Radical democracy redux
Politics and subjectivity beyond Habermas and Mouffe

av

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Abstract


This thesis investigates two contemporary theories of radical democracy, Jürgen Habermas’s deliberative and Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic democracy. By bringing the two scholars together and constructing a debate between them, their respective strengths and weaknesses are highlighted and the similarities and differences are pointed out. Habermas and Mouffe are seldom dealt with simultaneously as they represent different theoretical traditions, critical theory and post-structuralism respectively. This thesis argues that we can learn from both of them.

The aim of the thesis is to clarify and critically assess Chantal Mouffe’s and Jürgen Habermas’s versions of radical democracy, their disparate visions of democratic politics and subjectivity, in order to clear the ground for a third position that draws inspiration from both of them. The methodological inspiration comes from the deconstructive approach to interpretation, and thus the study aspires to a ‘just reading’ while being conscious of the elements of violence inherent to any instances of reading.

The main bulk of the thesis is dedicated to an analysis of the two authors’ theories of democracy and subjectivity, which leads on to the third position situated beyond the two. From Habermas the stress on political communication and intersubjectivity is taken, while both these concepts are extensively reformulated. The elements rejected from his position are the orientation to consensus and the strong requirements of coherence and transparency of the subject. From Mouffe the accent on the agonistic spirit of democracy is taken, while the ontological status of antagonism is set aside. Her conception of split subjectivity is included, but supplemented with a more explicit theorization of the unity of the subject in the element of intersubjective meetings. The third position on radical democracy embraces the fundamental status of undecidability, which calls for an ethos of questioning.

Keywords: radical democracy, Jürgen Habermas, Chantal Mouffe, deliberative, agonistic, consensus, conflict, antagonism, agonism, subjectivity

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