***DRAFT***

**Radical Democracy**

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**Grasping the Root of the Matter**

What is radical democracy? I will begin to explore this question by deploying Marx’s definition of ‘radical’ from his 1844 introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right.* Here Marx writes that to be radical is ‘to grasp the root of the matter’. As such, we can say that ‘radical democracy’ means to grasp or draw out the root meaning or conditions of democracy that have been obscured in its various historical appropriations. Radical democrats, as we will see in this chapter, argue that we can draw out two central, inter-twined and historically constituted root meanings or conditions of democracy: first, the free and equal participation of ‘the people’ (the *dêmos*) in power (*Kratos*); and second, that democracy – including any of its criteria, institutions, and decisions – has no grounds, justifications, or guarantees outside of the people, that is, outside of itself. This second condition of democracy – its self-grounding, self-legitimation, and indeed its self-constitution – leads to, when taken seriously, constant anxiety and self-reflexive questioning: democracy is the only regime with a self-revolutionizing logic. Thus, at its root democracy cannot be specified in any detailed substantive way. Nor does going to the root of democracy mean finding, and returning to, an ‘origin’, such as returning to classical Athens. While the root conditions are historically constituted, and excavated, any historical moment in the practice of democracy will involve fixing and limiting democracy in particular, contingently circumscribed ways. The dangers of nostalgia for Athens*,* for example,would include forgetting the many exclusions upon which Greek democracy was based. Thus, even pinning down the ‘true’ meaning of liberty and equality is impossible. At the same time, democracy’s self-grounding is also the condition of *possibility* for liberty and equality: the absence of external principles is the basis for participant’s positive freedom and equality – each is autonomous from external gods and equally qualified and responsible for governance (Rancière, 2006: 41).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Radical democratic theorists have added ‘radical’ as a supplementary term to ‘democracy’ so as to draw out these root conditions. This supplement would be unnecessary if democracy was understood and practiced according to these root conditions: ‘radical democracy’ would be a tautology. As a supplement, ‘radical’ does not just add to but, as intended by the second meaning, problematizes current understandings and practices of democracy.

The drawing out of these root conditions has been undertaken by a range of radical democrats. This has resulted in an array of interpretations and conceptualizations of what goes under the name of ‘radical democracy’. While some of these conceptualizations stem from the work of Habermas and other deliberative democrats, many now draw upon poststructuralist influenced political theory, including the work of Jacques Rancière (2006), postmodern anarchism (e.g. Simon Critchley, Todd May), contemporary Marxist philosophy (e.g. Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek), autonomist Marxism (e.g. Antonio Negri), Deleuzian theories of abundance (e.g. William Connolly),and post-Marxism (e.g. Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe). These poststructuralist currents share with other radical democrats an interest in radicalizing democracy through drawing out – although in different ways – the two conditions introduced above. However, it is poststructuralist radical democrats who take most seriously the implications of the second condition, that of democracy’s self-grounding.

In this chapter I will focus upon poststructuralist interpretations given that deliberative democracy, the most notable ‘competitor’ to poststructuralist radical democracy, has been discussed earlier in this book. I begin by noting some of the background influences on contemporary radical democracy. I then introduce the poststructuralist conceptualization in general, touching momentarily on Habermas as a point of contrast. I subsequently draw on Laclau and Mouffe so as to flesh out the poststructuralist conception, choosing their work given its widespread influence amongst those identifying with radical democracy.

**From Participatory to Radical Democracy**

The forebears of contemporary radical democracy are largely western enlightenment social and political theorists, most prominently Rousseau. These enlightenment radical democrats argued for an extension ofpopular sovereignty against the limits placed on political participation by other forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, and liberal-capitalist democracy), forms of government that they saw as being sustained by, amongst other things,extensive social, political, and cultural inequality. And here the work of Marx and other critics of liberal capitalism has also been very influential upon radical democratic thinking.

Contemporary radical democratic thought has more recently been influenced by the 1960’s theory and practice of participatory democracy, as well as the New Left and the ‘new social movements’. Participatory democrats, drawing strongly upon Rousseau and Marx, demanded more direct participation in all spheres of society, against the increasing domination of life by state and capital (Macpherson, 1977; Pateman, 1970). The New Left,an intellectual development largely based in the UK and USA, drew on participatory principles to push for the extension of popular sovereignty, but its particular concern was to emphasize pluralism of identity as against the class essentialist and authoritarian tendencies that could be identified within ‘older’ Left traditions (see Aronowitz, 1993 and the journal *New Left Review*). This pluralist recognition of difference expressed the second condition of democracy named above: the self-groundingof democracy that allows it to accommodate multiple ways of being. Participatory democratic and New Left theories found practical representation in what came to be referred to as the ‘new social movements’: the civil rights movement followed by the women’s, peace, sexual rights, indigenous peoples’, and ecology movements. These movements were understood to be ‘new’ and ‘social’ as they did not prioritize economic restructuring as did the ‘older’ workers movements, nor aim to seize state power as revolutionary Marxist theories would expect of class movements; rather, they struggled for the empowerment of marginalized groups through the transformation of ‘everyday life’ (particularly through ‘cultural politics’) as well as the democratic *reform* of state and economic institutions (Melucci, 1980). This ‘new’ democratic politics expressed both conditions of democracy identified above: it involved working for greater liberty and equality without claiming the certainty of absolute moral right or scientific truth. As Mouffe (1989: 34-36) says, the recognition that ‘the impossibility of any ultimate foundation or final legitimation is constitutive of the very advent of the democratic form of society’ can be seen in the new social movements’ claims for particular knowledge and democratic (self-grounded) rights, rather than universal knowledge and the ‘rights of man’.

Such participatory and pluralist democratic theory and practice continues to be developed today, particularly with respect to periphery and emerging nations (see Santos, 2007). However, it has now largely been subsumed within ‘radical democracy’. The emphasis upon the extension of inclusive and plural participation without external grounds has been drawn upon in various ways by all currents of radical democratic theory. For example, deliberative democracy, particularly through the work of Jürgen Habermas (1996), is understood by adherents as radically democratic in that it sees legitimate political rule as being based upon the equal opportunity for all those affected by a particular issue to participate in a pluralist public sphere of inclusive, reciprocal, respectful, and reasoned communication aimed towards the formation of rational public opinion that can scrutinize and guide decision making, thus holding power accountable to ‘the people’. In this model, free and equal participation in public opinion formation, and hence in public sovereignty, is secured through the institution of universal criteria of democratic communication, while these criteria are drawn from the presuppositions of democratically oriented communicative action, and thus deliberative democracy is self-grounded.

Poststructuralist influenced radical democrats have also drawn inspiration from participatory politics, the New Left, and new social movement theory. However, they have brought poststructuralist readings to the root conditions of democracy. In relation to the first condition, they have been particularly interested in how liberty and equality are limited by the politics of inclusion and exclusion, which are seen as often hidden within formally liberal democratic norms, practices, and institutions. In relation to the second condition, poststructuralist radical democrats have,more than any other democratic tradition, taken seriously the implications of democracy’s lack of external legitimating grounds. Given their attention to this self-grounding, I will take a moment to explore how they conceptualize it.

Against any ideal of a fully reconciled or democratic society, such as envisioned by Rousseau and Marx, and also against the idea that universal normative criteria can be reconstructed from out of social practice (as in the Habermasian model), poststructuralist radical democrats conceptualize democracy as being conditioned by undecidability,and indeed by the self*-*consciousness of its own radical contingency (Critchley, 2004: 115; Derrida, 2005: 86-87;Mouffe, 1989: 34).In other words, contingency is not just seen as an empirical fact but as constitutive. Politics, and thus democracy, is made possible by the absence of extra-political grounds or foundations (apart from contingency itself, which is necessary, and as such there is a necessary/contingency dialectical tension running through poststructuralist radical democracy). Ultimate foundations would make politics, and thus democracy, unnecessary.For poststructuralists, radical democracy is not only post-foundational, but must be, as just noted, self-consciously or explicitly so:democracy is that particular type of politics that seeks to come to terms with – that is institutionalize – radical contingency. As Marchart (2007: 157-8)explains, the poststructuralist radical democrat believes that:

democracy is to be defined as a regime that seeks, precisely, to *come to terms* with the ultimate failure of grounding rather than simply repressing or foreclosing it. While all conceivable political regimes, all forms of political order and ordering, are necessarily grounded in the abyss of an absent ground, most of them tend to [ideologically] disavow their abyssal nature . . . . every democracy, if it is worth that name, *will have to be deliberately post-foundational* – a criterion which is not precisely met by everything that goes under the name of ‘democracy’ today . . . . democracy has to accept contingency, that is, the absence of an ultimate foundation for society, as a *necessary* precondition. Otherwise it cannot legitimately be called democracy in a strong sense.

We see this institutionalization of radical contingency spoken of in different ways in poststructuralist conceptualizations of democracy. For Jacques Derrida (2005: 86-94), democracy is always ‘to come’, not in the sense that it will be achieved at some future time and not even in the asymptotic sense that we can get ever closer to it without ever finally arriving at it, but in the sense that there is in fact no ‘it’ to arrive at – ‘it’ is impossible. Thus, in accord with the idea of democracy as self-revolutionizing, beingimpossible means that‘democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name’ (ibid). For Claude Lefort (1986: 305-6), whom Marchart draws upon in the above quote and who has been adopted by poststructuralist thought (if not explicitly poststructuralist himself), the ‘democratic revolution’ involves the ‘beheading of the king’ and thus the ‘dissolution of the landmarks of certainty’, followed by the institutionalization of the ‘empty place of power’. In democracyproper,‘the place of power’ (sovereignty) can never be fully occupied or pre-determined, neither by a metaphysical principle or Being nor by any human beings with essential qualities endowing them with the right to rule (such as a monarch, an aristocracy, or the proletariat).

The institutionalization of radical contingency means recognizing that ‘politics goes all the way down’ (Tønder & Thomassen, 2005b: 4), which means the institutionalization of (political) struggle, ensuring that no social arrangement comes to be seen as final and uncontestable. This contrasts with the Rousseauian and Marxist radical democratic understandings that conflict may be eliminated through the realization of the general will or the communist revolution.It also differs from liberal democratic theory in that it does not try to limit or contain conflict within certain (formal political) spheres. In contrast to liberalism, radical democracy

emphasizes conflict and dissension as themselves constitutive of democracy, as necessary to maintain its openness. On this view, the main danger to democracy would be freezing or institutionalizing a particular arrangement of power. Politics-as-conflict is always necessary to renew politics-as-regime by challenging its limits (Ingram, 2006: 38).

Thus, poststructuralist radical democracyinvolves not only the extension of liberty and equality but the institutionalization of contingency, which means the institutionalization of contestation. In order to further explore this poststructuralist understanding of radical democracy, I will turn to the work of Laclau and Mouffe given their extensive engagement with the question of radical democracy, to the extent that the term has come to be associated with them possibly more than with any other theorist.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Laclau and Mouffe**

Radical democracy first became associated with Laclau and Mouffe through their highly influential work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*(HSS), which in Epstein’s(1996)words, ‘has done more than any other single piece of work to set the terms for discussion of . . . radical democracy’. In HSS Laclau and Mouffe (2001, first published 1985) locate radical democracy as part of a post-Marxist project, a project aimed at the renewal of the left imaginary after the various theoretical and political defeats of the 1970s and early 1980s. Their project here offers a poststructuralist deconstruction and reconceptualization of the emancipatory programme of Marxism and socialism, attempting to resituate left politics in terms of radical contingency. I will here explore how they further develop, particularly through the concept of hegemony, the two conditionsof radical democracy introduced above: first, the extension of liberty and equality, and second, democracy as self-grounded, or in the poststructuralist terms, as self-consciousness of its own radical contingency.

Following on from the first condition of democracy noted above, Laclau and Mouffe see radical democracy as involving an on**-**going commitment to the expansion of ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ into ever wider areas of social life so as to give ‘political voice to the underdog’ (Laclau, 2004: 295; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2000). This means the extension of liberty and equality without formal limits, unlike those placed on democracy by liberalism (Mouffe, 1996: 22). However, Laclau and Mouffe see an ‘unresolvable tension’ between liberty (linked to the extension of differences and recognition of distinction) and equality (linked to the extension of equivalences and the elimination of distinctions), which means there is an ontological limit to radical democracy: neither liberty nor equality can be fully achieved without the elimination of the other (Laclau, 2001: 4). Moreover, defining what ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ are is finally impossible. While ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ carry embedded (‘sedimented’) significations, any specific claim to their full meaning, given radical contingency, is always contingent, the result of a political logic (form and practice) that Laclau and Mouffe refer to as ‘hegemony’ (radicalizing Antonio Gramsci), where a particular understanding comes be invested with, or comes to represent, a universal meaning. In the process, ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ become ‘tendentially empty signifiers’: they are partially (or their tendency is towards being) emptied of fixed signification, which allows particular meanings to occupy them (Laclau, 2001). These particular meanings become accepted as universal through liberty or equality representing the positive commonality of a set of otherwise differentiated elements, as well as the common negative relation to a named ‘enemy’ – what they are ‘not’. As a result, the representation articulates the set of elements into a seemingly coherent and total ‘discourse’ of liberty or equality,ostensibly encompassing all relevant elements while necessarily excluding a potentially infinite – given radical contingency – array of possibilities that remain in ‘excess’ but also hidden – given the naming of an explicit outside (the ‘enemy’) that seemingly represents all exclusion.

Liberty, for example, takes on a liberal (as against, say, social democratic, deliberative, or libertarian) meaning when it becomes the representative of a particular articulation of elements – ‘free markets’, ‘individual rights’, ‘private property’, ‘privacy’, ‘religious tolerance’, ‘citizenship rights’, and so on – each of which shares, or comes to share, a common relation to a liberal understanding of ‘liberty’. As this ‘liberal’ articulation comes to stand for the universal meaning of libertyit occludes other possibilities, for instance a deliberative understanding based on the articulation of such elements as ‘intersubjectivity’, ‘reciprocity’, ‘reflexivity’, and so on, along with some of the liberal elements named above, re-signifying these in the process. Liberty is partially emptied in order to represent liberal democracy’s or deliberative democracy’s (or any other) specific meanings. This emptying is only partial because ‘liberty’ carriessedimented meanings from previous articulations, as do all elements in the discourse, which make some articulations more likely than others. For example, we might expect liberty, with its embedded association with human autonomy, as more likely to represent the articulation of, in a liberal discourse, ‘private property’ and ‘individual rights’, as against ‘surveillance’. However, one can imagine a particular liberal discourse where liberty might represent the articulation of, and thus modification of, all three, for example, the ‘right’ to freely carry out surveillance within one’s own ‘property’ even if the latter is used for politically-oriented communication (here we can think of the case of digital properties like Facebook). Similarly, ‘equality’ may be understood in a range of ways through the articulation of a variety of elements, but will resist articulation with any form of explicitly exclusionary or exploitative order. In fact, ‘exclusion’ and ‘exploitation’ are likely candidates to represent ‘enemies’ of equality, as ‘totalitarianism’ would be for liberty. Hence, different articulations of elements provide for different meanings, and thus practices, of liberty and equality.

As empty signifiers, liberty and equality are historically and politically articulated rather than rationally founded or metaphysically given. The meanings of the terms liberty and equality, like democracy, derive from, and are passed down and developed by, hegemonic struggles over democracy. Democracy – liberty and equality – must not, to be consistent with itself, be limited to any particular conceptualization: ignoring the particularity of any understanding or practice of liberty and equality, no matter how liberating and equalizing such may seem, would mean limiting possibilities for their extension. And this in turn means that radical democracy must not only promote the expansion of liberty and equality, but encourage the ongoing contestation of their specific conceptualizations.

In other words, a radical democracy must make explicit (‘keep in play’) the hegemonic relation underlying its own understanding and practices of liberty and equality (Laclau, 2001: 5, 10). This call for hegemony to be made explicit is another way of expressing the second understanding of *radical* democracy introduced above: the type of politics that institutionalizes its own radical contingency and thus makes explicit its own ultimate failure and its exclusionary politics, which means the institutionalization of self-critique and contestation. This is in contrast to failure being ideologically covered over, where ideology for Laclau and Mouffe involves the non-recognition of radical contingency,which takes place when one particular social arrangement comes to be naturalized, comes to be taken to be coterminous with the whole (Laclau, 1990: 92). Ideology is thus the name Laclau and Mouffe give to the opposite of radical democracy in its pure – impossible – form.

Thelogic of hegemony, for Laclau and Mouffe (2001), does not just apply to liberty and equality but can be found to operate in all politics. Moreover, given that the social is understood as finally contingent and hence political, hegemony is understood to be a principle structuring of all aspects of social life.This means that any (seemingly) stable, fully consensual social system or identity involves the occlusion of exclusions (excess) and associated antagonisms. For maximizing liberty and equality such exclusion and antagonism, and hence radical contingency, must be brought to light, which once again involves making explicit the hegemonic logicat work. To make hegemony explicit requires the contestation of the particular articulations of all seemingly fully explanatory discourses, contestation that can develop from out of counter-hegemonic discourses formed from the articulation of excessive particularities.

We have already seen that poststructuralists generally understand radical democracy to involve the institutionalization of radical contingency: the institutionalization of perennial contestation of any fixations of meanings and practices. So what is Laclau and Mouffe’s contribution here? It is their conceptualization of hegemony, which offers a means by which to theorize the politics associated with radical contingency. As such, we can understand the institutionalization of radical contingency in terms of the institutionalization of hegemonic contestations: keeping contestation going between different hegemonizing forces so that no one articulation comes to be finally accepted as total, to be (ideologically) seen as fully incarnating universality (Laclau, 2001). Thus, the logic of hegemony helps extend Lefort’s understanding of democracy as the institutionalizing of ‘the empty place’ of power.

Four important aspects of this institutionalization of hegemonic contestation need to be highlighted here. First, democracy is understood as involving the management of power, rather than its (impossible) elimination, bringing power into the open and mediating subsequent conflict. Second, the radical democratic motivation in keeping the hegemonic game in play, rather than ideologically masking it, is to allow for the possibility of excluded voices being heard through new discursive articulations. Third, representation is central to radical democracy (as well as all human being): ‘relations of representation are constitutive of democracy . . . . [t]hat is why *representative* democracy is not a second best, as Rousseau thought, but is *the only possible democracy*’ (Laclau, 2001: 13). Representation here is not direct or transparent, but rather mediated and transformative: in the hegemonic process all articulated identities are transformed to a degree. Fourth, hegemony, asLaclau and Mouffe have strongly emphasized throughout their work, involves passion: there is a subjective identification with, and investment in, the representative identity and against the ‘enemy’ (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005b).

But what is needed practically for realizing the institutionalization of hegemonic contestations? It is at this point that Mouffe’s and Laclau’s focus diverges somewhat, although remaining complementary. Mouffe (2000, 2005b) argues that the institutionalization of hegemonic contestation requires the institutionalization of ‘agonistic’ spaces that enable the transformation of ‘enemies’ bent on destroying each other into ‘adversaries’ that ‘recognize the legitimacy of their opponents’ to engage in political struggle (Mouffe, 2005b: 20).[[3]](#endnote-3) Agonistic conflict is understood to be guided by a minimum agreement amongst adversaries upon the need for the ‘ethico-political principles’ of liberty and equality as well as for some form of ‘democratic procedures’ to regulate conflict, although the interpretation and content of these principles and procedures (as radically contingent and tendentially empty) always remains open to contestation and decided upon through agonistic struggle (Mouffe, 2005a, 2005b: 14-21). Mouffe (2005b: 22-23) refers to parliament as one example of such an agonistic institution. In various places she has also suggested the importance of the mass media, as well as critical media and ‘artistico-activist’ practices for fostering agonistic spaces, although her thinking here remains undeveloped (Mouffe, 2007, Mouffe et al. 2006).

However, to institutionalize such spaces of democratic contestation in the first place requires a political (i.e. hegemonic) project: the articulation of the greatest possible number of diverse democratic struggles, with otherwise differentiated demands, into a ‘we’ ‘radical democrats’ that can then effectively challenge existing liberal and other discourses (Mouffe, 1989: 41-42; 1993: 77). HereMouffe, as well as Laclau, develops on earlier thinking on the democratic politics of the ‘new social movements,’ seeing such as enabling the articulation of a range of groups around calls for justice and democratization (see Fenton, 2011).And it is also here that Laclau’s (2005) recent work on populism is useful, helping to extend his and Mouffe’s understanding of what is involved in the extension of radical democracy, as well as in any attempt to win hegemony.

An example of such a hegemonic project aimed at democratization can be seen in ‘alter-globalization’ politics where a wide range of groups – farmers and other local producers, radical environmentalists, indigenous peoples, socialists, anarchists, and so on – with a wide variety of (sometimes conflicting) demands become articulated through their common negative relation to capitalist globalization and positive association with calls for ‘democracy’ and ‘justice’.More recently, the ‘Arab Spring’ has involved a range of previously unarticulated, and sometime hostile, groups (Muslim, Christian, secular, women’s, and youth) coming together, and modifying themselves in the process, around the demand for ‘democracy’. While it remains uncertain as to how radically democratic these movement’s ambitions may be with respect to the poststructuralist understanding described in this chapter, they provide a practical illustration of the hegemonic battle that Mouffe and Laclau would see as necessary for a political system to move towards radical democracy.

This discussion suggests that radical democracy must negotiate, as indicated earlier in this chapter, an inherent dialectical tension between necessity and contingency.[[4]](#endnote-4) This can be seen in a couple of interrelated ways. First, hegemonic politics must be deployed in order to fight for the institutionalization of radical democracy and as such there must be, ironically, a moment of ideological closure (non-contingency) and exclusion. Second, ‘contingency’ must be fought for as ‘radical’ (as necessary), and thus as the only thing *not* operating upon hegemonic logics. This dialectical tension – ‘undecidable game’ (Laclau, 2001) – between contingency and necessity, is presupposed by hegemony and expressed within it, and thus within radical democracy, by the tension between universality and particularity. The institutionalizing of the hegemonic logic is thus the institutionalization of this tension, which subverts any final institutionalization. Radical democracy is an ongoing, impossible project.

Finally it needs to be said that, in promoting this conception of radical democracy,Laclau and Mouffebring a normative element to their ontology of radical contingency. Along with many other poststructuralist radical democrats, they are committed to not only the ‘ethico-political principles’ of liberty and equality (even if tendentially empty), but to the institutionalization of radical contingency and ‘the empty place of power’, which in their terms meansto extend agonistic spaces and institutions so as to ensure the opportunity for contestation and re-articulation of all hegemonic discourses.

**Conclusion**

Laclau and Mouffe understand radical democracy in terms of the institutionalization of hegemony, and thus of the tension between contingency and necessity (and particularity-universality). This institutionalization is achieved by keeping contestation going as against (the impossible task of) overcoming it. However, this call for the institutionalization of contestation should not be read as an unrestrained embrace of power and conflict, but rather a shaping of it in accordance with the (always negotiable) principles of liberty and equality, that is, in accordance with ‘the people’.

This conceptualization has been thoroughly interrogated and refined through political philosophy. However, there are still significant questions that need attention, particularly relating to political organization, economy and sociology, areas to which poststructuralist radical democrats have yet to pay adequate consideration. To conclude this chapter, I will raise three problems. First, a question of political organization: how can the practical requirements for instituting radical contingency, or more specifically hegemonic struggle, be further clarified given the limits that a commitment to radical contingency places on prescriptions. In particular, greater consideration is needed of the role of communications media in supporting the institutionalization of agonistic engagement. Second, a political economy question: what is the relation of radical democracy to globalization, and specifically global capital. In other words, can the institutionalization of agonistic struggle between hegemonic forces effectively challenge neo-liberal discourse, or, particularly given its decentering of class, will it simply sit-on-top of, and ideologically legitimate, the already seemingly dislocating rhythms (contingency) of global capital. And third, a question of political sociology: can hegemony be considered the universal form of politics and democracy given that some (e.g. Deleuzian and autonomist Marxist) theorists claim to recognize in human relations non-hegemonic, non-representative political and democratic logics and practices, including the democratic politics of decentralized (digital) networking, while others argue that alongside hegemonic conflict there are modes of politics based on a disposition to ‘receptive generosity, hospitality, or acknowledgement’ that must be considered central to radical democracy (Barnett, 2004: 505).

Of course, there is no space here to expand on these and other questions, nor to indicate how poststructuralist discourse theorists might reply. These questions have been introduced here simply to indicate that there is still much work to be done in developing a convincing and workable poststructuralist theory of radical democracy. This might be expected given that it is a very recent development in the history of democracy. Yet, to be true to their understanding of the root meaning of radical democracy, poststructuralists cannot be expected to give us detailed substantive prescriptions. Such can only be decided through political struggle, that is, as the result of the temporary, hegemonically instituted decision of the ‘free’ and ‘equal’ body of ‘the people’, which justifies itself, its rules and decisions, to none other than itself: democracy is founded upon the rule of the people, and the people alone.

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1. **Notes**

   Rancière (2006: 40-41)draws from Plato’s understanding in the third book of the *Laws*, where democracy is finally understood as based on the law of chance, decided by lottery, thus highlighting the contingency of any democratic order and equal entitlement of all to govern.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion of other strands of poststructuralist radical democracy, see Marchart (2007) and Tønder and Thomassen (2005a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Mouffe (2007: 3) uses institution ‘in a very wide sense’ to refer to ‘an ensemble of practices, language-games, discourses but also traditional institutions such as parties and other political institutions as well as different forms of participations among a diversity of people at local and other levels.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The dialectic here is, as Laclau and Mouffe (2001, xii) observe, a ‘specific dialectic’. They explicitly reject the singular and total philosophical system that can be found in dialectical materialism or particular readings of Hegel, where there is a single self-unfolding teleological movement towards a resolution – the ultimate return of difference into the one (Laclau, 1990: 26; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: xi, xiii). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)