations of the political order and the social order vanish, in which that which has been established never bears the seal of full legitimacy, in which differences of rank no longer go unchallenged, in which right proves to depend upon the discourse which articulates it, and in which the exercise of power depends upon conflict (Lefort 1986:19).

By abandoning all foundations, but holding onto the 'new republicanism' ideal, we may well discover that our conception of politics is as meaningless as that contained in the Marxist – Leninist problematic. Nowhere do Laclau and Mouffe adequately explain the origins of the antagonisms that are seen to be characteristic of late capitalism. (Indeed, their argument is, in many senses, a simple inversion of that developed by the Frankfurt School.) Legitimacy need not rely on any

ahistorical assumptions about class interests, or on normative principles. Perhaps the best definition lies in a procedural approach? Once again, if radical democracy is to gain widespread support as a political project, it will have to provide us with some tools with which to 'think' the question of legitimacy.

The final problem connected to the idea of a radically democratic society in which all relationships are open to continual re-negotiation, is the question of whether the human psyche will be able to tolerate the effects of such indeterminacy.¹⁶ In his recent onslaught against the 'carnavalesque delirium' inherent in the work of many discourse theorists, Terry Eagleton has made much of 'the extent to which a certain provisional stability of identity is not only essential for psychical well-being but for revolutionary political agency': their work, at worst, 'slides into an irresponsible hymning of the virtues of schizophrenia' (Eagleton 1991:197–8). This relates to the need for post-Marxists to provide a more robust account of the processes which give rise to, albeit temporary, stability.

Conclusion

Although not unproblematic, radical democracy can thus be seen to provide us with a useful set of philosophical assumptions with which to begin our re-thinking of socialist democracy. Unlike the traditional Marxist-Leninist argument, it is not dependent on an anthropological conception of man, and does not rely on the notion of 'class interests' or an essentialist depiction of institutional arrangements. However, for the reasons outlined above, it is not without its problems.

Few, if any, attempts, have been made to think through the institutional arrangements needed to create the foundations for the radical democratic project. Such a project is of immediate political importance if democratic socialism is to gain any popularity. As democrats and as socialists we have to respond to the challenges which lie ahead, and reject both the fundamentalist left and the 'New Right' in order to make possible a world which is simultaneously both liberal and egalitarian, and in which distribution is in accordance with the needs of the populace as opposed to the desires of the few.

NOTES

1. Many of the ideas contained in the essay stem from a course which I jointly teach with Mr P.A. Hudson, entitled 'The Crises of Socialism'. I acknowledge his influence gratefully.
2. It is necessary from the outset to stress that there is an essential continuity between the works of Marx and Lenin. Some recent evaluations of Marxist theory have attempted to separate the two traditions in order to lessen Marx's responsibility for the conceptual bankruptcies of communism. (See, for example, Ralph Miliband 1989:30). It should be admitted, however, that there is in Lenin an attempt to turn the doctrine of a man – who, when faced with the attempts of his followers to codify his work, proudly proclaimed: *Moi, je ne suis pas marxiste* – into a series of shock-slogans. The basis for Lenin's work can be clearly traced to texts like *The Holy Family*; the 1872 Preface to the German edition of *The Communist Manifesto*; *The Civil War in France* and *Capital*. The *Paris Manuscripts* are equally revealing, but were only published after Lenin's death.
3. Although, to be fair to Hegel, the subject of his teleology was the process itself, not man (cf. Althusser 1982:183).
4. This text is often erroneously cited as proof of a rejection of the essentialism in Marx's work, and as a defence of the importance of 'Politics' in the construction of identity. This is false for, as Lenin tells us, the trade union politics to which workers are otherwise condemned, is *bourgeois consciousness*. As such, the essentialist structure remains the same, all we have is a degree of movement therein.
5. On the same page, Polan points to the similarities between this approach and the words of the American Declaration of Independence: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.'
6. An equally clear endorsement of the endogenous development of history can be found in the works of the 'late Marx': 'My standpoint, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them' (Marx 1976:92).
7. Although we will not discuss the claim here, it can be argued that once we reject the conception of ideology contained in *The German Ideology* i.e. as a false reflection of 'reality', and acknowledge the crucial role which ideology plays in the *interpellation* of human subjects, then the claim that ideology will wither away with the superstructure becomes equally untenable (Eagleton 1991:81, 148–52; Althusser 1984).
8. Here the practical expression of the concept of class interest is clear and unambiguous. As Lenin puts it: 'The overthrow of bourgeois rule can be accomplished only by the proletariat, the particular class whose economic conditions of existence prepare it for this task and provide it with the possibility and the power to perform it. . . . Only the proletariat – by virtue of the economic role it plays in large-scale production – is capable of being the leader of *all* the working and exploited people, whom the bourgeoisie exploit, oppress and crush . . . but who are incapable of waging an independent struggle for their emancipation' (Lenin 1977: 255).
9. Here Marx contradicts Marx's view that 'we do not deny that there are countries – such as America, England, and . . . perhaps Holland – where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means' (Marx 1978c:523). However the 'institutions, mores, and traditions' which *may* make this possible, are never outlined, or discussed at any length.
10. A useful discussion of this point can be found in Jon Elster (1988). The main thrust of Elster's argument is that the conception that 'one may rationally count on being able to achieve full democracy by the temporary abolition of democracy' is essentially untrue. This is interesting, as the theoretical assumption on which Elster bases his argument is that 'it is impossible to predict with certainty or even qualified probability the consequences of a major constitutional change'. Whilst Elster limits his discussion to an assessment of the unpredictability of constitutional – or any institutional – arrangements, this fits in nicely with the comments which we will make later on concerning a) the way in which the assumption of rationality in Marx's conception of communism provides a justification for undemocratic practices; and

- b) the essential indeterminacy of institutional relationships. An interesting special argument used by Elster is that 'democracy is an especially unlikely outcome of a process that begins by abolishing democracy' (Elster 1988:303–4). We will not consider this here.
11. By discourse is meant the result of any articulatory practice. As such, we are not simply talking about language. Institutions and social practices like 'the sex-gender system' are all discursive practices. For a critique of this definition, see Jessop (1990:288, 297–301) and Eagleton (1991:215–19).
 12. As Laclau argues, 'in the Gramscian discourse the politics of the signifier and the play of difference do not enter the process of constitution of the identity of the subjects of hegemony. Social classes appear in the Gramscian discourse as *natural* subjects of hegemony and, as a result, the necessity of *one* hegemonic centre can reproduce, under different forms, a discourse of *the* society' (Laclau 1983: 42–3).
 13. It is this acknowledgement, more than anything else, that separates Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism from the more 'idealistic' post-Structuralist tradition. For an important discussion of the differences between Lacan and the post-Structuralists, see Žižek (1989:156).
 14. This formulation is developed – by way of a commentary on Lacan's notion of the 'Ideological Quilt' – in Žižek (1989). For a discussion of the 'Derridean trace' in their work see Jessop (1990:296).
 15. Here Laclau is correct to argue that capitalist relations should not be treated as *intrinsically* antagonistic, as it 'is only if the worker *resists* such an extraction [of surplus value] that the relationship becomes antagonistic; and there is nothing in the category of "seller of labour power" to suggest that such resistance is a *logical* conclusion' (Laclau 1990:9). In the absence of the sorts of assumptions underlying the Marxist-Leninist theory of consciousness, such a conclusion would not only rely on an extreme act of faith, but would fly in the face of the reality of post-war worker political allegiances. Jon Elster, working from a completely different perspective, is also concerned to comment on the ability of subjects to interpret their class situation in non-class ways, eg. as 'bad luck', rather than as systematic exploitation (Elster 1985:18–22).
 16. I am grateful to Mr P. A. Hudson for this point.

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