An Interview with Chantal Mouffe, College International de Philosophie, Paris, France

Martin Bosman
University of Kentucky

Leila Barre
University of Kentucky

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.10

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Philosophy Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.03.10
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol3/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com


Slattery, B. 1983. Ancestral Lands, Alien Laws: Judicial Perspectives on Aboriginal Title. (Saskatchewan, SK: Native Law Centre, Univ. of Saskatchewan).

Endnotes
1 Reprinted with permission from Return to Balhats, prepared by the Cheit-Lit'en Nation, 1992 (British Columbia, Canada).
2 The Indian Act and other related issues are discussed in the Afterward to this essay
3 This statement pertains to the legal status given by the Canadian government to aboriginal people, a topic discussed in the Afterword.
4 Paper reprinted with permission from Native Issues Monthly, 1(3) 1993.
5 The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (DINA) was established by the Canadian Government to administer the federal Indian Act.
7 Since the mid 1980s trial of several Brothers at Newfoundland's Mt. Cashel Orphanage literally thousands of cases of physical and sexual abuse have come to light.
8 It must be remembered that, even in the flurry of policy proclamations, White Papers and Royal Commissions, the general perspective of the Canadian legal and political establishment may not have changed much. For example, in his 1991 ruling on the Gitskan Wet'suwet'en land claim case, B.C. Supreme Court Justice Alan McEachern not only denied the petition for aboriginal title; he also added a judicial addendum in which he criticised the native petitioners for not having fully assimilated themselves into mainstream Canadian society.
9 Native Issues Monthly, 1(3) 1992, p.53.
and, also that would make room for a series of new democratic struggle which had not so far been incorporated into the socialist project. Obviously there was a relation between the theoretical and the political aspects because we considered that in order to make room for feminism and other new movements it was necessary to challenge the essentialism of Marxist theory. We thought that it was not only a question of adding feminist demands or demands around sexuality and race to the list of already existing demands, but that in fact there was a need to reformulate the theory in order to make room for those demands.

So, it is in that context that we began to work on Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, and we ended up in fact advocating the need to reformulate the socialist project in terms of “radical and plural democracy”. So, in a sense, this work can be seen as post-Marxist. We insisted that it was post in the sense that it was going further than Marxism. But it was post-Marxist also, insisting on the fact that it was not anti-Marxist. It was an attempt to take account of what was important in the critique of Marxism. For instance, and this is something which I think is really misunderstood by our critics, we said that concerning the question of the critique of class and the critique of capitalist relations, there was still very important aspects in Marxism which needed to be taken into account. It was not that we ever wanted to get rid of the critique of class and replace that by the new movements. But we saw a need to articulate the struggle around class with the struggle around issues of gender, race, sexual orientation and the environment. So, it is not something which attempts to abandon the struggle around class at all.

But we also in fact came to the conclusion that a project of socialism, as it was formulated, did not leave enough space for other democratic struggles. And that is why we insisted on the need to reformulate that struggle around radical and plural democracy in which the socialist goals would become part of that struggle—an important part but not the only one. We asserted the need to articulate all the struggles against relations of subordination in order to create a chain of equivalence among all the struggles. So, in a sense, this was an attempt to reformulate the identity of the Left both in terms of the kind of theory which was important, and here, I think post-structuralism was certainly the most important element in our critique, and from the point of view of politics, where the main influence on us was the new movements—feminism, the environment, and the struggle around other relations of subordination. So, that was how we came to Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. It was in order to answer those questions that we put forward the project of radical and plural democracy.

**Disclosure:** Can you specify what the project of “radical and plural democracy” is all about?

**Mouffe:** One thing I want to insist on is that radical and plural democracy, as we presented it, did not require a Revolution with a capital R or a break with the principles of modern democracy, because we consider that if one takes the principles of modern democracy to be equality and liberty for all, there is no need to find more radical principles to organize society. We felt that the problem with our societies was not the professed ideals, but that those ideals were not put into practice in those societies. As a result, the Left tended to see those ideals as shams and say ‘these societies claim that they are equal but in fact they are not equal societies. So let’s get rid of our societies and build something completely different’. That of course was what led to the idea of revolutions and the need to build something completely different from scratch. But we felt that it was much more important to try to transform society on the basis of its principles instead of trying to build from scratch, because this was what really was shown to be disastrous in the case of the Soviet Union.

So, the project of radical and plural democracy must be understood as a radicalization of the principles of liberal democracy, not as something which requires a break with liberal democracy. Of course, here I am referring to liberal democracy as a political system. I don’t believe that liberal democracy, understood in the way in which I use it, requires the component of economic liberalism. I think that one must distinguish in what we call liberalism between 1) political liberalism, which is the aspect of liberalism which I will re-ideate: the idea of pluralism, the idea of individual freedoms, the distinction between the public and the private, the rule of law, which are very important contributions of liberalism to modern democracy, and 2) the aspect of economic liberalism, which has to do with the economic system. And there is no necessary relation between the two. Of course, many Right-wing liberals insist that you cannot have modern democracy or pluralism without capitalism but that is something that I question because I think that there is no necessary relation.

Our aim was to show that within the context of liberal pluralism and democracy, understood as a regime (and here I insist that with “a regime” I refer not just to a mode of government or set of institutions, but to a symbolic ordering of social relation, a way in which the political community as a whole is envisaged, expressing by that a series of normative views which espouse the principles of liberty and equality), we could in fact develop an immanent critique which, instead of rejecting the society on the basis of the fact that it did not put into practice the idea (which is in general the line followed by the Left), tries to force those societies to implement those ideas. That is what I understand by “immanent critique”. Or one could also say that it is a question of using the symbolic resources of modern democracy in order to develop it, to radicalize it. The definition of radical and plural democracy consists in giving a specific interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality for all because those principles can of course be understood in very different ways. Liberty can be
understood in very different ways, and so too with equality. This is a contested question. In fact, the idea of radical and plural democracy tended to bring more and more democratic subjects into the "we" and also widen the scope of social relations to which the principles of liberty and equality shall apply.

One of the arguments we made in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, is that we can see the evolution of democracy over the last 200 years as an extension of those principles that all men are free and equal, and that is what constitutes the specificity of what is called democratic revolution. But, of course, by "men" they only meant male, white and not even all white males because you had to have some degree of property in order to become free. So, the evolution of democracy seems to be a widening of its scope in the sense that more people were being included into the whole. This is in the sense that first the criteria of property were abandoned and more men were brought in and later women demanded their rights, and then with the Civil Rights movement in America, for instance, the Blacks also became part of that movement for democracy. So, once those rights had been affirmed, they were claimed by more and more groups.

That was one level of development which we can call "horizontal." But there was also a "vertical development" which consisted in new areas of social relations in which the principles of equality were implemented in the sense that, for instance, they did not limit themselves strictly to the idea of rights in the political sphere but also to the idea of equality in economic relations. This is what I consider to be the novelty of the socialist goal. And of course, the specificity of what we call the "Third Wave" of democratic revolutions was that relations which were still considered naturally unequal, as between the sexes and races also came to be contested. So, the principles of equality were pushed into more areas of social relations. It is very much in that context that we presented the project of radical and plural democracy as trying to push even further the area in which equality should become the dominant value and also the multiplicity of subjects that will be taken into account. And that is why we insist also on the idea of a "plural" democracy because it takes many more democratic struggles into account.

So, the relation between our project and a liberal project consists not in rejecting liberalism completely because this had been the big mistake of the Left in general, particularly, of course, the Marxist Left, that is, they believed that liberties were formal liberties, or what they called "bourgeois liberties". And obviously this is something that the experience of the Soviet Union and dictatorships in many parts of the world proved to be wrong. When those liberties do not exist, they come to be valued as very important. So, we felt that those so-called formal liberties were not to be seen as they had been seen by the Left, usually as some kind of cover-up for bourgeois domination. There were aspects in liberalism which had radical potential. And that is why I insisted on the need to distinguish between economic liberalism and political liberalism. The Left had to come to terms with that and reinvocate instead of trying to reject those ideals. [They have] to try to disarticulate the connection that had been made between capitalism and liberal democracy and show that, in fact, one could perfectly struggle against capitalism and at the same time maintain a struggle for pluralist democracy. And that is very much what the project of radical and plural democracy is about. So it should be seen, if we think at the level of the political regime, that radical and plural democracy does not require a break with constitutional democracy. It is understood as one radical way to interpret its [modern democracy's] principles. And of course, we also recognize that there will always be other competing ways of understanding liberty and equality. And that's what the political struggle is about.

For instance, there is a neo-conservative way of understanding which tends to limit the idea of equality and limit the "we" and there is a neo-liberal way which very much insists on the centrality of market relations and capitalism to the very idea of modern plural democracy. And there will always be a contest about that. So, liberal and plural democracy is, and this is a point I want to stress here, not some kind of completely radically different type of society. It is not that, for instance, at some point we will pass a threshold and we will no longer be in a liberal democracy. It is more of way thinking about politics, of understanding political struggle. It is not an end state. And, in fact, it means that there are obviously no guarantees.

disClosure: Now, if this is the case, then the question becomes how the thrust towards "radical democracy" can be keep course, without erring, or being co-opted? What are the dangers you see for the project of "radical and plural democracy"?

Mouffe: Well, there are obviously no guarantees.

diSClosure: No guarantees that it, radical democracy, will be achieved?

Mouffe: The problem is this. The very idea of achievement is something I want to put into question because it [politics] is an unending process.

diSClosure: Collectively and individually?

Mouffe: Yes. It is very important to understand the centrality of pluralism. I think it is a crucial idea in radical and plural democracy. It is what we could call a self-refuting ideal in the sense that if it could ever be achieved it would self-destruct because it would cease to be pluralistic. Imagine a society in which, at some point, we will say that we have achieved radical democracy. Therefore at this moment we have achieved the end.

disClosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy
Mouffe: Right. No more politics, no more possibilities for contestation, no pluralism. So the idea of radical and plural democracy implies that we accept the possibility of contestation, that we accept that conflict is part of the vitality of a modern pluralistic democracy which, of course, means it will always depend on the capacity of the radical democratic forces to maintain their hegemony. And we can never reach a stage in which we are sure that the conservative or neo-liberal interpretations are not going to be able to win over. I think that the idea of hegemony always implies that this hegemony can be put into question. Always. If not in actual struggle for counter-hegemony, at least the possibility of counter-hegemony. The idea of hegemony means there is always what one can call, after Derrida, the “constitutive outside”. There is always an “exterior” to that hegemony and this idea is also linked to a point central to radical democracy. It is the idea that in order to construct a “we” it is necessary to distinguish it from a “them”. There is no “we” without a “them”. There is no consensus which is not based on some form of exclusion. So it means there will never be complete absolute consensus. The “them” can always, and will always, try to undermine the hegemony, even if we will arrive at the moment when the radical democratic forces have been able to establish their hegemony, and that is of course what radical democratic politics should try to construct. But we must understand that this is never an end state because it is always something which will be undermined by others because there will always be other interpretations.

And, in a sense, that is the danger. Well, one of the dangers could be to try to establish guarantees because one must accept the possibility of contestation. Take the risks that this implies because the search for guarantees, the search for trying to find a way in which no danger can come, this for me is the big danger because this is a way in which you are going to try to close off the democratic process.

So, I think that instead of trying to find a way to avoid the danger of being put into a counter-hegemony, we should understand that any attempt to fix the institutions at a given moment is what should be avoided because that is what will in fact be the end of a radical democratic form of politics. This is a very important point. That also, by the way, distinguishes our project of radical and plural democracy from other understandings of radical democracy. For instance, I am referring to the understanding which is put forward by Habermas and people around him, because they also speak of radical democracy. But theirs is the aim of creating a consensus without exclusion, a situation of undistorted communication. Even if Habermas recently recognized this or some kind of regulative idea that we will never reach. But he [Habermas] thinks we will not reach it because there will always be some empirical impediment to reaching it. What he does not understand is that the very ideal of a society in which there will be an absolute rational consensus is not an ideal of a pluralistic democracy. So, in a sense, those forms of radical democracy aim, even if they recognize that they will never achieve it, for a society in which there will be perfect harmony. And that is what we put into question.

disClosure: Hannah Arendt has been a very influential theorist and social critic on the condition of the “public sphere”. Can you speak about the relationship or influence of her work on your ideas about “radical and plural democracy”? And who are the other major theorists who have influenced your ideas on democracy?

Mouffe: The question concerning Arendt and the “public sphere” depend upon the interpretations one gives. [In fact] one of the dominant interpretations of Arendt is the one which has been given by Habermas. And I definitely believe therefore that the critique will work in this case because there is no public sphere which is completely free of relations of power and domination. I think that is an argument that we must abandon.

The public sphere is always created by the exclusion from that public sphere of things which we do not want to bring to bear on the public sphere. That is important. It seems that many of the ways in which Arendt is understood are conducive to an understanding of radical democracy which is different from the one that we propose precisely because of the fact that it does not acknowledge sufficiently the importance of conflict and antagonism. For instance, I think that in Arendt there is much influence given to the idea of plurality. She is one of the political philosophers who insisted on that. But I do not find that idea of plurality adequate because it is a plurality without antagonism.

I think she not aware enough of the fact that pluralism necessarily implies the possibility of conflict and antagonism. It is too much an idea of some kind of happy pluralism in which people have different aims. But she does not acknowledge the conflict between those aims enough. And, by the way, I would say the same about many contemporary liberals like John Rawls, who insist very much on what they call the “fact of pluralism” and the need for its acknowledgment. But I think that the dimension of conflict, what we could call the tragic dimension of pluralism of value, is something which is not acknowledged by liberals. This is the problem with Arendt’s understanding.

disClosure: We want now to shift your ideas to “other” contexts (post-colonial ones, if you will), and ask about some of the concrete possibilities and applications of your project for a “non-Western” world. In a theoretical project such as yours, where notions of difference and specificity are paramount, how
important is it to consider differences between “Western” and “non-Western” contexts? Do you see distinction, where they exist, as fundamental to the process of building a “radical and plural democracy”?

Mouffe: Well, one thing I will start by saying is that in order to radicalize the principles of modern democracy, you must have the basis of democratic institutions. You cannot radicalize something that does not already exist. In that sense, I do not think that the idea of revolution has become completely obsolete because I think that in countries where there are no democratic systems, where you have either totalitarian and authoritarian systems, the very first step is to establish democracy. And that of course might have to take a violent form or the form of revolution. That is not necessarily so, but one must not exclude that possibility. So the idea of radical democracy does not imply that the idea of revolution must be definitely abandoned. What I am saying is that where the institutions of pluralism and democracy already exist, there is no need to have a revolution in order to begin the process. What must be done is to try to radicalize those principles. But where those institutions do not exist, obviously, there is a need first to establish those institutions. And that obviously might be the case for many or a certain number of non-Western countries.

Another point I want to make concerning that, which may lead to many other questions about radical and plural democracy, is that it is a way to think about politics and the Left project from a non-vanguardist perspective. In that way it is of course very critical of the Leninist conception in which there were some people who knew what people were supposed to do and were able to tell them to do so. This [radical democracy] is something which starts much more from the grassroots in the sense that it must in each place start from the movement that already exists and try to articulate those movements instead of trying to impose already worked out institutions or ideas on the movement or society. And that is why I think, for instance, there are a series of questions which a radical democratic theory should in fact refuse to answer because it will imply that we know best about how society should be organized. I think that these issues should be Left to the different movements to find the ways in which they want to organize society.

We wanted to present a way to think about politics but also leave lots of space for people to organize in the different ways in which they want to do it. And that is why the project of radical and plural democracy is also very historically specific. It is going to take different forms in the United States, South Africa, Britain, and even in France and Italy because in some places unions are going to play more important roles because of the tradition, or in other places the gay movement is going to play a more important role. There must not be one single answer to apply to all societies.

disClosure: [radical democracy] is something which starts much more...
Mouffe: Yes, but you asked what were the reasons that it backfired. Usually it is because the leaders realize that the results of the ballot box were not going to be the ones they wanted. So, they were ready to have elections only as long as those elections were going to produce the results that they wanted. This, of course, is something which is going to discredit the democratic process with the people who voted and then were denied the results of their elections. And I am particularly worried about the present situation with respect to the Arab world, for instance, because I think we are living at a moment when the very idea of democracy has become discredited.

I think that the Gulf War was an extremely negative moment because the idea of democracy and rights were undermined. That war took place in the name and in defense of human rights and, of course, the reaction against that is a discrediting of those ideas because they are now perceived as mere ideology on the basis of which powerful countries impose their own interests, particularly when people see that they don't do the same when it is questioned in [the case of] Israel expelling Palestinians. So it has become very much a cover. But what I am saying here is that liberalism is a very important idea which must be appropriated by the Left and fought for. I am also recognizing that those ideas are very often used as a cover for the simple pursuit of their [Western] interests. But that should not mask the fact that nevertheless there is also radical potential there. And that is what is the whole question of hegemonic struggle is about you see.

I don't think one should leave the idea of democracy and rights to the Right-wing. That has been, for too long, the tendency of the Left. That is, to say that democracy and liberalism are only Right-wing ideas. This is dangerous because these are very important ideas that need to be re-articulated, appropriated by the Left, not Left to the Right because of their consequences in the Arab world, which I know a little about because I have been following the situation in Algeria. For a series of reasons, such as the Gulf War, the coup d'etat in Algeria, people don't believe in democracy anymore because this is seen as a way, a discourse, which the Western world is using but does not at all want to put into practice.

disClosure: Would there be some long or short-term strategies that “radical” democracy can provide so that people would not see democracy as something that is discredited but rather as something that can be strengthened and reinforced? What are some of the elements to make it work?

Mouffe: We thought that there were no guarantees. It is a question of how able the democratic forces are to implement a hegemony. Obviously this is difficult enough in our societies in which those ideas are more or less accepted by everybody. And, of course, it is even more difficult in societies in which, as you were saying, have been told that this was something that was imported and was therefore not part of their tradition, which, by the way, I think was wrong, because the idea of democracy is something that can be found in many different cultures. But, of course, it takes different forms and that is why I think it is very important not to believe that the very specific form that it takes in the West is necessarily the only one. Because if you don't find it you say, “well those countries don't have a tradition of democracy therefore the solution for them is to import the Western conception,”. That is the big danger because it is going to create lots of problems.

First, I think Western traditions will probably not be suited to the conditions in those societies. Second, they might very easily be seen as imports and as imperialistic. So, it is going to create a reaction which is, by the way, what happened in Iran. It was a reaction to the Shah's attempt to import Western democracy. This is in fact something which tends to create a reaction against it, leading to the complete rejection of the very idea of democracy. What can you do if you live in Iran and are committed to the idea of radical democracy? I think the answer would be to try to highlight democratic elements in Islamic culture and try to articulate them and put them to the fore, to start from their tradition and try to develop and radicalize the democratic elements of that tradition. That is something I often discuss with people who know the Moslem world. There are many different interpretations of Islam and there are some interpretations which are really democratic interpretations. So what is important is to try, instead of coming with imported ideas about the Western understanding of democracy, to start from their tradition and build from there. I think that is what is needed and what a radical democratic understanding of politics implies! You start from your tradition and develop from there and you don't try to import ideas because this is completely opposite to a democratic understanding [of politics].

disClosure: How can one actually take local tribalism, which may be another form of the democratic tradition, or ethnic diversities and pluralities, that one finds in many parts of Africa, Latin America and ex-Yugoslavia and turn those traditions into starting points for “radical and plural democracy”? To follow your logic, should they be interrogated for democratic elements and on that basis build? Can you please clarify this issue?

Mouffe: Yes, yes... One thing that probably relates to that is that a radical democratic understanding of politics requires not only that we start from the tradition but also, for instance, it needs to go through and not against the existing forms of community. For instance, I think that nationalism is something that should not be considered archaic or something to be overturned. It is starting from those identities and, of course, trying to link those with democracy. That is the important point: to try to see how one can articulate...
those strong identities, where they exist, instead of negating them and believing them to be something negative—a resurgence of the past, archaic, or something that must be overcome. No, [there is a need] to work through nationalism and not negate it because, I think, those are forms of identity which are important for people and which should not necessarily be an impediment to democracy. I don’t think that a strong sense of belonging to an ethnic group or nationality is something that is contradictory to a commitment to radical democracy.

Of course, the question is how that is articulated and how it is worked through democratically and in that sense you can see a very interesting difference between what is happening in ex-Yugoslavia, in the case of Slovenia and Croatia. Croatia is using its [nationalism] in a profoundly authoritarian way. There is no freedom of the press, there is control and the aspect of tradition that is being emphasized is more the ustachi and there is really no critique of that. It is a Right-wing articulation of nationalism.

In Slovenia, the case is completely different. In Slovenia, the people have a more Left-wing government and, for instance, in Slovenia they have very much tried to articulate Slovenian identity in terms of democratic forms. So, this is an interesting case because it shows you that in both cases they have insisted on their national identity but they have constructed it in different ways. And, I think, the whole question of radical democracy is to link those identities with the democratic institutions and forms, not to negate those identities but to articulate them with democratic issues.

disClosure: Do you see “nodal points” as processes or tempo-spatial positions?

Mouffe: The issue of nodal points is relevant to what we are discussing here. Let me first define the idea of nodal points. The idea is something which is borrowed from Lacanian psycho-analysis and it is, of course, linked to our understanding of the subject as not being something which is an essence already, existing independently from its inscription into social relations as it is, for instance, in much socialist theory or in liberalism.

The subject is constructed in a multiplicity of subject positions. That, also, is a point which makes our idea different from any extreme forms of postmodernism, because we believe that [subjectivities] are always temporary forms of fixation. The subject is not that endless, constantly changing thing. There are forms of identification which, at a given moment, are temporarily fixed and they are fixed through nodal points: temporary articulations that fix the meaning either of subjectivity or politics, because nodal points are not only refer to the subject. Let us say, in a given culture the “commonsense” is articulated in certain hegemonic forms.

Nodal points must also be understood in terms of articulation and hegemony because the creation of hegemony is the fixation of a certain number of nodal points. For instance, in the case of the principles of liberty and equality, principles can be given many different interpretations. But at a given moment, they are more or less what is the most accepted interpretation, the one that we could call, with Gramsci, the “commonsense”. And those are also the result of nodal points. For instance, a nodal point will articulate a certain idea of equality with a certain idea of liberty. For instance, if we had a nodal point that is articulated by a neo-liberal interpretation it would link the meaning of democracy with the existence of economic liberalism. And as I said, there is no necessary relation. But at a given moment, there are always constructed relations which are the result of political interpretations and those are nodal points.

So, nodal points are temporary fixations which are the result of political practice. And of course, the hegemonic struggle consists in disarticulating the nodal points in order to reconstruct them in a different way. For instance, radical democratic types of politics are going to try to disarticulate the meaning of equality and liberty which has been constructed through a neo-conservative or liberal interpretation in order to re-articulate them in different ways. So, there are always nodal points. They [nodal points] are not really processes in themselves, but the result of processes of hegemony. They are more some kind of temporal-spatial positions. They are the result of partial fixations which are the product of a given hegemony. But of course they are always temporary in the sense that there is always the possibility that they will be disarticulated since they are not totalized because there is always the possibility of further interpretations.

For instance, if one accepts that liberty and equality are things for which there are no “true” interpretations, one cannot imagine, as analytic philosophers believe, that there could be a way, through very sophisticated methods, to find out exactly what equality or liberty means. This is what an anti-essentialist critique puts into question. There is no such a thing as “the true” interpretations of liberty and equality. Liberty and equality are constantly contested concepts and this is something where we can never come to a final discovery of what it is. It does not mean, [however], that a hegemony cannot last for a long time and even come to a point where its meaning becomes so sedimented that it looks absolutely natural. It is only the result of a very strong hegemony. And it does not mean that this [hegemony] cannot be put into question.

That is why there are never any guarantees in politics that things are not going to be challenged. So, that is the idea of nodal points. They are temporary
fixations but always the process of political articulation and therefore never permanent. [There is] always the possibility of putting them into question.

disClosure: Talk, if you will, about your use of “nodal points” as opposed to Lyotard’s “language games” in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.

Mouffe: I think, one of the differences between our conception and that of Lyotard, his idea of language games, for instance, is that he insists on multiplicities and incommensurabilities. But it is seems to me, as something which does not make enough room for temporary fixations. It is as if the seamless web is constantly moving without realizing the results of politics. And, he [Lyotard], in fact sees that as something more democratic, something which is good. But I think that is a misunderstanding of politics which we put into question. But this is an important area where we follow Lyotard, in terms of the critique of essentialism and the idea that there is no one real or essential identity. [However], it does not mean there is no identity because there are always also partial fixations. So this notion is important if one wants to think in terms of politics and hegemony. What is definitely missing in Lyotard is the possibility of hegemony.

disClosure: What about the idea of “historic blocs”?

Mouffe: Yes, of course. The “we” against the “them”. He seems to believe that this is something to be avoided whereas we consider the need to articulate the democratic struggle. This is the main difference [we have] with people like Lyotard. But there are also other postmodernists who insist on the multiplicity of struggles and the importance of those struggles but do not acknowledge the need to create a chain of equivalence. They see that as some kind of danger for democracy.

I, on the other hand, think this is a condition of democracy and certainly of politics because politics is always about the construction of collective identities, of “we” as opposed to “them”. Politics is about the construction of hegemony. The danger, it seems to me, with a position like Lyotard’s is that by not understanding the need to construct a hegemony of the democratic forces, we leave the terrain open for the right to do it. And then, of course, they are going to be able to impose their hegemony and we will not be in a position to fight back because of the insistence on the incommensurability of the democratic struggle and the need for each to follow his/her own movement. This puts us in a situation which is not favorable with respect to the Right because the Right usually understands very well the need to construct a hegemony. So I think it is important to understand this point.

disClosure: Can you speak about how, in environments where Lacanian theories are marginal, would there be other ways of thinking about the politics of “radical and plural democracy”?

Mouffe: We, of course, in our work have been inspired by post-structuralism and by Lacanian psycho-analysis. But the critique of essentialism, which is after all what is important, can also be made from other points of view. And even people who would not be familiar with psycho-analysis, I think, can arrive at similar conclusions. For instance, they might have been inspired by post-Heideggerian hermeneutics. For instance, the work of Gadamer and his idea of “the fusion of horizons” could also lead to something along the same lines as what I am proposing here. Or, obviously, work inspired by the late Wittgenstein can also lead to the critique of essentialism. So, the critique of essentialism is not only found in post-structuralism. In fact, I would argue that this is one of the trends we find in the most important current of contemporary philosophy.

And there are others. I am thinking, for instance, of the work of Bill Connolly who is more influenced by Nietzsche and who has come to rather similar conclusions as ours in terms of the idea of the subject. So, there are many different ways, many theoretical points from which one can come to that same understanding. So, one does not necessarily need to come from psycho-analysis in order to have that anti-essentialist understanding of the subject. There are many other theoretical spectrums from which one can make it.

disClosure: Are there any other theorists who have had a strong influence on your thinking? You have already mentioned some, like Gadamer, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Are there any others who are part of your “theoretical horizon of understanding”, so to speak? Who predominates?

Mouffe: Yes, I would say that Wittgenstein and Gadamer are important. But, obviously, the main influences in our work were Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Saussure, and Barthes, to speak from the point of view of the post-structuralists spectrum. Yes, those are the most important ones because those are the ones who defined the specificity of the project. And of course, there is Gramsci. He was extremely important even if we ended up criticizing him. But there are still many important aspects of Gramsci I will reindicate.

So, Gramsci from the point of view of Marxism, and Althusser to a certain extent. I was very much influenced by Althusser. In fact, chronologically, I was influenced by Althusser, and then by Gramsci and then by post-structuralism and Lacan. And that is what really constituted the theoretical framework of Hegemony and Socialism Strategy. Then, in more recent work, I have been working mainly with Wittgenstein. Also, to a certain extent with certain ideas of Gadamer. I am also interested in the work of Michael Oakshott. But these
disClosure: What about Nicos Poulantzas, who is key to the Althusserian tradition? He also tried to theorize and problematize the "political" in a manner similar to what you are trying to do. Is there any influence here?

Mouffe: No, I don’t think so. There was much discussion with Poulantzas whom I knew quite well. But there was never a direct influence. We were both influenced by Althusser but then I became more interested in Gramsci and Poulantzas was very critical of Gramsci at that time. He interpreted Gramsci in a way I disagreed with. I had lots of polemics with him about that. But influence, no, because I tended to disagree more with him. We were interested in common subjects but giving different emphases. Well, except his very last book, which was in fact much nearer to me and to our [with Laclau] position on hegemony. So, who knows how he might have evolved after that. For instance, Political Classes was a work I had lots of disagreement with, but the very last Poulantzas book, I felt we had a meeting point.

disClosure: Could you perhaps be more specific about the influence of Althusser on your thinking, because there is a strong suggestion in certain critiques of your work that you, in fact, completely reject Althusser. But it seems that on the basis of what you have said so far during this interview, you and Laclau are not interested in rejecting, but in building upon, past traditions. For example, in your discussion of the democratic tradition, did you not say that we should not reject tout court but rather build or reappropriate the most critical radical elements of other traditions? So, could you be more specific about Althusser's relationship to your work?

Mouffe: Althusser was very influential in my evolution, not, I will say, on my current work because when we began to write Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, I had already become very critical of what I felt to be a strong theoreticism in Althusser. And by, that time, I was already much more interested in Gramsci. But Althusser was important because I was his student. The moment I came across Althusser, I was a humanist Marxist working on Lukacs and I changed radically under the influence and became very critical of historicism and Hegel and was, in fact, for several years some kind of orthodox Althusserian, I would say. I began to understand Marxism as a science and it is only when I left France to teach in Colombia that I began to realize that such an understanding of Marxism was an obstacle to political practice because it did not give enough room for questions about the importance of tradition, of the national popular practice which I felt were absolutely important if one wanted to be active politically. That was when I turned to Gramsci because he provided better perspectives on political action than Althusser. Althusser was very much the intellectual who wanted to develop a very sophisticated theory but a theory which did not help me very much when I had to act politically and was in fact cutting me very much from the possibility of understanding the specificity of what was happening in Latin America and in Colombia in particular.

I still believe that it [Althusserianism] was an obstacle to acting politically. On the other side, what does remain of the influence of Althusser is that it is through Althusser that I became interested in Derrida, Lacan and Foucault. And that is something which, probably, if I had remained a humanistic Marxist, I would not have been able to do. I am where I am now because Althusser was very interested in me reading these theorists. So, I think this was a very positive influence. But it was sort of indirect because it was not so much his ideas but the way he opened me to access to other things which as a Marxist I would probably not have read because most Marxists would not have read those theorists. So, what remains of Althusser’s influence is the influence of post-structuralism because it is through Althusser that I got in touch with post-structuralism.

Althusserian ideas such as over-determination are things Althusser borrowed from Lacan. So, I think that what remains of the influence of Althusser is what Althusser borrowed from post-structuralism. And of course, in my work on Gramsci, I was still very Althusserian in many senses because I was trying to maintain the idea of the determination in the last instance by the economy. But I was trying to provide some kind of non-economic understanding of the determination of the last instance by the economic. In fact, that was what, when I began to work on Gramsci, I thought that Gramsci could provide. So, I was still Althusserian in thinking of the determination in the last instance but I thought that Althusser did not really provide the solution and that Gramsci could provide a better solution to that same problem.

Then of course, I came to the conclusion that there was no solution to that problem and that one had to abandon the idea of determination in the last instance by the economy for the very simple reason that it did not really make sense to speak of the economy as if it could exist independently of the ideological or political relations which constituted it. And that is where, of course, we moved to the understanding of different discourses. Once one accepts that there is no economy which could exist without political, legal, and ideological conditions of existence, then the economy can not be seen as
determining in the last instance those things which in fact provide its conditions of existence. So, one has to think in different ways. That is the conclusion we came to in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy but it took some time to work through. And of course, that is also linked to the critique which I ended up making of Gramsci because I, in my previous work on Gramsci before Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, still agreed with Gramsci on the idea that only the working class could provide the articulating principle of the new democratic hegemony. I was trying to bring in the new movements and the importance of feminism and other struggles believing that there was some kind of necessary centrality of the working class. That is something which we abandoned in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.

We came to abandon the idea that it was only the working class that could provide the articulating principle of a hegemony. Of course, it does not mean that in some countries it cannot be the working class. But in other countries it can be some other group and sometimes there is not even an articulating principle. Sometimes there is hegemony without an hegemonic center. For instance, it might in many cases be a situation in which no particular group is dominant. So, that is something I personally see as a break with my work on Gramsci before Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. At that point my work really became post-marxist because once you abandon the centrality of the working class you are obviously post-marxist.

It does not mean I was rejecting everything of marxism. I still feel that there are many important concerns about the struggle around class which are post-marxism's contributions to the formulation of a left perspective. In the same way, feminism insists on the importance of the feminist question. I see very much marxism as part of a wider project but not at all as providing the theory, the master theory. And of course, I feel the same way with respect to feminism. Feminism is one component in a much wider perspective on democratic struggle.

disClosure: Are there any last comments? If there are not, there is one last thing we would like to ask you. One gets the impression from listening and talking to you that your view of radical and plural democracy is related to the Trotskyian notion of a “permanent revolution”. Could you clarify the difference for us?

Mouffe: No, it abandoned the idea of revolution. In societies like the USA or Western Europe, “permanent revolution” does not make sense because it means transforming completely the very basis of society and I do not think we need that. All the goals of radical democracy, and I would say even the socialist goals in terms of the democratization of the economy, can be done perfectly well within the current tradition.

An Interview with Samuel Bowles
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Conducted by Jeff Popke, Todd Lewis and Cædmon Staddon
disClosure Editorial Collective
Lexington, Kentucky
February 27, 1993

This interview was conducted during a visit Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis made to the University of Kentucky to give the lecture “Economic Democracy and Democratic Organizations” as part of the 1993 Spring Social Theory Lecture Series sponsored by the university's interdisciplinary Committee on Social Theory. It is divided into three parts; the first dealing with concepts of the state and uneven geographical development, the second dealing with the recent resurgence of interest in the ideas of “civil society” and the “end of history” and the third with economic and political transition in Eastern Europe.

I. State, Power and Uneven Development

Popke: I think a good way to lead this interview off is to refer to the institutional accommodations that you spoke of in Democracy and Capitalism. In the last chapter you outline three distinct possibilities for the future articulations of political and economic formations: “global-liberalism,” which would entail the worldwide growth of markets and capital mobility so as to erode national sovereignty; “neo-Hobbesianism,” which represents an expansion of hierarchical institutions of authority in the political sphere; and “postliberal democracy,” which combines decentralized control of productive forces with democratic control of the economy. What can you say about contemporary conditions and their dynamics, given these three models?

Bowles: Well, of these obviously the most vibrant power in the world today is global liberalism. The spread of free trade as an ideology and set of social policies is a powerful movement in the world today and it has found support in a lot of historically unprecedented places. It has found strong support among many Third World governments; as exemplified by Mexico’s enthusiastic support of the North American so-called free trade agreement. So I think that global liberalism is the dominant tendency in the world today. It will pose the dominant challenge to the Left, which will have to address the issue of increased mobility of goods and services in the world. This will be a challenge to find ways of continuing to express the hopes and aspirations of working people in an arena in which capital is more than ever willing to use the threat of mobility against populist and democratic movements.