"Radical Philosophy?"


Darrow Schecter, Beyond Hegemony: Towards a New Philosophy of Political Legitimacy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

In a quirk of sloppy copy-editing, one of the contributions to Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen's collection, Radical Democracy, bears the running header "For an Agnostic Public Sphere" instead of the essay's actual title, which is "For an Agonistic Public Sphere." But this confusion between agnosticism and agonism is perhaps symptomatic of the problems afflicting the very concept of radical democracy. For though its proponents repeatedly invoke notions of political combat and engagement, they all too easily slip into quiescent indecision. Put it this way: it is far from clear what is "radical" about radical democracy behind the rhetorical display of terms such as agonism, antagonism, pluralism, heterogeneity, and the like.

Is radical democracy a specific form of democracy, comparable to but different from (say) its Athenian, liberal, or neoliberal variants? And if so, is it a democracy still to come, to be fought for as a perhaps utopian horizon of democratic thought and struggle? Or is it, by contrast, a form of democracy in which some groups (new social movements, say) currently engage, in other words a counter-democratic actuality
that has emerged since the end of the Cold War and the bad old
days of class politics? On the other hand, could radical
democracy be found less either in the future or the present, but
in a return to the founding moment of the so-called "democratic
revolutions"? Is radical democracy then the rediscovery of a
radicalism once inherent to democracy but now lost? In slightly
different words, is radical democracy simply another name for
what Simon Critchley here terms "true" democracy? Or finally,
is democracy always radical? Is radical democracy really a
tautology, in that democracy properly understood and described,
even as it is played out currently in the real world, is
necessarily in some way radical?

All these possibilities crop up at one point or another in
this collection, and often enough several contradictory
positions are argued or assumed in more or less the same breath
by the same author. To his credit, Ernesto Laclau at least
confronts the fact that there are, as he puts it, a "plurality
of ways of radicalisation" (261). In his version of this
plurality, these are: first, the universalization of democratic
ideals leading to "the internal democratisation of liberal
institutions" (259); second, "the constitution of the 'people'"
as a "democratic subjectivity" (259); and third, a "radical
pluralism" as a range of demands from diverse constituencies
insist on being heard within the political arena (261). So
radical democracy can be liberal; it can be populist; and it can
also be what for want of a better word we could call postmodern.
But in themselves neither liberalism nor populism nor indeed
postmodernism are necessarily radical--often quite the reverse
in terms of, say, their relations to capitalism, minorities, or
the prospect of revolutionary change. So, albeit without
wanting to lose the notion that these three possibilities are in
fact radical in some way, Laclau concludes by arguing that what
is truly radical is precisely their mutual incompatibility: "The undecidable character of this interaction [between liberalism, populism, and postmodernism], the impossibility of conceptually mastering the contingent forms in which it crystallizes, is exactly what we call radical democracy" (261; emphasis in original). Yet surely this is simply making a virtue out of incoherence. What is more, the normative problem remains: for Laclau these incompatible democratic impulses necessarily intertwine in any politics; politics is therefore always incoherent; while the social is always political because it is always incomplete, in that it is defined by a constitutive lack. Once again, "radical democracy" comes to be a tautology.

Tønder and Thomassen frame their collection as a kind of face off between (as their subtitle suggests) theories of lack and theories of abundance—or more strictly, "the ontological imaginary of abundance and the ontological imaginary of lack" (2). Essentially this means that the Lacanians confront the Deleuzians in this version of a political philosophy World Cup. But the Lacanian team are almost without exception made up of players affiliated in some way with Laclau; there are no Zizekians, for instance, and Zizek himself gets rather a bad rap, not least from Critchley, who somewhat cattily suggests "One might say, like Slavoj Zizek, pretty much anything you like, as there are so many contradictions in what he has said about politics over the years" (233). And on the other hand, the Deleuzians are stymied by the fact that the chosen field of play is radical democracy, a concept so close to the heart of Laclau (and perhaps even more so, his collaborator Chantal Mouffe) yet so alien to Deleuze. Paul Patton, for instance, purports to get around this significant obstacle only by means of a series of non sequiturs that rely mostly on what Deleuze did not say about radical (or indeed any other form of)
democracy. Hence Patton's contribution is studded with rhetorical questions such as "does this neglect of political reason in Deleuze's thought justify the charge that he provides an aesthetics or ethics but no properly a theory of politics?" (55). Or, in discussing Deleuze and Guattari's critique of Rorty in *What is Philosophy?*, Patton's argument is based, it seems, on the assumption that Deleuze may have chatted to his friends from time to time: "He is clearly opposed to the idea that the exchange of opinions is a means to create concepts, but not necessarily opposed to the pleasures of conversation as such. Moreover, nothing follows [. . .] about the exchange of opinions or the need for consensus in the political sphere" (63). Nothing follows; how true.

So we have a rather forced opposition between lack and abundance framed as a debate on the common terrain of radical democracy. Many contributors are keen to problematize the distinction between the two philosophies allegedly in contention: Tønder and Thomassen themselves admit that "the distinction between abundance and lack may itself be contestable" (7); while Nathan Widder convincingly argues that the point is more that a Deleuzian politics has little interest in the failures or otherwise "of any identity or identification" and so in the pseudo-politics of hegemony (45). But on the whole the issue of radical democracy, and the desirability of either radicalism or democracy, remains unaddressed. If, after all, "antagonism is and remains constitutive" in liberal democracy, as Yannis Stavrakakis argues (189), then surely celebrating this fact would be better described as conservatism? Moreover, though there are many nods towards internationalism, few contributors think beyond the notion of a territorially-defined *demos* upon which democracy traditionally rests, and almost without exception all see the state as an immutable
feature of political and social organization. For all the excitable proclamations of hope in a radical future, the prevailing sentiment is that summarized by Critchley: "for good or for ill, let us say for ill, we are stuck with the state, just as we are stuck with capitalism" (226). In this context radicalism seems to be mostly a matter of trying to get people to be a little nicer to each other, and democracy to depend (in line with some of New Labour's flirtations) on faith groups and the like: "local meetings, internet campaigns, church organization, film portrayals, celebrity testimonials" and so on in William Connolly's words (253); the revivalist atmosphere of a "Rev. Battle" whipping his flock into "a guttural 'love jam' incantation with Corinthians: 'LOVE . . . LOVE . . . LOVE'" in Romand Coles's account (81-82). Perhaps even worse, Jon Simons turns to what is surely now the thoroughly discredited cultural populism of cultural studies and its praise for "consumer agency" (159).

Still, there are some bright spots here and there. Despite the many knee-jerk dismissals of Negri's concept of the multitude (and disparaging Negri and Hardt is clearly as fashionable now as adulating them was some five years or so ago), in fact Critchley's version of the political subject as a "formless mass" is more multitudinous than he would like to admit, however much he wants to relegate such subjectivity to an "empty space" (231); for to say that "the people are missing" (as Deleuze has it) is not to say that they are some kind of non-entity. And fashioning a more expansive conceptualization of subjectivity and agency is also Jane Bennett's project: drawing on Bruno Latour she offers an "enchanted materialism" that posits "multiple sites of agency" in the human and non-human alike (136); it would certainly be good to cultivate the "slight surprise of action" that she takes from Latour rather
than the reiterated certainties of hegemony theory otherwise offered by Radical Democracy.

Darrow Schecter, by contrast, has so little time for either hegemony or hegemony theory that he hardly stops to define what he means by the term that appears in his title, Beyond Hegemony. He suggests, however, that hegemony is a "fabricated consensus" (3). It is society's purported reconciliation either (in its liberal variant) by "transforming the horizontal contract between private trading partners in economic exchange into a vertical contract between citizens and the state" (61) or (in its post-liberal, socialist or social democratic variants) on the basis of legitimacy's trumping legality by positing particular subjects as the bearers of the general will. But in the end, he argues, these two variants are much the same: the problem with those who criticize liberalism, be they partisans of state socialism or civil society democratization, is that they neither go far enough beyond liberalism, nor do they really understand it in the first place. They merely substitute an overt legitimating subject (the proletariat or new social movements, say) for the covert (white, male, property-owning) subject that anchors the traditional liberal ideal. So encore un effort, Schecter tells us, if we are really to leave behind liberalism or its hegemonic compromises. Yet abandoning liberalism means also returning to its first impulses, before it became corrupted by its hegemonic pretensions.

For Schecter wants to rescue liberalism from its own disrepute. Rather than remaining content with the familiar observation that liberal universalism is built on particular premises, he argues for a return to the Kantian priority of legality over legitimacy. And so rather than tempering abstract legality with popular demands for legitimacy (this being, as he sees it, the long history of Western democracies passing through
universal suffrage and the welfare state), he seeks instead to establish a legitimate legality, which would retain the virtues of universality and objectivity, without being in hock to the subjective needs of even an ever wider cast of particularities. The position he stakes out is, then, what he terms a "critical," "radical," or even "materialist" idealism (125, 120) that also, inter alia, promises to reconcile humanity with both outer nature, or the system of needs, and inner nature, or the system of the passions. This reconciliation will be instantiated by means of consumer councils and workers' cooperatives, which will further ensure that "knowing becomes aesthetic and pleasurable rather than instrumental and strategic" (142) and so leave instrumental reason behind as an odd relic of a by then vanquished age of hegemony.

Schecter's critique of purported post-liberalism, as simply a warmed-over liberalism that conserves the worst rather than the best of what it claims to supercede, is a useful antidote to theories of radical democracy. His analysis of liberalism's paradoxes, while not always novel, is also sharp and to the point. However, he might have considered more the possibility that we are already living in a posthegemonic age. Bush, Blair, and Co. hardly stir themselves much to fabricate consensus these days--indeed, Blair's main argument for the war in Iraq is now that precisely the unpopularity of his policies is a guarantee that he is not merely bowing to the court of legitimate public opinion. Moreover, is not Schecter's dream of a "constant exchange of information between producers [. . .] and consumers" (138) not already with us albeit in the form of questionnaires, focus groups, and the information derived from loyalty cards on the one hand, and advertising and the ideologies of business transparency on the other? We are already beyond hegemony, and whatever else radicalism might be, surely it does not involve
rescuing liberalism, whether in its purer, idealist, form or in its corrupt, democratizing, incarnations.