

**BEYOND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF POLITICAL THEORIES OF
CHANTAL MOUFFE AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK**

By

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Abstract

In this thesis I compare and assess political theories of Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek who develop conflictual alternatives to real existing democracies marked by post-political condition and to normative liberal democratic theories. I trace theoretical differences between Mouffe and Žižek to the different ways in which they articulate concepts of 'capitalism' and 'democracy': for Mouffe 'democracy' is a name of the radical potential of the ideals of freedom and equality and 'capitalism' signifies the inequality of power in the socioeconomic realm, whereas for Žižek democracy is an ideological phantasy securing smooth circulation of capital. Consequently, Mouffe prescriptive project is radicalization of liberal democracy in which plurality of local struggles of legitimate adversaries occupies a central position, while Žižek argues for resuscitation of the Idea of communism. I claim that both theories suffer from certain deficiencies: Whereas Mouffe, due to her focus on the political realm, is unable to address the source of the structural socioeconomic inequalities, Žižek's total critique makes creation of substantive prescriptive theory impossible. By extracting valuable points from their theories and supplementing it with Elizabeth Anderson's conception of relational equality, I suggest a way of overcoming aforementioned deficiencies and propose a theory that would combine comprehensive critique of capitalist society with appreciation of local struggles.

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Introduction

The failure of the “actually existing socialism” has brought about the proclamation of the end of history, according to which liberal democracy and capitalism are the ultimate stage of human socio-political development.¹ Many left-wing thinkers, however, have seen a simultaneous “hollowing of democracy”² and hegemonization of the political spectrum by the free market ideology. Politics *qua* clash of different opinions and visions of the world has been substituted by technocratic governance. In the words of Colin Crouch: “while the forms of democracy remain fully in place – and today in some respect are actually strengthened – politics and government are slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times; and that one major consequence of this process is the growing impotence of egalitarian causes”.³

This diagnosis, under the label of post-politics, is shared by two left-wing political theorists, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek, who have been trying to develop conflictual alternatives to actually-existing liberal democracy and to normative theories of liberal democracy. There are many critiques of liberal democracy, in particular: a critique of socioeconomic inequalities which impair the functioning of liberal democratic practices and institutions; a critique directed at capitalism in which liberal democracy is attacked indirectly; and a critique aimed at liberal variant of democracy itself. The third critique is the concern of my thesis. It has been raised by plethora of theorists, including deliberative democrats, participatory democrats, or civic republicans. The conflictual critique of liberal democracy, however, differs from the deliberative one in that the former assumes the inevitability of political conflict and does not aim at agreement; it differs from participatory democracy in

¹ See: Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, <http://www.wesjones.com/eoh.htm> (accessed 24 January, 2012).

² See, e.g.: Peter Mair, “Ruling the Void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy,” *New Left Review* 42, November-December 2006, 25-51.

³ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, (Cambridge, Malden, MA: Polity, 2004), 6.

that it not only aims at increasing direct participation but at politicization of subsequent spheres of life; it differs from civic republicanism in that it does not limit political participation to the public realm recognizes the private realm as a site of political struggle.

Within conflictual critiques of liberal democracy two strands can be spotted. In the first strand the problems of mechanics of liberal democracy, of privileging private over public and of too modest aims of liberal democratic theories are addressed. Advocates of the second strand perceive it as a form of ideology, which closes the horizon of political imagination disabling any prospects for political change that aims beyond liberal democracy. The two strands are represented respectively by Mouffe and Žižek. Mouffe claims that liberal political theories are incapable of grasping the pluralist and conflictual character of democratic politics. She argues for agonistic democracy, where struggle among political actors – kept within liberal-democratic institutional framework – occupies the central position. Pluralism of agents and agonism are crucial for 'democratization of democracy.' Žižek shares her views on the weaknesses of liberal democracy; however he broadens it by linking it with a critique of capitalism. His main concern is the foreclosure of any political critiques of either by their commodification or by silencing them by reviving the specter of 'another Gulag.' He claims that an alternative to the actual *status quo* – capitalism and liberal democracy as its political correlate – requires questioning the liberal democratic framework altogether. In other words Mouffe represents the strand of radical pluralist democracy which stresses the need of radicalization of the liberal democratic ideals of liberty and equality, whereas Žižek represents a strand of 'revolutionism' that calls for a fundamental questioning of liberal democracy as such.

The aim of this thesis is to assess whether their theories of Mouffe and Žižek provide an alternative for the diagnosed post-political world and to normative liberal democratic theories. My analysis will have two main points of focus: one concerning the prescriptive

content of the examined theories; the other concerning how the theories themselves differ from liberal democratic ones.

- 1. *Do their theories provide a theoretical foundation for stepping beyond actually-existing liberal democracy?*
- 2. *To what extent are they different from liberal democratic theories?*

I take these questions as separate, the potential failure in respect to question 1 does not rule out a positive answer for question 2: one can easily imagine that the theory that fails to provide substantive prescription for a different social and political order, nonetheless due to its critical component does not fit into liberal democratic mainstream. Conversely, the theory can have a prescriptive content, but under closer examination can be proved to be in line with what mainstream theorists recommend.

My argument proceeds in four steps. In Chapter I I present the diagnosis of the post-political condition which informs the theories of Mouffe and Žižek. I confront it with some empirical findings and briefly mention the criticism of liberal democratic theories informed by the diagnosis. In order to test the accuracy of this criticism, in Chapter II I elaborate on it and confront it with actual liberal democratic theories of Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Christiano. I conclude that the relevant criticism concerns the ontology of the political and the social which is better grasped by conflictual theories than by liberal theories. I examine and compare the theories of Mouffe and Žižek in greater detail in Chapter III, including their prescriptive components. I trace the differences between them to the difference in articulation of the concepts of 'capitalism' with 'democracy.' In Chapter IV I argue that in the consequence of that the theories of Mouffe and Žižek suffer from different deficiencies when tested against the criterion presented in the Introduction. By extracting valuable points I nonetheless find in Mouffe and Žižek, I suggest a possible way of overcoming their deficiencies. I recapitulating the argument, assessing the contribution and pointing to possible further research topics and

areas worth investigating and pursuing.

Chapter 1 - The post-political condition

In this chapter I sketch the origins and diagnosis of the post-political condition contemporary democracies suffer from. In order to do that, it is necessary to understand what Mouffe and Žižek understand by politics. Politics, according to Mouffe, is a struggle between collective subjects created by the us/them division over the shape of the political community that involves – and aims at the creation of – relations of power. Democratic politics in particular aims at transformation of existential antagonism into domesticated struggle of adversaries: it is a struggle between collective subjects over the place of power domesticated by democratic institutions.

Žižek claims that politics is not merely a conflict, but the sudden rupture in the social body. Politics is an event of the questioning of the universality of the social order by claiming to be a “universal exception” – a part of the society that is not recognized as its part. Therefore, politics always involves power and violence. For him, arche-politics (the search for the substantial essence – αρχή – of political community), para-politics (attempt to regulate the struggle with pre-given ethical norms and procedures based on them), ultra-politics (open warfare against external enemies) and meta-politics (where politics is perceived just as a spectacle of more primal or fundamental forces, like productive forces in orthodox Marxism) are only attempts to disavow the politics proper that emerges from the rupture within social body.⁴

My argument will proceed as follows. I will, first, focus on Colin Crouch's sociological insights about the societal transformation. Next, I will place them in the context of more recent theory-based proclamations of the end of history and of the politics beyond right-left division. This will be followed by the brief description of post-political practice as

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Carl Schmitt in the age of post-politics,” in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. Chantal Mouffe (London, New York: Verso, 1999), 28-29.

perceived by Mouffe and Žižek; in this section I confront the account of Mouffe and Žižek with empirical findings concerning the polarization of politics and the US and rebirth of nationalism and xenophobia in Western countries.

1.1 The post-democratic drift

Decline of the working class with simultaneous decrease in mass political participation on the one hand and emergence of professional political class that wasn't biographically embedded in their constituencies but rather linked with the society through lobbyists of the capital resulted in, according to Crouch, "post-democratic drift", which although preserves the institutional framework of liberal democracy, is empty of democratic spirit: public debate turned into spectacle staged by the specialists "expert in techniques of manipulation."⁵

1.1.1 Distrust and political apathy

Democracy is a question of degree: one side of this spectrum is occupied by the ideal of democracy, the other by its opposite. The metaphor of a drift is supposed to draw the attention to processual and gradual change in the regime. The concept of post-democracy introduces into this metaphor the dimension of the historical parabola. The process of the drifting away from the ideal of democracy has a historical character: there were pre-democratic times, when there were no democratic institutions; later, societies experienced the increasing democratization marked by the development of democratic institutions and political participation of citizenry that culminated in the democratic peak; after this peak, however, while democratic form remained rather intact, it started to lose its previous impetus. Post-democracy cannot be labeled as non-democracy, because there are signs of democracy;

⁵ Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 4.

the *Zeitgeist* has moved, however.⁶ The outcome of this drift is the transfer of power from citizenry to the business lobbies that privileges the privileged and undermines an egalitarian agenda.⁷

Optimistic interpretation of the developments of the last half a century from 1970s onward, which focuses on quantitative increase in the number of democratic states, simply denies that there is any crisis of democracy at all. Nonetheless there are at least two developments that beg for different interpretation. First is the change in the role of citizenship. As Crouch notes, there are two concepts of citizenship. Active and positive citizenship describes grass-root creation of collective identities and formulation of alternatives and new demands. Negative citizenship, on the other hand, is an “activism of blame and complaint.”⁸ It is driven by the distrust towards politics and politicians and its main concern political corruption. For negative citizens, politics is the matter of elites not masses; no wonder then that attention of the public opinion is concentrated on scandals. The second development is the emergence of a- or antipolitical cause groups that are not concerned with the state activities. They deliberately distance themselves from both politics and state. In this context, the concept of post-democracy is used to

describe situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after democratic moment; when powerful minority interests have become far more active the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands; where people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down campaigns.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

This results in increasing power of the elites and political and social marginalization of the lower strata of society.

1.1.2 The replacement of politics by lobbying

Post-democracy does not put into question the idea of the people but rather the idea of the rule at all. The rise of the use of the negative citizenship results in putting on the governments increasing pressure for transparency and scrutiny; at the same time, a citizen is understood as a customer, whose preferences have to be guessed in advance. In response, however, to these developments, and in order to gain support in the times of general distrust, the techniques of government start to resemble the techniques of show business and commercial marketing.¹⁰ In post-democracy, politics, instead of being a struggle or competition of ideas about the shape of the polity between political parties and movements, becomes rather a hide-and-seek game between the public or the citizenry in general and politicians in general. As Crouch concludes: “[f]rom this emerges the familiar paradox of contemporary politics: both techniques for manipulating public opinion and the mechanisms for opening politics to scrutiny become ever more sophisticated, while the content of party programs and the character of party rivalry become ever more bland and vapid.”¹¹ While it is hard to call such a development undemocratic, but it is difficult to “dignify it to democracy itself”.¹²

1.2 The end of conflictual politics

Social transformation diagnosed by Crouch happened in accompaniment of two other main changes: the end of the cold war and the disappearance of the traditional collective

¹⁰ Ibid. 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

identities. The common denominator of the two developments is that they are interpreted as the twilight of certain epochs (and the dawns of others). In this subsection I reconstruct (partly via Mouffe's critique)¹³ how these changes inform theoretical reflection by examining ideas of the theorists of the post-traditional society Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, and Francis Fukuyama.

1.2.1 The end of history

The best known modern version of 'the end of history' theorem was presented by Fukuyama. Relying on the Kojèveian interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history, he argues that with the end of the Cold War the ideological development of mankind achieved its *telos* in liberal democratic regime as *the* final embodiment of the principles of freedom and equality since there is no viable alternative to it. Democratization of the world is the question of time, not *whether*, but *when* undemocratic (i.e. still historical) societies will adopt liberal democracy. “[A]t the end of history it is not necessary that all societies become successful liberal societies, merely that they end their ideological pretensions of representing different and higher forms of human society.”¹⁴ According to Fukuyama, the end of history means the state of affairs in which no substantial, qualitative change is possible nor desirable. It is the end of political evolution, and liberal democracy represents its final stage.¹⁵ In other words, it is not about the true end of times and ideological struggle – they may appear between historical and post-historical societies. Rather, it is a utopianism in which humanity has found the final formula of political organization *and* politics as action.

¹³ I am not interested here in the accuracy of Mouffe's criticism of Beck and Giddens but rather in reconstructing the position of Mouffe (and Žižek). The understanding of specific way of reconstructing criticizing the theories of Beck and Giddens is crucial for understanding Mouffe and Žižek's positions.

¹⁴ Fukuyama, “The End of History?”.

¹⁵ Susan Marks, “The End of History? Reflections on Some International Legal Theses,” *European Journal of International Law* 3/1997, 452.

1.2.2 The disappearance of traditional collective identities

The early variation on the “end of history” thesis has been formulated still during the cold war under the label of “the end of ideology” inspired by the advancement of post-industrial society. The contemporary version of it in sociological spirit are theories of reflexive modernization.¹⁶ According to Beck, reflexive modernity is characterized by the emergence of the 'risk society'. Technological development besides intended improvement in the quality of life brings about also different kinds of economic, social, political and individual risks. While in the times of simple modernization these side-effects were considered marginal costs of development, in reflexive modernization they are the “motor of social history.”¹⁷ Consequently, old forms of political actors – like political parties and trade unions – are not suitable for resolution of the conflicts, because in the present stage these conflicts are no longer over distribution of wealth and power but over “distributive responsibility.”¹⁸ Globalization and increasing individualization undermined old collective identities and created the need for a different basis for participation. “In a risk society ideological and political conflicts ... are better characterized by the following dichotomies: safe/unsafe, inside/outside, political/nonpolitical.”¹⁹ Thus we are in need of the new form of politics, which Beck labels 'sub-politics' characterized by the emergence of resistance in sites which have not been considered political; at the same time traditional sites and problems of politics become depoliticized. We do not deal with one unitary political system but the variety of different subsystems in which the individual and risks she faces (brought by the extensive pollution of the environment or the advancement in medicine and biotechnology) is at the center of attention.²⁰

Giddens, one of the major theorists of the 'third way', argues in similar vein that we

¹⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Routledge: London, New York, 2005), 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 39-40.

live in post-traditional society and face the “manufactured risks” caused by experimentation in both private and public realms, intensified by the technological development.²¹ In post-traditional society, traditions which were the source of collective identities are open for questioning and therefore cannot be taken for granted but need discursive justification. This kind of 'social reflexivity' leads to greater autonomy and increasing individualization. These two processes demand change in the our understanding of politics and in doing politics: traditional left-wing “emancipatory politics” should be substituted with “life politics.” “While emancipatory politics concerns life chances and freedom from different types of constraints, life politics concerns life decisions – decisions about how we should live in a post-traditional world where what used to be natural or traditional has now become open to choice.”²² The left/right division has lost its meaning together with the failure of the socialist project embodied in real-existing socialist countries; in unchallenged capitalism we are left with life politics which is directed at enhancing autonomy and broadening the spectrum of choices available to each member of society.²³ At the same time the need for discursive justification of traditions opens up the spaces for dialogues and creates the conditions for 'dialogic democracy,' in which the issue at stake is personal autonomy of all individuals *qua* individuals.²⁴

1.2.3 Beyond adversarial politics

Despite noticeable differences in their diagnoses and conceptualizations, the common denominator of Beck and Giddens is elimination of adversary from democratic politics in favor of broadest accommodation different life styles.²⁵ Both of them are preoccupied with political participation; however, their main argument is that individuals participate *qua*

²¹ Ibid., 42.

²² Ibid., 43-44.

²³ Ibid., 45.

²⁴ Ibid., 46.

²⁵ Ibid., 48.

individuals, because the development of societies destroyed the very basis for collective identities. Both claim that in the result of the social changes, traditional modes of politics and institutions are exhausted. In such a vision of the world, the right/left division cannot address the problems faced by individuals. In both cases this fundamental claim resembles 'the end of history' thesis because it divides the political visions and modes of political participation according to lines that are non-political: whereas 'the end of history' approach divides political subjects as still-historical and post-historical, the 'reflexive modernity' approaches divide the political visions as fit to new circumstances (and thus legitimate) and not fit (illegitimate). The (unintended?) consequence of such a vision is that the only opponent that fits it is a “fundamentalist” who resists modernization and tries to stick to unrecoverable past with whom dialogical discussion is impossible.²⁶ Paradoxically, the only form of political conflict, then, is simple antagonism, not its domesticated agonism, because any and every dissent is externalized as fundamentalist or traditionalist reaction to what is considered inevitable.²⁷ Jürgen Habermas' idea of 'modernity as unfinished project' resembles this embrace of historical necessity. As Žižek points out, in Habermas' notion, the instrumental rationality that has driven the historical development should not be challenged but merely supplemented with communicative rationality. In such a framework, however, any expression of fundamentalism is perceived not as systematically produced by the process of development, but rather as accidental, contingent detours not fitting the logic of modernity and its development – and more importantly the narrative about it.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁷ Ibid., 50.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin's Choice,” in Vladimir I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (London, New York: Verso, 2004), 298-299.

1.3 Third way and populism

The post-political vision found its best known practical expression in the governments led by Tony Blair in the UK who claimed to make politics that does is neither left-wing nor right-wing. Blair's characterization of the New Labour as the 'Radical Center' is one of the best formulation of post-politics. Here, the radicalism is not understood as pursue of radical agenda but rather in the sense of “radical abandonment of the 'old ideological divides’”²⁹ What counts in such an approach is not the origin of the ideas, but whether these ideas work. However, “[t]o say that good ideas are 'ideas that work' means that one accepts in advance the (global capitalist) constellation that determines what works.”³⁰

1.3.1 The lack of genuine policy alternatives

Tony Blair advertised his position as “*above* left and right”³¹ which suggested the possibility of overcoming the antagonism; it is a position not in between two sides of the spectrum, but rather be *beyond* them. It is not the claim that there can be found a reconciliation between the two sides of the spectrum (or at least between some of their ideas or policies), but the idea of such a spectrum itself is simply irrelevant. What is distinctive for the 'politics of post-politics' is that it is deprived of any ideological pretenses. This is why for Žižek it is Silvio Berlusconi – not Blair – who is the best example of post-politics: *Forza Italia*, his party during 2001 elections, resembled more of the sport fan club than a regular political party – there was no ideological project behind it.³² If third way social democracy tried to frame a political struggle in moral terms, in the case of Berlusconi even that

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Ticklish Subject. The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 199.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, “A Politics without Adversary?” in *The Democratic Paradox* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 108.

³² Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin's Choice,” 303.

dimension has been lost.³³

For Mouffe, the abandoning of the left-wing identity by the New Labour was clearly visible in neglecting the struggle for equality.³⁴ The structural inequalities were translated into the language of inclusion and exclusion, where what is at stake is personal choice. The other hallmark of post-ideological character of Blair's government was the pursue of the idea of Private-Public Partnership (especially in public services): “[t]he PPP strategy is of course paradigmatic for the third way strategy: neither state (left) nor private sector (right), but their supposed harmonious partnership”.³⁵ Market oriented agenda of the New Labour, instead of taking the form of political program, has been phrased as a combination of the claims about the necessity of 'flexibilization' and remoralization of the poor.³⁶

1.3.2 The return of the political

How does this diagnosis of the convergence around center relate to empirical findings concerning the polarization of e.g. American politics and reemergence of collective identities of the anti-immigrant and xenophobic flavoring? Quantitative evidence justifies the claim that since the mid-1970 American politics became much more polarized, also when it comes to policy issues, while the intra-party homogeneity became stronger.³⁷ And this polarization has detrimental effect on the quality of democratic politics.³⁸ The emergence of populism is acknowledged by Mouffe and Žižek themselves. Should, then, their diagnosis be rejected?

Faced with such an argument, Mouffe and Žižek would in quasi-functionalist way

³³ In fact, Žižek argues that Berlusconi is an effect of moralization of politics: a product of the anti-corruption campaign 'clean hands', which drawn Christian Democracy and thus shattered the political spectrum stretched between Christian Democrats and Italian Communists. See: “Afterword: Lenin's Choice”, 303.

³⁴ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 62.

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁶ Mouffe, “A Politics without Adversary?”, 112.

³⁷ Nolan McCarthy, Keith T. Poole, Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America. The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Reaches* (Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press, 2006). I do not discuss or assess the quality of this evidence.

³⁸ William A. Galston, “Can a Polarized American Party System be “Healthy”?”, *Issues in Governance Studies*, April 2010.

reply that polarization is a consequence of convergence. Traditional right/left conflict concerned the struggle of global visions including two radically different ideas about organizing the economy. And it is precisely the lack of the two substantially different visions of economic organization Mouffe and Žižek are referring to. As Žižek argues, it is the domination of capitalism that is not being questioned since the proclamation of the end of history³⁹ (and has never been seriously questioned in the US); nonetheless political conflict in one or the other form is inevitable. As Mouffe phrases it, the “[l]ack of democratic contestation over real political alternatives leads to antagonisms manifesting themselves under forms that undermine the very basis of the democratic politics.”⁴⁰ And one of these dangerous forms is an anti-immigrant, xenophobic right-wing populism. According to Mouffe, “scandalization of politics” and reemergence of collective identities that refer to ethnic or religious fundamentalisms are the results of the same process of the depoliticization that on the one hand causes disinterest in properly political life and reemergence of the political conflict outside the democratic institutions.⁴¹ Hence the emergence of right-wing populist party across the Western Europe.⁴²

According to Mouffe, all European countries in which right-wing populist parties have become important political actors displayed significant similarities. “Their [right-wing populist parties] growth has always taken place in circumstances where the differences between the traditional democratic parties have become much less significant than before. ... in each case a consensus at the center had been established, which did not allow voters to make of a real choice between significantly different policies.”⁴³ The blurring of right/left distinction resulted in (less democratic but more millenarian) distinction between 'the establishment' and

³⁹ More on this in the chapter of this thesis dedicated to the theories of Mouffe and Žižek.

⁴⁰ Mouffe, “A Politics without Adversary?”, 114-115.

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

⁴² Mouffe, *On the Political*, 65.

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

'the people' which identifies the latter with some form of ethnic purity.⁴⁴ The traditional parties and public opinion for whom the alliance with openly xenophobic parties was out of question reacted to this by referring to morally infused language labeling the populist parties and movements 'extreme right' as morally evil.⁴⁵ Thus, politics has been played in the register of morality – the struggle between competing visions of the political communities has been transposed as the struggle between 'brown plague' and 'good democrats'. Such a transposition makes it possible to form the us/them distinction in terms that does not require the rejection of the 'beyond right and left' politics while giving a way for political passions; this way, however is anything but a safety valve since instead of legitimate adversaries such a distinction gives us moral enemies who cannot be considered legitimate.

In Žižek's words, "Schmittian ultra-politics – radicalization of politics into open warfare of Us against Them discernible in the different fundamentalisms – is *the form in which the foreclosed political returns in the post-political universe of pluralist negotiation and consensual regulation*."⁴⁶ As Ian Parker in his book on Žižek notes, however, to these forms we should add seemingly more traditional, but at the close inspection thoroughly postmodern, deprived of true ideological commitment, arche-politics.⁴⁷ The effect of post-political foreclosure of politics is simultaneous emergence of arche-politics and ultra-politics as the two sides of the same coin.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71. For a detailed elaboration on the difference between democratic and millenarian identities and subject positions see: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition, (London, New York: Verso, 2001), especially "Equivalence and Difference," 127-134.

⁴⁵ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 72-74.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁷ Ian Parker, *Žižek. A Critical Introduction* (London, Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2004), 91. Žižek himself argues that contemporary racist violence of skinheads is intellectually explained by perpetrators themselves as a result of unfavorable socio-economic factors. Despite this intellectual mediation, violence is perpetrated anyway and this cynical self-distance is typical for postmodern consciousness. See, for example: Žižek, "Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics."

1.4 Summary: the post-political condition

Although there are overlaps in positions of Crouch, Mouffe and Žižek – their dissatisfaction with the present state of politics and democracy, in particular with unchallenged dominance of neo-liberal ideas – there are significant differences between them. Crouch is more preoccupied with the question of equality of outcome both in material and political terms. His concern is that while the traditional mechanisms and institution of democratic political life lost their egalitarian potential, new ways of putting the pressure on governments have been devised, however these ways are accessible only to the limited – mostly business – elite. Hence declining participation and growing inequality. Although the egalitarian democratic ideal standing behind his argument might be well beyond what has ever been achieved, it seems that both the ideal and means for achieving it are not beyond (perhaps very democratic and very egalitarian) democratic capitalism.

Critique deployed by Mouffe and Žižek – all differences between them aside for the moment – seems to be more radical: what is at the center of their critique of post-politics is the conceal or foreclosure of the political, the apparent lack of conflict and transposing it into other dimensions than politics (for example morality). Their critique stems from the opposition to the lack of alternatives of what can be chosen from the accessible political options and – more in the case of Žižek – what can be even thought.⁴⁸ Mouffe and Žižek ultimately go beyond mainstream critique – what they seem to call for is not simply more egalitarian and participatory democracy but different democracy.

To sum it up with Žižek's words: “[t]he ultimate sign of 'post-politics' in all Western countries is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its properly political dimension.”⁴⁹ What I call a post-

⁴⁸ Žižek, “Afterword: Lenin's Choice,” 167 and following pages.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 303.

political condition is a state of a social world, with its normative and factual aspects, which excludes political conflict on moral grounds but at the same time frames the conflict in moral terms; it is the world, in which politics has been substituted by management of social needs and acceptance of globalized free market capitalism with liberal democratic institutions as its political correlate as the only possible and acceptable form of social organization of collective life. As Mouffe argues, there are important analogies between the post-political condition and liberal democratic theories: the latter also are consensus-oriented, moralistic and incapable of grasping the political properly.⁵⁰ Thus, according to Mouffe's criticism, they are impotent when confronted with the challenges of the post-political condition.

⁵⁰ See: Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passions: the Stakes of Democracy*, Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, http://www.westminster.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/6456/Politics-and-Passions.pdf, last accessed on May 25, 2012.

Chapter 2 - The liberal democratic theory and its limits

In order to assess the accuracy of criticism of Mouffe towards liberal democracy it is necessary to confront them with actual liberal democratic theories; my choice are theories of Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Christiano. I limit myself only to Mouffe's criticism, since Žižek does not formulate explicitly any charges against liberal democratic theories. An obvious obstacle in such an endeavor is the difference in languages between analytical liberalism of Dworkin and Christiano on the one hand and inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralism post-foundational critical theory⁵¹ of Mouffe and Žižek on the other. This difference stems from the discrepancies in political ontologies, which will be addressed in later parts of this chapter.

The first sentence in the definition of 'democracy' in *A Glossary of Political Theory* states that it is a “confusing concept.”⁵² Its relation to liberalism is also rather complicated. Initially, liberals opposed democracy on the grounds of property rights; later, their distrustful attitude towards it was motivated by the fear of the tyranny of majority.⁵³ Nowadays, however, liberal political theorists and philosophers seem to accept democracy as a political system. In order to avoid confusion related to the concept of democracy the working definition of democracy is “a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among participants at an essential stage of collective decision making.”⁵⁴ As shall be seen, this 'kind of equality' is crucial for the conception of democracy and the argument that is made. In this chapter I present two arguments for liberal democracy – the instrumental one

⁵¹ In this context I use the term 'critical theory' to describe a particular approach to political philosophy and political theory, approach that is motivated by particular ethico-political convictions, that is aimed at actual social change and for which theorizing and political practice are inseparable. I make no reference to 'critical theory' as philosophical tradition of the Frankfurt School.

⁵² John Hoffman, *A Glossary of Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 38.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thomas Christiano, “Democracy” in: Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/> (accessed May 15, 2012).

presented by Dworkin, and argument of intrinsic value of democracy advanced by Christiano – and present their normative conceptions of democracy. First I discuss dependent and partnership conceptions of democracy advocated by Dworkin. Then I present Christiano's democracy *qua* public equality and contrast it with Dworkin's. In the third part I confront these conceptions with the charges brought forth by Mouffe and assess the quality of the criticism.

2.1 Dworkin's partnership conception of democracy

For Dworkin, justice is best defined as equal concern for all members of a community. The preferred interpretation of equality *qua* equal concern is the basis for designing political institutions of a community and for the decisions that the institutions make.⁵⁵ Equal concern that has to guide the actions of the state and its institutions demands democracy. According to Dworkin, “[d]emocracy requires that officials be elected by the people rather by chosen through inheritance or by a small group of families or electors.”⁵⁶ This definition does not tell, however, what are the details of this arrangement and how to apply the principle of equal concern to political institutions.

2.1.1 Dependent conception of democracy

In the essay “Political Equality” Dworkin argues for a dependent conception of democracy.⁵⁷ In contrast to a detached conception, which focuses only on the features of the

⁵⁵ Ronald Dworkin, “Political Equality,” in *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 184.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* It is worth commenting on Dworkin's argumentative strategy which is not entirely convincing. Oppositions Dworkin creates – between dependent and detached conceptions of democracy as well as between majoritarian and partnership conceptions of democracy – follow the pattern in which the conception he advocates is described as nuanced and sophisticated, paying attention to multiple dimensions of the issue which is discussed whereas the criticized conception is rather simplistic (if not crude), full of inconsistencies and judged by its extreme consequences. The criticized conception is not, however, attributed to any

political process, the primary concern of the dependent conception is a design of the “form [of democracy which] is most likely to produce the substantive decisions and results that treat all members of the community with equal concern.”⁵⁸ This is a consequentialist conception because the choice of the arrangements depends on which set is most conducive to substantive egalitarian goals. In order to address this problem in more detail, Dworkin introduces the distinction between choice-sensitive and choice-insensitive issues.⁵⁹ The first category consists of the issues in which there is no independent standard of rightness of decisions concerning these issues apart from the preferences of the members of the community; they are called also issues of policy. The second category are issues for which the accurate answer does not depend on the preferences; these are issues of principle. Adequate design needs to take into account these differences.

Because the accuracy of some decisions depends of the preferences of the people, the dependent conception of democracy has to pay attention not only to the distributive consequences of decision-making process, but also to the participatory ones. The latter group consists of three kinds: symbolic, agency and communal.⁶⁰ The symbolic goal is achieved if by allowing an individual to participate in collective decision-making the community confirms the membership of the individual as equal. Agency goal requires that the political process should enable people to take part in decision-making as moral agents recognizing their moral experience. Thus, the process should consist not only of voting but also of public reasoning and expressing and justifying opinions, that is public deliberation. Communal

particular theorist and thus its description by Dworkin cannot be tested against its advocates. This contrast is supposed to give more soundness to Dworkin's argument; what it does instead is that it creates in a reader double doubt. First doubt concerns the proper reference to other authors: Dworkin makes an impression that he argues against conception that nobody advocates, that in the end he argues against himself. Second doubt concerns the quality of Dworkin's argument for his conceptions: if he needs a (ridiculed) rival conception to make his own look appealing and places on the reader the burden to actually confront his account of rival conceptions with possible originals, maybe his own, on its own and contrasted with actually advocated ones is simply not attractive? It is not the point of this essay to resolve these questions, however.

⁵⁸ Dworkin, “Political Equality,” 186.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 187.

consequences concern whether the design of the process contributes to creation and sustaining of the community, whether individuals feel that it is their decision as well whatever its content.

Given the high probability of reasonable disagreement over the content of the principles of justice, satisfaction of participatory goals is *sine qua non* of realization of equality *qua* equal concern. For the detached conception of democracy, the only way of showing this equal concern is to provide political equality. This equality can be understood either as equality of impact or equality of influence; impact is understood as the capacity of citizens to contribute and/or change decisions on their own, whereas influence involves the change of and/or contribution to decisions by convincing and/or mobilizing others for their cause. Moreover, it needs to be judged along two axes – a vertical one, which refers to the relation between the citizens and the power-holders, and a horizontal one concerning the relation between citizens themselves. Equality of impact along the vertical axis makes for Dworkin no sense since it questions the very form of representative government. Equal impact along the horizontal axis is, on the other hand, insufficiently demanding because it does not take into account other forms of inequality (especially inequality of wealth) which can translate into inequality of political power.⁶¹ When it comes to influence, according to Dworkin, its equalization would involve solutions that are detrimental for other egalitarian goals.⁶² Therefore, the dependent conception of democracy rejects the need for equality of political power and suggests equal opportunity for influence concerned with the source of illegitimate political inequality – the unequal distribution of wealth that translates into political power.⁶³ The aim is to give all members of the community equal opportunities for meaningfully active partaking in political life. This might require deviations from both equal impact and equal influence. For example, the symbolic goal requires that all members of the

⁶¹ Ibid., 191-3.

⁶² Ibid., 196-7.

⁶³ Ibid., 195.

same electoral district have equal voting power; however, in order to arrive at the most accurate answer it is preferable to have an equal impact among districts.⁶⁴

2.1.2 Partnership conception of democracy

In other essays Dworkin presents the partnership conception of democracy, which he contrasts with the majoritarian one⁶⁵. “On this majoritarian view, the democratic ideal lies in a match between political decisions and the will of the majority or plurality of opinion.”⁶⁶ In practice it means that a decision is legitimate if the majority of the people agreed on it, or it can be assumed that they would if they were fully informed and rational. Ultimately, it is not the content of the decision that matters, but the procedure applied to arrive at it: the majoritarian conception is in fact a procedural one. According to Dworkin, its main weakness lies in that it fetishizes the majority rule and elevates to the rank of the goal itself.

In contrast, the partnership conception of democracy is concerned with the outcomes of decisions; thus, it does justice to three dimensions of democracy. First, popular sovereignty requires that “the people rather than the officials be masters”⁶⁷. Second, citizens' equality demands that they participate as equals in the “contests they judge”.⁶⁸ Third, the requirements of the quality of democratic discourse, which should be characterized by freedom of expression, right to be respectfully heard and rational deliberation, demand plurality of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁵ See: Ronald Dworkin, “Free Speech, Politics, and the Dimensions of Democracy,” in: *Sovereign Virtue*, and “Introduction: The Moral Reading and the Majoritarian Premise,” in *Freedom's Law* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-38.

It is important to note that although this distinction is similar to the one of detached and dependent conceptions, they are not the same. Most important difference is that detached conception of democracy is in fact a broader category that can accommodate many conceptions for which legitimacy of collective decision-making stems from the legitimacy of the process of decision-making and can include some conceptions of deliberative democracy, conservative purely formal democracy and some forms of radical direct democracy. Majoritarian democracy, in contrast, is a particular type of detached democracy, in which legitimacy stems from the fact that decisions match the will of the numerical majority of citizens.

Also, I rely here on Dworkin's typology and description of the two kinds of democracy. The assessment of its accuracy, especially the description on the majoritarian conception, is not a purpose of this essay.

⁶⁶ Dworkin, “Free Speech...”, 357.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 363.

⁶⁸ Christiano suggests that here Dworkin departs from his position thoroughgoing instrumentalist approach to democracy he allegedly occupied in “Political Equality”. See: Christiano, “Democracy”.

opinions in order to foster arrival at the most accurate decision.⁶⁹ In the partnership conception the people as a whole act as partners, with equal respect and concern towards each and every member of the community; partnership thus “ties democracy to the substantive constraints of legitimacy”.⁷⁰ The legitimation of a decision requires not only the right way of arriving at it, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, the right content. People should be allowed to take part in decision-making process because this is what the principles of dignity require: “in a true democracy citizens must play a part, as equal partners in a collective enterprise, in shaping as well as constituting the public's opinion.”⁷¹ However, what they agreed upon can – and should – be trumped if it violates these principles.

2.1.3 The role of judicial review – the moral reading of the constitution

Here we arrive at the issues of principle. Because the accuracy of the decisions in choice-sensitive questions depends on the opinions of the people, the decision-making process must take them into account by attempting to equalize impact of all citizens. Although the accuracy of the decisions of choice-insensitive issues is not preferences-dependent, the symbolic goals, agency goals and choice-sensitive accuracy goal require application of the same democratic decision-making mechanism for this category as well. Dworkin claims, however, that other mechanisms are acceptable if we have good reasons to believe that they will deliver more accurate decisions and they do not outrage other egalitarian goals.⁷² According to Dworkin, the practice of judicial review satisfies these conditions. Majoritarians are reluctant to accept this practice: a final decision on salient issues is made by an exclusive body, not a majority. The partnership conception of democracy, on the other hand, does not rule out on principle the practice of judicial review, because it can (though it does not have to)

⁶⁹ Dworkin, “Free Speech...”, 381.

⁷⁰ Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press., 2011), 384.

⁷¹ Dworkin, “Free Speech...”, 358.

⁷² Dworkin, “Political Equality,” 207.

strengthen the legitimacy of the political order, if decisions of the judges improve protection of the principles of dignity.⁷³ The partnership conception of democracy thus presupposes commonly acknowledged existence of the principles of dignity and requires that they are enshrined in the constitution; that is why partnership conception appears in *Freedom's Law* as constitutional conception of democracy.⁷⁴ The aim of the constitutional democracy is “that collective decisions be made by political institutions whose structure, composition, and practices treat all members of the community, as individuals, with equal concern and respect.”⁷⁵ Therefore Dworkin accepts the practice of judicial review as a possible way of protecting citizens against harmful decisions.

Dworkin advocates a particular type of constitutional hermeneutics – a moral reading. Moral reading pays attention to historical legacy by examining the 'biography' of the constitution and constitutional practice, and interprets the abstract provisions of the constitution in accordance with this history and what the framers of the constitution intended to say (which it is not the same as deciphering the what the framers intended to *achieve*).⁷⁶ Constitutional judges cannot ascribe to abstract formulation any particular moral judgment, unless it is in principle consistent with Constitution as a whole and with dominant constitutional practice. “They must regard themselves as partners with other officials, past and future, who together elaborate a coherent constitutional morality”.⁷⁷

How, then, is it possible that there are disagreements concerning constitutional rulings? If principles are written in the Constitution and their interpretation is guided by

⁷³ In fact, Dworkin's case for judicial review against majoritarianism is disappointing. In the end he admits, that he cannot provide any argument in favor of judicial review, only counterarguments to rejection of judicial review on majoritarian basis. Besides that, some of his arguments gain power from its rhetorical, rather than intellectual attractiveness.

⁷⁴ Dworkin, “Introduction: The Moral Reading...”, 17. This is not to say that they are the same. Partnership conception of democracy, it seems, is more preoccupied with horizontal relations, both private and public. Constitutional conception of democracy is focused on the vertical relation between the coercive apparatus of the state and individuals.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

constitutional integrity, what is the source of possible conflict of interpretations? Dworkin does not accept the simplest answer that some judges know the constitutional history better. Rather, the differences are bred by different understanding of what central moral values are embedded in the Constitution.⁷⁸ Although “[j]udges may not read their own convictions into the Constitution”⁷⁹, “moral reading encourages lawyers and judges to read an abstract constitution in the light what *they* take to be justice.”⁸⁰ Every constitutional decision is a partisan decision, not in the sense that it is a decision made by or in favor of a political party, but made by the engaged subject with political convictions. Dworkin praises this personal dimension of constitutional decisions and calls for its explicit acknowledgment:

though these constraints [the text and integrity] shape and limit the impact of convictions of justice, they cannot eliminate the impact. The moral reading insists, however, that this influence is not disreputable, so long as it is openly recognized, and so long as the convictions are identified and defended honestly, by which I mean through proper arguments of principle not just thin slogans or tired metaphors.⁸¹

In this sense the interpretation of the principles of dignity enshrined in constitution is profoundly political.

2.2 Christiano's public equality

In the radical interpretation of Dworkin's partnership conception, democracy would have only instrumental value as long as it delivers decisions which are consistent with the

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 8, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 37.

principles of justice. It is only the condition of disagreement about the substantive content of these principles that renders democracy desirable; in the case of unanimity democracy could have been substituted with a benevolent autocrat without any offense to justice. Christiano opposes this view and claims that the outcome-oriented and the procedure-oriented aspects of evaluating democratic decision-making are irreducible to each other.⁸² He agrees with Dworkin that pure procedure-oriented conception of democracy is a false one;⁸³ however, for him democracy has not only instrumental value but also an intrinsic value as an embodiment of the principle of equality. Christiano calls this position an evaluative dualism.⁸⁴

2.2.1 Democracy as realization of public equality

Christiano begins his non-instrumental argument in favor of democracy by defining his principle of justice as public realization of equal advancement of interests, where interests are understood in a welfarist way as “parts of what is good overall for a person”.⁸⁵ Justice is supposed to balance the interests of individuals in the case of conflict. This principle requires that this balance is struck in a way that persons in principle, given limitations of human cognitive abilities, can see justice being done. It is weakly public principle because it does not require that everyone knows that justice is being done but that everyone can learn it.⁸⁶ Publicity is a separate aspect of justice, which nonetheless impacts on the general assessment of actions as more or less just: just actions are more just when they satisfy the requirement of publicity than when they don't. This does not require, however, that the recipients of justice agree with the principles of justice; it is enough if they can see that they are treated in line

⁸² Thomas Christiano, “The Authority of Democracy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* Vol. 12, No. 3, 2004, 266.

⁸³ Ibid., 269.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 268.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 269.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 270.

with the correct principles of justice.⁸⁷

The requirement of publicity stems from persons' fundamental interests in publicity, background conditions of which are pervasive disagreement and fallibility. Individuals tend to know their own interests much better and be more sensitive to their own harms, which prevent them from proper comparison of their own interests with the interests of others. Thus, persons have three fundamental interests in publicity.⁸⁸ First, it is a safeguarding mechanism against biased individual opinions about equality. Second, since people's judgments tend to reflect their lifestyles, publicity secures that each citizen can contribute to collective decisions and thus make sure that their outcomes at least to some extent conform to their judgments and are not imposed by others without respect to her preferences. Third, publicity give individuals an opportunity to see that they are being treated as having equal moral standing among fellow citizens. It means that treatment-as-equal has to take into consideration perception of the treated; otherwise it amounts to denial of moral recognition. Therefore "[t]he institutions of the society must publicly embody the equal advancement of interests in a way that can be clear in principle to its members."⁸⁹

The three resemble to a certain extent the Dworkin's participatory consequences. The third fundamental interest in publicity is similar a symbolic goal; the second and the first one are differently framed communal and agency goals – they aim at making the individual feel in community as in her community and give her chance to properly express her judgments. The difference seems to lay in the angles from which the relation of political process to interests or goals is approached. In Dworkin the formulation of the goals are established externally from the political process itself; properly designed political process is a tool that helps in achieving them. In other words, participatory goals are set independently of the process and its participants. In Christiano, on the other hand, fundamental interests are those of internal

⁸⁷ Ibid., 271.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 274.

participant involved in political process; they are intrinsic to the process itself. This difference – between 'mere' goals and fundamental interests – is reflected in the attitude towards democracy. To put it in a starker opposition: for Dworkin, democracy is the best instrument for achieving participatory goals provided it is designed in accordance with the requirements of the partnership conception; for Christiano “democratic decision-making is uniquely suited for satisfying this principle [of publicity]” when it comes to decision about common social world under conditions of pervasive disagreement about justice and the common good.⁹⁰ Democracy is a unique intrinsically fair way of collective decision-making, because its formal features of citizens' equality – equality of voting-power, of opportunity to run for offices and to deliberate on public matters – are publicly visible. These institutional features publicly assert also the equal respect for judgments of all members of society by giving them a publicly visible equal say in how society is to be organized.⁹¹

2.2.2 Limits to democratic authority

For Christiano, the intrinsic fairness of democratic decision-making is the reason for the authority of democracy. However, even if decision-making process is inclusive and takes everyone's judgments equally into consideration, because of the cognitive bias and fallibility, many people will feel that the outcomes of the decisions are offending their sense of justice. Nonetheless, Christiano argues that consent or the lack of disagreement is not the *sine qua non* of legitimate political authority. “To act justly it is essential for us to be on the same page with others, to coordinate with them on the same rules. Otherwise, though two people may be perfectly conscientious and even believe in the same basic principles, they will end up violating each other's rights if they follow different sets of rules that implement the same

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 275-6.

principles.”⁹² The state as an authoritative rule maker is morally necessary in order to provide this publicly recognized framework of rules against which the citizens can see that they are publicly treated as equals; and in order for this rule maker to be legitimate it has to treat citizens publicly as equals: it has to provide equal participation of citizens in the rule-making.⁹³

The requirement of public equality also sets the limits of democratic authority in the case when there is a conflict between the decisions of the just decision-making process and what is just independently of the process. It is here where the other dimension of the evaluation of the democratic process comes to the fore – the substantive outcome of decisions arrived at in a democratic way; in this case however the same criterion of legitimacy is applied. The legitimacy of democratic institutions stems from the fact that democracy in itself embodies justice publicly.⁹⁴ Public realization of justice is a sufficient condition for legitimate authority; disobedience is a violation of the duty of justice. Public realization of justice, however, is also necessary condition of legitimate authority.⁹⁵ If the decisions of the assembly outrage justice by either depriving some part of the population of the democratic rights or by violating their basic liberal rights, the assembly itself ceases to publicly realize justice, because these offenses to justice are in themselves a public violation of equality.

2.3 What's wrong with liberal democratic theories?

Charges brought against liberalism by Mouffe (briefly mentioned in Chapter I.) are threefold. I shall present them and later determine their accuracy.

⁹² Ibid., 281. Christiano rejects consent theories of political obligation because they turn the blind eye on the moral necessity of the state. It is possible only by assuming that there are clear and accessible to all natural rights and duties concerning the conduct in a collective. This Christiano rejects.

⁹³ Ibid., 283.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 286.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 287.

2.3.1 Mouffe's critique of liberalism

First, within liberal democratic theory she sees a theoretical analogon of the eradication of the political antagonism and substitution the political with the moral and juridical. Here Mouffe directly refers to Dworkin, who for her is one of the most prominent examples of this tendency. “According to Dworkin all the fundamental questions that a political community faces ... are better resolved by judges, providing they interpret the constitution with the reference to the principle of moral equality.”⁹⁶ Consequently, there is not much left to be resolved in discussion in the political sphere. The moral and the juridical are regarded in liberalism as spheres where impartial decisions are made. Liberal political philosophy is in fact moral philosophy of political institutions.⁹⁷ Her second charge, directed at liberalism at large, states that liberalism is consensus-oriented and focused on rational and reasonable agents. It has two components. First, that the aim of politics in liberal theories is consensus, which Mouffe equates with suppression of conflict and exclusion of those who disagree. Second, this consensus is supposed to be “rational”, which enables to frame the exclusion not as a political act involving power relation but as a result of rational procedures.⁹⁸ “In politics the very distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' is already the drawing of a frontier [between 'Us' and 'Them']; it has political character and is always the expression of a given hegemony.”⁹⁹ In democracy which is committed to the value of equality citizens should be encouraged to question the limits of what is labeled reasonable. The third charge, which wraps the two previous points up, states that liberalism is based on

⁹⁶ Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*, 4. Similar point is made by Ian Shapiro in *The State of Democratic Theory*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26.

⁹⁷ Chantal Mouffe, “Politics and the Limits of Liberalism,” in *The Return of the Political* (London, New York: Verso, 1993), 147.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 142.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

the flawed ontology of the political and the social.¹⁰⁰ This is a more powerful one, since it questions the very foundations on which liberal democratic theory stands.

When it come to the first charge, Dworkin himself would agree. Issues of principle are best resolved by institution of judicial review provided it applies moral reading of a constitution. When it comes to second criticism, a brief analysis of the theories of Dworkin and Christiano suggests that in their case this criticism misses the point.¹⁰¹ The condition of disagreement is one of the most important in their theories of democracy – it renders democracy necessary. Neither consensus nor unanimity are described as desirable not to mention realizable goals. Moreover, plurality of opinions that feeds this disagreement is perceived – in Dworkin explicitly, in Christiano implicitly – as valuable and contributing to both accuracy of decisions and quality of democracy as such.¹⁰² Of course, in their case it has “merely” instrumental value; nonetheless in practice it needs to be taken seriously and *is* the condition of necessity and condition of possibility of proper democracy.

2.3.2 Mistaken political ontology

According to the third charge deployed by Mouffe, liberalism is not capable to grasp the specificity of the political. Consequently, instead of speaking about antagonism, it speaks about the disagreement or the conflict of interests. The ethical individualism¹⁰³ of liberalism cannot properly account for substantive collective identities involved in politics (not merely

¹⁰⁰ See: Mouffe, *Politics and Passions*, 2-7.

¹⁰¹ This obvious weakness might result from the fact that Mouffe deals with liberal democratic theories together with theory of deliberative democracy of Jürgen Habermas together without paying much attention to substantive differences between liberalism and deliberative democracies. Another explanation is that she needs such exaggerated opposition for argumentative purposes.

¹⁰² In case of Christiano plurality of opinions concerning public matters can be considered as an indicator that none of the points of view, no one's judgment has been neglected.

¹⁰³ In fact, Mouffe speaks of methodological individualism of liberalism, which is not entirely correct in this context. Mouffe follows in her critique Schmitt and applies his point to contemporary liberal theories. Contemporary liberalism, however, is capable of accommodating different methodological approaches that individualism – individual motivation might stem not only from their self-interest but also from their collective identities; and this point of departure does not invalidate liberal claim that it is the individual (and her dignity and welfare) that is the ultimate point of reference of contemporary liberals.

interests or judgments) which are created in political struggle by relations of power. According to Mouffe, the result of political struggle *necessarily* generates winners and losers, that is: inequality, regardless the common acceptance of procedures or the substantive.¹⁰⁴ Neither Dworkin's nor Christiano's theory can account for this inequality because they employ distributive conception of equality which conceives equality as a pattern of distribution (of different resources and/or rights), not as a social relation.¹⁰⁵ In Dworkin, political inequality is unequal distribution of opportunity for equal political participation.¹⁰⁶ In Christiano inequality can be determined only in comparison with other citizens; equality, however, still is defined by the equal distribution of voting-power etc. Liberal democratic theories cannot account for this ex-post inequality qua relation of power, because, if the decisions do not offend egalitarian goals or principles by definition (within liberal framework) cannot create inequality and are *morally* justified. It is here where Mouffe's first objection gains more power: substitution of the political with the moral and the juridical conceals the dimension of the power relations involved in every political arrangement, including (or rather: especially) the one concerning the dominant meaning of the principles of justice.

Liberal democratic theorists could respond that their aim is a normative theory of democracy, not a descriptive theory of democratic process. Mouffe would respond that the weakness she points out is not merely an empirical obstacle in realizing their theory but in fact a conceptual one rendering it implausible. The very fact that they choose to create a normative theory is not without political significance: normative theory which seeks to give the firm and definite substantive answer to the question of the best arrangement of a political community in accordance with certain principles does not make sense unless one believes that

¹⁰⁴ For Mouffe the result of the voting in parliament is functionally equivalent to defeat or victory in a battle, however conducted by different means. The aim of democracy is to provide means for conducting conflicts without resorting to killing and dieing. See:

¹⁰⁵ For more detailed account, see: Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the point of Equality," *Ethics* January 1999, 287-337.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

this question can be answered on moral grounds. If like Mouffe one believes that there are no correct answers to moral questions independently of political struggle, then the only questions that make sense are those about the political struggle. It does not mean that political engagement is not motivated by some convictions or values, it only means that it is through the political struggle they can be realized.

2.3.3 Missed critique or valuable insight?

Is this objection fatal to liberal democratic theories? The answer is more complicated than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. As has been shown, the critique of liberal-democratic theories deployed by Mouffe is accurate only to a limited extent. They are neither consensus-oriented, nor particularly hostile to conflict. Indeed, the very *raison d'être* of these theories is the fact of pervasive disagreement about the arrangement of the common world. And the objection that they substitute the political with the moral or the juridical is embraced as a merit by the liberal theorists since their aim as they define it is normative theorizing. However, this critique receives more power once one rejects the liberal political ontology and accepts the ontological premises that inform Mouffe's critique. From this angle, liberal democratic theories suffer from the inability to formulate theory adequate to this ontology. To put it bluntly – Christiano and Dworkin win if the game is played on their field; once the field is changed, however, their theories suddenly lose the appeal.

There is no impartial position from which one could judge which stance is the correct one. In this case metalanguage in which one could impartially describe and assess all political theories does not exist and one needs to decide without a definite, external criterion. It seems to me that it is the conflictual theories of Mouffe and Žižek who better grasp the ontology of the political and the social; this, however, does not automatically mean that they themselves are free from deficiencies. In order to assess them, it is necessary to analytically examine their

structure.

Chapter 3 - Radicalizing or transcending liberal democracy? On Mouffe and Žižek

Theories of Mouffe and Žižek not only differ from liberal democratic theories but also they significantly differ from each other. Both Žižek and Mouffe belong to the group of thinkers whose theories evolved on the basis of the groundbreaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.¹⁰⁷ The authors of this work argued against economic determinism and essentialism of orthodox Marxism, and employ the reinterpreted Gramscian notion of hegemony to support their claim of the radical contingency and the constitutive character of the political for the social. According to the authors of *Hegemony*, society is always already split by fundamental conflict – antagonism – and stabilization of social order is achieved by building a coalition that imposes its vision of the society on the divided social body. Every such coalition – or the chain of equivalences in the language of *Hegemony* – involves relations of power but is unstable and prone to reconfigurations. Politics in this framework is about the vertical struggle for occupation of the place of power; democratic politics in particular, informed by the ideals of freedom and equality, aims at undermining the temporally fixed relations of power.

Both Žižek and Mouffe departed from this original position, however in significantly different directions. In this chapter I compare and assess Mouffe's democratic agonism and Žižek's revolutionism, and point to their main advantages and weaknesses in providing an alternative to real existing liberal democracies. I claim that the noticeable differences in the conceptual language between Mouffe and Žižek express fundamental theoretical differences in their ways of connecting capitalism and democracy. My argument proceeds as follows. First, I present Mouffe's understanding of democracy – how it is informed by her understandings of the identity-making and of the political – and relate it to capitalism.

¹⁰⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

Second, I discuss Žižek's critique of liberal democracy as ideology and its connection to capitalism. Lastly, I discuss the implications of their standpoints.

3.1. Mouffe's plural democracy and pluralist economy

3.1.1 Democracy

Whereas in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* the focus is on hegemonic character of democratic politics, Mouffe's insistence on common symbolic framework in later works deprives democratic politics of this hegemonic aspect.¹⁰⁸ Mouffe defines liberal democracy as a “political form of society”.

[Understood] as a regime, it [liberal democracy] concerns symbolic ordering of social relations. It is a specific form of organizing human coexistence politically that results from the articulation between two different traditions: on the one side, political liberalism (rule of law, separation of powers and individual rights) and, on the other side, the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty.”¹⁰⁹

In a different context, Mouffe, following Carl Schmitt identifies liberal component of liberal democracy with liberty and universalism and democratic component with equality and particularism; the two can never be fully reconciled.¹¹⁰ However the articulation between them installs in liberal democracy a tension which “subvert[s] the tendency towards abstract universalism inherent in liberal discourse” on the one hand, and equality based on exclusion

¹⁰⁸ For very interesting discussion of this problem by comparison with Ernesto Laclau's theory, see: Stefan Rummens, “Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle? Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Model of Politics,” *Constellations* Volume 16, Number 3, 2009, 377-391.

¹⁰⁹ Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy, Power and the “Political”,” *Democracy and Difference*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996), 245-246.

¹¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe, “Introduction: The Democratic Paradox,” in *The Democratic Paradox*, 5.

on the other hand.¹¹¹ Subsequent groups can challenge existing inequalities, rendering them both unnatural and unjust by either demanding the extension of existing right on them (e.g. labor movement demanded universal suffrage) or demanding creation of new rights regulating the inequalities considered hitherto natural (e.g. legislation concerning equal pay for equal work despite gender of the employee).¹¹²

In such an understanding, pluralism amounts to the axiological principle constitutive for modern democracy; it has, however, its limits – the allegiance and commitment to values of liberty and equality and liberal democratic institutions.¹¹³ At the same time Mouffe acknowledges that there is no pluralism without antagonism, because it would presuppose that social relations – including those of power – are between pre-constituted actors with already existing, full identities.¹¹⁴ Mouffe rejects this because, she claims, every identity is created by relations of power:¹¹⁵ every identity is created by the negative reference to other identities and repression of the surplus of meaning resulting from articulation with other identities. Power is not external to identities; rather, identity-creation requires power. Thus, the crucial feature of modern liberal democracy is, for Mouffe, acceptance of pluralism and legitimacy of political conflict, and creation of institutions through which power can be limited and contested. In other words, liberal democracy as institutional arrangement rests on the common acceptance of the principles of liberty and equality as organizing principles of society, where legitimate adversaries struggle over concrete interpretations of these principles¹¹⁶.

Such an understanding of democracy is informed by Mouffe's understanding of identity-creation, which I briefly described above, and by her conception of the political. This notion is taken from Carl Schmitt, however in her theory it undergoes a crucial reformulation.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 44-45.

¹¹² Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics Today," in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* ed. Chantal Mouffe (London, New York: Verso, 1992), 2.

¹¹³ Ibid., 11-12.

¹¹⁴ Mouffe, "Democracy, Power and the "Political", 247. Such a view is labeled by her a "liberal illusion."

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," in *The Democratic Paradox*, 102; see also: Mouffe, "Democratic Politics Today".

In Schmitt the political denotes an existential relationship between friends and enemies which as its ultimate possibility presumes fight for life and death, the possibility of physical extermination.¹¹⁷ A political relationship is also the basis for the most profound identity of the political community. Therefore politics always involves antagonism. For Mouffe the friend-enemy distinction is one of the many possible we/them relationships; another one, desirable in democracy because of the lack of the real possibility of killing and dying, is agonism, in which opposing sides accept the fact that their positions are irreconcilable but nonetheless recognize each other as legitimate adversaries.¹¹⁸ The basis for such a mutual recognition is a shared symbolic framework and allegiance to liberal democracy as regime.

3.1.2 Capitalism

One of the weak sides of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* pointed out by Jonathan Diskin and Blair Sandler in otherwise quite enthusiastic discussion of the book, is undertheorization of the economic realm.¹¹⁹ As Diskin and Sandler note, the authors of *Hegemony* reject economic categories because of their alleged essentialist meaning.¹²⁰ The conclusion is that “the space of the economy is itself structured as a political space, and that in it, as any other ‘level’ of society, those practices we characterized as hegemonic are fully operative.”¹²¹ Thus, the economic inequalities do not rest on the Marxist notion of capitalist exploitation anymore but are reduced to inequalities of power; consequently, notions of capitalism and socialism are reduced to “the names of unequal and equal power in the

¹¹⁷ See: Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political. Expanded Edition* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹¹⁸ See: Mouffe, *On the Political*, chapter 2 “Politics and the Political”. For more detailed elaboration of the difference between Mouffe and Schmitt see also mine “Chantal Mouffe vs Carl Schmitt: The Political, Democracy, and the Question of Sovereignty”, *Hybris. Internetowy Magazyn Filozoficzny* No. 16 (2012), <http://www.filozof.uni.lodz.pl/hybris/pdf/h16/05.Smolenski.pdf>.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Diskin and Blair Sandler, “Essentialism and the Economy in the Post-Marxist Imaginary: Reopening the Sutures,” in: *Rethinking Marxism: Journal of Economics, Culture and Society* Vol. 6, No. 3, 30.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹²¹ Laclau, Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 76-77.

economic realm.”¹²²

A similar weakness characterizes later works by Mouffe. In *On the Political*, in a passage referring to policies of the New Labour under Tony Blair, she describes public-private partnership as the embodiment of the third way post-politics where “neither state (left) nor private sector (right), but their supposed harmonious partnership” prevails.¹²³ In an earlier contribution she states that an obstacle for realization of principles liberty and equality are capitalist relations;¹²⁴ this is why socialism is one of the goals of radical and plural democracy, but, as Mouffe stresses, it has to be recognized “that liberal democratic institutions should be an essential part of any democratization process, and that socialist goals can only be achieved in any acceptable way within a liberal democratic regime.”¹²⁵ Thus, she postulates establishment of a “truly pluralist economy” in which civic associations, public and private actors interact.¹²⁶ These remarks, however, hardly amount to theorization of the economic. An attempt to fill this lacuna has been undertaken by J. K. Gibson-Graham in “Identity and economic plurality: rethinking capitalism and 'capitalist hegemony',”¹²⁷ where they aim to contribute to “a new theory of economic plurality in service to a new politics of economic diversity.”¹²⁸ For them, the existence of capitalism is not a self-evident fact, but the result of capitalist hegemony in the field of the economic. “[T]he economy did not have to be thought as a bounded unified space with fixed capitalist identity. Perhaps the totality of the economic could be seen as a site of multiple forms of economy whose relation to each other only ever partially and temporarily fixed and always under subversion.”¹²⁹ Gibson-Graham

¹²² Diskin and Blair, “Essentialism and the Economy in the Post-marxist Imaginary,” 43.

¹²³ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 63.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 111-112.

¹²⁵ Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” 2.

¹²⁶ Mouffe, “A Politics without Adversary?”, 126.

¹²⁷ J. K. Gibson-Graham, “Identity and economic pluralism: rethinking capitalism and 'capitalist hegemony',” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol. 13, No. 3, 199, 275-282. J. K. Gibson-Graham is a pen name of the tandem of authors Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson. In the text I quote in this paper they refer to themselves in singular.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 275.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 277.

argues the struggle for the pluralist economy takes place at the sites of both the economy and 'the economy' – that is both at practical and conceptual level. When the economy is labeled 'capitalist,' then the signifier 'economy' is hegemonized by particular content and consequently non-capitalist forms of economic activity are defined simple in opposition to and as inferior to the capitalist ones. “[Both] as a constituent and as an effect of 'capitalist hegemony', we encounter the general suppression and negation of economic difference; and in representations of noncapitalist forms of economy, we find a set of subordinated and devalued states of being.”¹³⁰ Moreover, if the economy is labeled 'capitalist' then all noncapitalist forms of economy lose their differences in favor of (quite broad and not very telling) feature of 'noncapitalism'. Gibson-Graham argues that economic institutions and activities have a multifaceted character; they employ the example of financial industry to show that even the sector that is considered thoroughly 'capitalist' is in fact pluralist (there are noncapitalist forms of appropriation in financial industry as well).¹³¹

If the application of Mouffe's theory of politics to the realm of economy by Gibson-Graham is correct (and it seems so) then the economy is seen as the sphere of multiple sites of local struggles and a 'global' site of struggle for hegemony in this realm. In such an approach the realm of economy is not governed by any single logic, the single logic that appears to govern this realm is an effect of the exclusion of (the plurality of) other logics. 'Politics of economic diversity' would, then, quite in line with Mouffe's postulate of 'pluralist economy', aim at an introduction of new economic logics, besides the (currently dominant) market one. Radical and plural democracy *qua* plurality of agents acting accordingly to different logics is also a way of democratizing economy. The tension between capitalism and democracy in Mouffe stems from the fact that capitalism *qua* hegemonic formation in the realm of the economic is based on the domination of market logic which suppresses and excludes plurality

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 280.

of other logics. In other words, uniformizing principle of capitalist hegemony *qua* discursive formation is at odds with pluralizing and egalitarian imaginary of radical and plural democracy.

3.1.3. Radical and plural democracy

Mouffe's interventions are not merely critical towards existing social order, but also aim at creating “radical democratic project”¹³² for the left that would be an alternative for neoliberalism and third way social democracy – her project is radical and plural democracy. In Mouffe's own words, “the objective of the Left should be the extension and deepening of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago.”¹³³ This revolution was predicated on the principles of liberty and equality and lies at the foundations of the modern liberal democracy, and the goal of radical and plural democracy is “the extension of the struggle for equality and liberty in a wide range of social relations”¹³⁴; its aim is to “take its [liberal democracy's] declared principles literally and force liberal democratic societies to be accountable of their professed ideals.”¹³⁵

Given Mouffe's conception of democracy as the competition for dominant interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality, the radical democratic interpretation of these principles seems necessary for effective partaking in politics on behalf of radical democrats.¹³⁶ In her discussion of democratic citizenship, Mouffe claims that it should consist of a set of constitutionally guaranteed social and political rights,¹³⁷ which would safeguard the liberty and equality of all citizens; she also calls for revival of civic republican ideal of

¹³² Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” 13.

¹³³ Ibid., 1.

¹³⁴ Mouffe, “A Politics without Adversary?”, 124.

¹³⁵ Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” 2.

¹³⁶ See: Leah Skrzypiec, “Chantal Mouffe's Radical Democratic Approach to Equality,” conference paper delivered on September 27, 2010 at Melbourne APSA Conference 2010 “Connected Globe: Conflicting Worlds,” http://apsa2010.com.au/full-papers/pdf/APSA2010_0138.pdf (accessed May 8, 2012).

¹³⁷ Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” 4.

political engagement of citizens.¹³⁸ Against theories of justice that are principally and predominantly centered on economic inequalities, Mouffe advocates for 'complex equality', idea which she takes from Michael Walzer.

This means that different social goods should be distributed in accordance with a variety of criteria reflecting the diversity of those goods and their social meanings.... Justice would consist in not violating the principle of distribution that is specific to each sphere [either free exchange, desert or need], and in assuring that success in one sphere is not allowed to exercise dominance in another sphere, as is the case today with wealth.¹³⁹

Such a conception of justice respects pluralism and difference as constitutive for modern democracy and safeguarding the egalitarianism by arguing that differences do not translate into relations of domination. However, Mouffe does not specify how this conception of justice corresponds with her project of radical democracy.

Significant undertheorization of the radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality can be explained partially by their reflexive character: the goal of radical democracy is not to find the “true essence” of these principles but be able to respond to different claims in accordance with these principles.¹⁴⁰ Another theoretically grounded explanation is Mouffe's anti-utopianism and contention that achieving full democracy is impossible.¹⁴¹ Radical and plural democracy, then, is “democracy to come”, which feeds on its own impossibility, in which the *telos* that is to be achieved cannot itself be specified. The condition of impossibility of radical democracy is at the same time its condition of possibility

¹³⁸ E.g. *ibid.*, 12.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁴⁰ Skrzypiec, “Chantal Mouffe's Radical Democratic Approach to Equality.”

¹⁴¹ Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” 14.

– arrival at the *telos* would mean at the same time destruction of democracy.¹⁴² However, by such a celebration of the impossibility of arriving at the ideal and her insistence on pluralism as axiological principle of modern democracy, Mouffe ends up in fetishization of political conflict for the sake of political conflict. It seems that the goal of radical democracy is not to impose radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality as dominant, but rather radical democracy *is* the plurality of competing conceptions and interpretations. Mouffe seems to hope that such a conflictual pluralization on the ground of commonly shared principles of freedom and equality will effectively results in revealing and undermining relations of domination. If this claim, however, is to be something more than unsupported empirical question, Mouffe should provide a some guiding principles or rules which could direct the conflict in a way that really undermines the relations of domination. Unfortunately, this is another lacuna in her theory.

3.2. Žižek – democracy as ideology

Žižek's thought has also developed from the rupture created in the left-wing tradition by the *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. His attitude towards real existing democracy initially was moderately optimistic. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* he claims that the moment of elections is “the moment of the irruption of the Real,” when the whole organized social edifice for a brief moment collapses.¹⁴³ In this moment the contingency of the political reveals itself opening up the emancipatory potential. However in his later writings, the signifier 'democracy' is associated with what Žižek calls *Denkverbot*, which under the moral blackmail of “It has to end in another Gulag” precludes any thinking about the possibility of

¹⁴² Ibid., 13; Chantal Mouffe, “Conclusion: The Ethics of Democracy,” in *The Democratic Paradox*, 136-137.

¹⁴³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New Edition (London, New York: Verso, 2008), 165-167.

fundamental change of what exists¹⁴⁴ – or in other words, it allows changes which actually make sure that nothing is fundamentally changed.

3.2.1 The parallax

Žižek claims that there is a historical connection between capitalism and democracy. More precisely, the legitimacy of formal democracy relies on the fact that its place of power is empty: “the gap between power *qua* place and its place-holder ... is acknowledged 'as such', reflected in the very structure of power ... so the very uncertainty and precariousness of the exercise of power is the only guarantee that we are dealing with a legitimate democratic power.”¹⁴⁵ This uncertainty and precariousness is secured by the moment of contingency during elections when individuals *qua* abstract citizens exercise their political rights to have their say.¹⁴⁶ The very possession of these political rights is granted on the basis of universal, purified of all 'pathological' (in Kantian sense) contingencies, humanity of each individual. Of course, this connection is mediated by belonging to particular political community. However, in liberal tradition this is also considered contingent, and all rights – including political rights – are granted because they are considered universally belonging to each individual *qua* human being. It is in this *form of universality* where the connection of capitalism and democracy is traced by Žižek. Referring to the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, he argues that in a society where market exchange of commodities predominates, people in their daily life relate to themselves and other object they encounter as if they were “contingent embodiments of abstract-universal notions.... The crucial point here is, again, that in a certain specific social conditions (of commodity fetishism and a global market economy), 'abstraction' becomes a direct feature of actual social life, the way concrete individuals behave and relate to their fate

¹⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!”, in: Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 127.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴⁶ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 166.

ant o their social surroundings.”¹⁴⁷

The simple coincidental historical emergence of the particular form of the economic (capitalism) and the particular form of the political realm (democracy) does not amount for any necessary connection between the two. Žižek resorts here to the concept of the parallax: it recognizes that both realms – economy and politics – are not reducible to one or the other.¹⁴⁸

The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the ‘two faces or a vase’: one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them—one has to make a choice. In the same way, we can either focus on the political, reducing the domain of the economy to the empirical ‘servicing of goods’, or on the economic, reducing politics to a theatre of appearances.¹⁴⁹

Important thing to note is that either of these facets is visible to a spectator depending on the point of view. Thus, Žižek is far from essentializing any of the realms however he claims that the necessary link between capitalism and democracy is established retroactively. In other words, the historical development of capitalism (and I would add – democracy) was contingent (in the sense that their constituents emerged contingently), however the logic of capitalist (capitalist-democratic) totality render their connection necessary.¹⁵⁰ Essentially, what follows from Žižek's argument, and what he states explicitly, is that modern formal democracy could have emerged because the realm of the economic has been repressed.

3.2.2 Capital as the Real

There is a structural resemblance between the concept of the parallax as used by Žižek

¹⁴⁷ Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?”, 105.

¹⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “The Parallax View,” *New Left Review* 25, January-February 2004, 127-129.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “*Da Capo Senza Fine*,” in: Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 225.

and his understanding of the notion of the antagonism. Antagonism, for Žižek, is the radical rupture within the social body that prevents it from achieving organic, stable unity. As which facet of the vase one sees depends on the point of view, similarly antagonism is differently perceived by the different social actors.¹⁵¹ Elements of antagonistic relations not only differ in terms of their positive identities, of occupying different places in the shared space, but also in more radical sense, they differ over what they differ over and what the very space they take positions in is like. In Lacanian terms, antagonism is the traumatic Real that resists symbolization.¹⁵² The politics proper emerges from this rupture within the social – it emerges from the point of the remainder of the social body that does not have its proper place in it. Thus, liberal democracy – with all its components of multicultural tolerance and human rights – serves as an ideological fantasy: it conceals the structural impossibility of society by externalizing the conflict from within the social body into the conflict between democracy and fundamentalists. “In short, the basic operation of ideology is not only the dehistoricizing gesture of transforming an empirical obstacle into an eternal condition (women, Blacks ... are by nature subordinated, etc.), but also opposite gesture of transposing the a priori closure/impossibility of a field into an empirical obstacle.”¹⁵³ In other words, democracy *qua* ideology carries a promise that a fully reconciled democratic society can be achieved if those who oppose it – presented as simply external obstacle – are gotten rid of.

In the context of contemporary liberal democracy, however, Žižek also defines Capital as the Real.¹⁵⁴ He claims that despite different ideologico-political reconfiguration within liberal democracy, “today's Real which sets a limit to resignification is Capital: the smooth

¹⁵¹ Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism,” 112-113.

¹⁵² Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, (London, New York: 2006), 249.

¹⁵³ Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?”, 101.

¹⁵⁴ Žižek, “*Da Capo Senza Fine*”, 223. In fact, Žižek's critique is even more extreme and aimed mainly in this text at his former fellows in struggle, Laclau and Mouffe, and their project of radical democracy. This criticism fits also liberal democracy.

functioning of Capital is that which remains the same, that 'always returns to its place'.¹⁵⁵ It is so because both liberal democracy and global capitalism are the two faces of the same vase, or in the words of Jodi Dean “democracy is the form our attachment to Capital takes.”¹⁵⁶ Liberal democracy is an ideological fantasy precisely because it displaces the antagonism from within the society – antagonism stimulated by the conflict within the socioeconomic – and places it outside the social body as an external struggle. In Žižek's view, Capital is the force that imposes its own rules of the game, and, according to him, this game is called (real existing) liberal democracy; global Capital is a totality¹⁵⁷ that colonizes all aspects of everyday life. This is why Žižek does not argue for local struggles against particular injustices; such an approach, typical for liberal democracy, deprives any claim of its properly political meaning, prevents it from standing for the fundamental exclusion/injustice that is a foundation of society as organized structure. It is not politics proper, since it is not done from the place of the universal remainder; it also reinforces global Capital because it is performed within the rules of the game set by it, it plays along the lines of the logic of capitalist exchange that aims at satisfying particular needs. Politics proper aims at reconfiguration of the basic rules of the game; it traverses the fantasy and touches the Real. Therefore, it has to be anticapitalistic but by this very token it also has to be anti-democratic.¹⁵⁸

3.2.3 Žižek's Idea of communism

Žižek's response to liberal-democratic capitalism is the Idea of communism. It is an attempt to resuscitate via the notion of commons the political alternative to capitalist

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Jodi Dean, “Žižek against Democracy,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2005; 1, 155.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 165.

¹⁵⁸ In fact, Žižek claims that the link between capitalism and democracy, the link which both in political imagination and political practice kept them both together, is now over; what we are doomed to is capitalism with Asian values, that is authoritarian capitalism. Nonetheless, for him, democracy is not the idea that is capable of pushing political imagination for the struggle for freedom and equality. See: Slavoj Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning,” in *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, (London, New York: Verso, 2010).

democracy, an alternative that would not accept as its basic assumptions the very principles on which liberal-democratic capitalist order is built. According to Žižek, contemporary stage of capitalism is marked by four fundamental antagonisms:¹⁵⁹ a potential ecological catastrophe which cannot be prevented by resorting to market solutions; private property rights for 'intellectual property' (from 'general intellect' as means of symbolic production to genomes) that deprive people from what has by now been perceived as naturally either personal or intersubjective; “socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in bioethics)” which cannot be addressed anymore by resorting to known ethical standards; new forms of apartheid, new walls and slums, the division between Excluded and Included. The first three correspond (although not cover one to one) the domain of 'commons' (the notion, which Žižek takes from Hardt and Negri):¹⁶⁰ the cultural commons which are the linguistic, symbolic and material infrastructure of communication and education (from signs to language to post services); the commons of external nature (natural resources, air, natural habitat); the commons of internal nature (human biology and genomes). It is the resistance to enclosure of these commons that justifies resuscitation of the notion of communism.

The antagonism between the Excluded and the Included, is, as Žižek insists, qualitatively different from the other three because it refers to the subject position from which other antagonisms are perceived and engaged in, it “is the zero-level antagonism, coloring the entire terrain of struggle.”¹⁶¹ Žižek does not theorize this exclusion in moral terms; he rather says that it is the product of global capitalism – it is the structural position within the system but without a proper place in it rather than deprivation of some essential good or violation of rights which determines the proletarian position that defines the exclusion (deprivation and poverty simply follows from this structural positioning). Proletarian position is the position of

¹⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London, New York: Verso, 2008), 421-424.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 428-429.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 428.

the “part of no-part”¹⁶² and paradoxically it gives the ground to make universal claims: “in politics, universality is asserted when such an agent with no proper place, 'out of joint', posits itself as the direct embodiment of universality against all those who do have a place within the global order.”¹⁶³ And looking at the social developments from the position of those who are systematically excluded from it is an ethical imperative of communist politics. This maintains the reference of the Idea of communism to the real, concrete social antagonism.¹⁶⁴

In the introduction to the volume dedicated to the Idea of communism Žižek writes that “Communism aims to bring about freedom and equality. Freedom cannot flourish without equality and equality does not exist without freedom.”¹⁶⁵ The difference between him and Mouffe is clear and lies in the articulation between the principles of freedom and equality: whereas in Mouffe these principles can and do conflict, in Žižek they are co-original and mutually dependent. This equality-cum-freedom, or *égaliberté* (equaliberty), is supposed to be realized under the “dictatorship of proletariat”, by which Žižek means “*not* a State-form in which the working class is ruling” but a transformation of the state “relying on new forms of popular participation.”¹⁶⁶ On the final pages of *In Defense of Lost Causes* Žižek (borrowing from Alain Badiou's works) sketches the communist response to ecological catastrophe. According to him equal limits per capita for exploitation of nature (e.g. carbon dioxide emissions, energy consumption) should be imposed world wide and strictly executed, even if this requires breaching liberal individual rights.¹⁶⁷ Nonetheless he fails to elaborate these points more thoroughly in his own works and they remain untheorized. He claims that what is haunting the failed attempts of egalitarian alternatives is the Idea of communism;¹⁶⁸ this idea, however, remains empty of theoretical prescriptive content – Žižek himself refers to it as

¹⁶² Ibid., 430.

¹⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, “Holding the Place,” in: Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 313.

¹⁶⁴ Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning,” 211.

¹⁶⁵ Costas Douzinas, Slavoj Žižek, Introduction to *The Idea of Communism*, eds. Douzinas, Žižek, x.

¹⁶⁶ Žižek, “How to Begin from the Beginning,” 220.

¹⁶⁷ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 461.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 217.

merely a 'name'.¹⁶⁹ Ultimately, it seems, that Žižek uncompromisingly holds to the Idea only in order to keep the space for global political and socioeconomic alternative open even if the alternative itself remains empty.¹⁷⁰

To sum up, it can be said that although both Mouffe and Žižek started their (most important) theoretical contribution from the position prepared by the *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the former went on the constructivist path, whereas the latter moved towards more classical Marxist stance. Thus, for the former, democracy *qua* creation, undermining, and recreation of social identities and relations of power within liberal democratic framework is the model of emancipatory politics; the latter rejects it on the basis of the claim of overwhelming force of capitalism and calls for questioning liberal democracy along with the questioning capitalism. The negativity subverting every existing social order, which underlies Mouffe's notion of radical and plural democracy, can be accommodated within liberal democratic regime – liberal democracy can be 'radicalized' and 'pluralized' from within. 'Capitalism' as the name of inequality of power within the realm of the economy is opposed democracy as the embodiment/institutionalization of the power that subverts these relations. In contrast, for Žižek liberal democracy, being founded on the depoliticization of economy, serves as an ideological fantasy for assuring the smooth circulation of Capital. What is needed is the leap into the contingency of the political that would change the basic coordinates of the system (shared assumptions that go without saying).

¹⁶⁹ Douzinas, Žižek, "Introduction", viii.

¹⁷⁰ See also: Žižek, "Holding the Place", 325.

Chapter 4 - The Assessment. Towards a radical democratic communism?

The research questions stated in the introduction to this thesis require determining 1. whether examined theories provide a theoretical foundation for stepping beyond actually-existing liberal democracy and 2 whether they provide an alternative vision of the society. Question 1 is about the prescriptive content of the theories of Mouffe and Žižek. The underlying assumption here is that in order to be attractive as a mobilizing factor for political action, a theory needs a prescriptive element that sketches the goals and stakes of political action. Question 2 is a comparative one in the sense that it is concerned with the differences between theories of Mouffe and Žižek on the one hand and the liberal democratic theories presented in Chapter II on the other.¹⁷¹ The subject matter of the two questions overlap; however, it is worth separating them analytically in order to highlight strong and weak points of the theories of Mouffe and Žižek; thus, the criterion of assessment has two aspects: internal, concerning the content of prescriptive part of the theories in question, and comparative one concerning the differences between them and their liberal democratic competitors.

In this chapter relying on the aforementioned criterion I argue that theories of both Mouffe's and Žižek's have their drawbacks on which I elaborate in the first section. In the second section I suggest the way to overcome these weaknesses by extracting the most attractive points of their theories; I mediate these points by the already mentioned notion of

¹⁷¹ I am aware of the fact that the two criteria are purely formal and they are not able to assess whether the prescriptions proposed by authors are in fact desirable (there is no way to distinguish, say, the socialist theory from neo-fascist one). The lack of the third criterion for desirability is justified by two reasons. First, the development of such a criterion is not in the scope of this thesis. It is taken for granted that desirable theories favor emancipation rather than disemancipation. Second, given the political ontology of Mouffe and Žižek there is no external and impartial position from which one can resolve the debate about the desirability, therefore the establishment of the firm criterion is impossible. (It does not contradict the first reason since the claim that the desirable theories favor emancipation rather than disemancipation reflects the ethico-political convictions rather than is the statement about the facts).

relational equality.

4.1. The assessment

4.1.1 Mouffe's not-so-radical alternative

Mouffe's prescriptive theory aims at deepening liberal democracy by radicalization of the principles of freedom and equality. In the radical and plural democracy pluralism is considered an axiological principle and institutions serve not to repress the political conflict but to domesticate its destructive potential by transforming it into agonistic struggle of legitimate adversaries. Mouffe argues that Walzer's complex equality is the conception of equality that is committed to egalitarianism without sacrificing pluralism and thus fits her idea of radical and plural democracy. However, her conception suffers from undertheorization. The “radicalization of the principles of freedom and equality” does not receive substantial meaning; neither does she provides radical democratic interpretation of these principles. Ultimately, the project of “radical and plural democracy” remains undertheorized and functions in fact more as a regulative idea, towards which we should strive but is unattainable.

In fact, what Mouffe proposes under the label of radical plural democracy is not as distant from liberal democratic theories as one could expect after reading her critique of liberal democratic theories. Her insistence on conflict and pluralism does not depart far from liberal democratic theories of Dworkin and Christiano. Both of them insist that conflict – or what they call disagreement – is the background for liberal democracy as they envision it and the very content of liberal democratic politics. Mouffe claims that pluralism amounts to the axiological principle of liberal democracy in its radical democratic reading; however, neither in Dworkin nor in Christiano is pluralism a mere fact. Rather it is a condition which enables the people to make informed decisions concerning preferred policies (Dworkin) and is a

simple consequence of a moral duty of paying equal respect to everybody's opinion (participatory goals of Dworkin and interests in publicity of Christiano). Her most radical claim concerning democratization of subsequent spheres of social life goes beyond what Dworkin and Christiano prescribe; however her insistence on the importance on liberal aspect of liberal democracy (rule of law, liberal individual rights, etc) seriously limit the scope of this democratization. In other words, Mouffe's language of critique is more radical than her actual prescriptions.

4.1.2 Žižek's empty radicalism

The prescriptive part of Žižek's theory steps beyond what could be accepted or confined in liberal democracy. His open rejection of liberal rights, advocating for different modes of popular participation than the ones suggested in liberal democracy, and open rejection of real existing liberal democracy as sustaining hegemony of global capitalism, is in open conflict with liberal ideas of individual rights and representative, liberal democratic form of government. It is also incompatible with Mouffe's radical and plural democracy which stresses the significance of the liberal component of liberal democracy *qua* political form of society. It seems that Žižek's theory satisfies the second criterion better than Mouffe's.

However, at closer inspection, the Idea of communism proposed by Žižek is empty. The description of possible communist arrangement described by him *a propos* ecological catastrophe can hardly be a pattern for arrangements concerning the antagonisms over commons that cannot be distributed (like language). Even more enigmatic is a conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat *qua* “new forms of popular participation”. His total critique prevents him from formulation of a positive image of what is at stake in the struggle for change and advocates for immediate abolition of the existing order in comprehensive revolutionary act. To put it differently, what is at stake for Žižek is no more (and no less) than

the (never secured) *possibility* of creating something new.

4.1.3 The political and the social

The core of the difference between Mouffe and Žižek will become clearer if approached from another angle, that is the angle of the relation between the social (including the economic) and the political. Malcolm Bull argues that the relation between the political and the social is circular:¹⁷² the political presupposes the social in the sense as an antagonistic but purely formal relation between (public) friends and enemies, or between the social body and “the part of no-part,” as Žižek defines it, it needs the sphere of the intersubjective, the existing substantive relations to feed upon. In other words, the political is parasitic and responsive to the social. On the other hand, however, it is constitutive for the social in the sense that it structures it into fixed edifice of social relations. Thus the social and the political conceptually presuppose each other.

Although the question about what is first – the social or the political – resembles the chicken-egg problem, at which point one enters the circle of the social-the political mutual presupposition has in the case of Žižek and Mouffe profound consequences. For Mouffe it is the political that is constitutive for the social. Looked at from this perspective, the social, and whatever concrete form it assumes, is purely contingent on political struggle and in itself of minor significance when it comes to its own efficacy. On the other hand, one of her prime concerns about today's politics is convergence of political actors around the center and naturalization of neoliberal capitalism.¹⁷³ If, however, capitalism, or the social in general, is considered the contingent outcome, or contingent and always temporary solidification, of political struggle and not given proper attention, as it happens to be in the case of Mouffe, it is impossible to see how particular form of the social impacts on the political and politics. To

¹⁷² Malcolm Bull, “The Social and the Political,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104:4, Fall 2005, 676-692.

¹⁷³ See: Chapter I of this thesis.

put it bluntly, because of the neglect of the social in her analysis of democratic politics, Mouffe's theory is impotent in theoretization of the issues she recognizes as crucial. Consequently, her moderately anti-capitalist stance is accompanied by political strategy which is inadequate to it. In contrast, Žižek, following more traditional Marxist approach, begins with the analysis of the concrete form of the social – late capitalism – as impacting on the political and politics. Consequently, if the political not only constitutes but also feeds on the particular form of the social, then the proper analysis of the latter can inform the political strategy. This theoretical point of departure and resulting from it critique of capitalism and its limitations of democratic politics is the strongest part of Žižek's theory: it leads to the conclusion that questioning of inequalities produced by capitalism requires questioning the current system altogether.

4.2. Towards 'radical democratic communism'?

Although the theories of Mouffe and Žižek have failed to satisfy the two aspects of the criterion of assessment, I nonetheless believe that they contain valuable points. Žižek's critical insight into the mechanisms of contemporary capitalist democracy enables him to touch the root of the problem – that is to question the natural, or rather naturalized, character of social inequalities resulting from the operation of economy, and the economic stability as the limit of democratic politics. Mouffe's account of the articulation between 'capitalism' and 'democracy,' and perception of capitalism as discursive formation, does not reach the root of the problem, that is the limitation of contemporary democratic politics by the requirements of economic stability (or what political economists call the structural dependence of state on capital); however, her vision of political struggle as consisting of multiplicity of local struggles seems to be more compelling and realistic than Žižek's comprehensive revolutionary act. I argue that

although the whole theories of Žižek and Mouffe are not compatible, it is possible extract from them and synthesize their valuable insights.

4.2.1 Equality – the goal beyond rights¹⁷⁴

It is not enough to argue, as Mouffe does, for more social rights and the extension of citizenship to include the so-called social question. Karl Marx's argument from “On the Jewish Question” that liberal rights of political participation and formal freedom and equality do not – and cannot – address the fundamental inequality produced by the inequalities in private property ownership, that is produced by capitalist relations, should be considered seriously in this context.¹⁷⁵ The criticism Marx deploys against Bruno Bauer's idea of the political emancipation seems to apply to Mouffe as well: the very form of rights upholds the detachment of the political from the social and addresses the question of inequality at the level of politics only.¹⁷⁶ As Sthatis Kouvélakis puts it,

Rather than being linear extensions of the notion of “right,” the different “social” rights, because they cannot, precisely, be legally defined in the mode of the property right and its corollaries (as so many individual rights that can be opposed to a specific “debtor”), but only as “claims on the collectivity,” opposable to everyone and no one in particular (if not public power, that is, the state), turn out to depend on political determinations and thus cannot claim the same legal status as other rights.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ The discussion about rights in the last two sections of this chapter is by no means meant to be a comprehensive critique but rather is meant as a reminder of the importance of thinking the substantial equality and freedom beyond rights. As it will be clear later, emancipatory struggle can use a language of rights to further the cause.

¹⁷⁵ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>, (accessed May 23, 2012).

¹⁷⁶ See: Sthatis Kouvélakis, “The Marxian Critique of Citizenship: For a Rereading of *On the Jewish Question*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104: 4, Fall 2005, 715.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 716. This is a valid objection even if we interpret right not as possessions of individuals of some different nature than material property but as the definition of the relation of the individual towards the state. Classical liberal rights a protective shield of the individual against other individuals. Social rights on the

It is this internal split in rights between 'freedom rights' and 'rights-claims' that makes them rather ambiguous tool efficacy in emancipatory struggle.

No wonder then, that Anderson describes her understanding of relational equality not only in the language of rights pertaining to individuals, but in the language of duties the community owes to individuals and individuals owe to each other – it is the obligation that is at the center of her conception.¹⁷⁸ The reason is that for her inequality does not stem from the natural features of people they need to be compensated for, but rather from social relations which prioritize and create the hierarchy of these features. In Anderson's conception of equality as democratic equality the community is obliged to provide individuals with certain capabilities: “[n]egatively, people are entitled to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive social relationships. Positively, they are entitled to the capabilities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state.”¹⁷⁹ Although both aspects overlap, there is a difference between them: whereas the positive aspect is concerned with formal equality and social preconditions of it, the negative aspect aims at abolition of private relations of domination. In line with the radical core of this conception, obscured unfortunately by the attempt to specify the content of democratic equality, the claims for equality stem from concrete antagonisms and relations of domination. Using the phraseology of Amartya Sen, Anderson claims that democratic equality guarantees effective access to certain levels of certain functionings by securing the “effective access to a package of capabilities sufficient for standing as an equal over the course of an entire life.”¹⁸⁰ It seems that this substantiation of the conception drags attention away from the fact that both

other hand are demands that cannot be translated into the protective device against the encroachment of others into our private sphere; they do not oblige others not to do something (and the state to interfere in case of the violation of a right) but rather oblige to do something.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?”, 330.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 316.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 318-319.

capabilities and (in)equality are defined by the concrete social contexts (including the context of capitalist production and free market exchange), which is the core of the argument. The notion of capabilities, however, links equality and freedom in a way that shows that the one is indispensable if the other is to be achieved.

In this context the ambiguity of rights are clearly visible. Addressing the social inequalities as relational and socially produced requires not only negative rights but above all positive rights. Similarly, the point Marx makes in “On the Jewish Question” is that the Enlightenment's ideals of freedom¹⁸¹ and equality require 'concretization' of abstract formal rights; this concretization must be formulated not only in the form of freedom rights (or negative rights) but also, and to a large extent primarily, in the form of rights-claims (positive rights). However, the ultimate goal of emancipatory politics and concrete emancipatory struggle escapes the language of rights *qua* abstract provisions. In fact, this position is not far from the one held by some egalitarian liberals who would agree that satisfaction of formal rights is not enough for achieving equality – rights are just tools for addressing the problem, not ends in themselves. The difference, however, is that the question of inequalities is addressed not from the point of view of abstract principles, but from the point of view of engagement in concrete antagonism.

4.2.2 The significance of local struggles

Žižek's insight concerning the main antagonism in the contemporary world – the one between the Included and Excluded – can give us the clue where to look for the most fundamental inequalities, which demand questioning of the socioeconomic and political structures sustaining these inequalities. However, in the case of Žižek, this questioning assumes the form of comprehensive revolution that in one act sweeps and reshuffles entire

¹⁸¹ It is worth noting that for young Marx himself, the ethical ideal of collective life was not equality but freedom. See: Paul Blackledge, “Marxism and ethics,” *International Socialism. A quarterly journal of socialist theory* Issue 120, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=486=120>, (accessed May 17, 2012).

social reality. This tactic (as opposed to strategy) seems rather improbable taking into account the practicalities: one cannot, say, nationalize all natural resources at once, but rather has to do it more gradually. Moreover, revolution as comprehensive act might not be even required. If capitalism, as Žižek claims, is historically contingent, that is built of many elements which only in articulation with each other create 'the logic of capitalism', and only retroactively establishes its necessity, it might be enough to undermine one element of the capitalist totality to render it unnecessary: far reaching change that reshapes both the political and the social “may only require some slight and apparently inconsequential shift in the balance of social relations at a far-from-equilibrium bifurcation point on the edge of capitalism.”¹⁸² It is through the local struggles advocated by Mouffe that the 'revolution' can be made. A hard-core Žižekian would argue against this idea by claiming that capitalism internalizes any opposition, unless it is questioned altogether. There are two responses to this argument. First, the problem of practicalities remains. Second, one does not exclude the other, if the former – local struggles – is used as tactic and the latter – abolition of inequalities of liberal democratic capitalism – as the strategic goal.

For Kouvélakis, in fact, the question of rights is more nuanced than it may appear from the quote cited three paragraphs above. “[I]f there has been an 'extension' of citizenship, this has been as a very condition of its 'disabstractification,' of the extension of the sphere of politics itself, of the reexamination, under the effect of struggles by classes and dominated groups, under the effect of the separations of civil-bourgeois society.”¹⁸³ Rights are tools, stakes, and signs of victories in political struggle. To quote Kouvélakis again, “It is therefore not a question of abandoning the field of right (struggles in the realm of right and for rights are constitutive dimensions of class struggle) but of determining its limits. We must see that

¹⁸² Eugene Holland, “Non-Linear Historical Materialism: Some Political Implications of a Minor Marxism,” unpublished manuscript of the conference presentation given at the CONNECTdeleuze: The Second International Deleuze Studies Conference on August 11, 2009.

¹⁸³ Kouvélakis, “The Marxian Critique of Citizenship...”, 714.

the struggles of dominated peoples, even when they are expressed in terms of right and rights, *exceed* right; they speak, in the final analysis, of something else.”¹⁸⁴ Thus, jettisoning the local struggles within real existing liberal democracy as Žižek does is all too quick and in this case it is Mouffe who is right about their significance. The struggle for emancipation takes place within liberal democracy (and capitalism) and against it, or more precisely, aims beyond real existing liberal democracy.

To conclude, I claim that theories of Mouffe and Žižek suffer from certain deficiencies. 'Radical democratic communism,' which I suggest as an alternative, uses local struggles as a tactic for a strategy of comprehensive sociopolitical transformation grounded in concrete antagonism: 'democracy' is the current tactic of struggle; 'communism' stands for the aim of universal emancipation that is beyond real existing liberal democracy requires its transcendence; and 'radical' describes the attitude which, to use Marx's words, “grasp[s] the root of the matter:”¹⁸⁵ the axiomatic, not just formal or regulative, unconditional freedom and equality of all men, which obliges us to detect the concrete inequalities and act against them.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 717.

¹⁸⁵ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction,” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> (accessed May 25, 2012).

Conclusions

Political philosophy is, as Leo Strauss noted, the search for the knowledge of good – preferably the best – society.¹⁸⁶ It aims at practical implications and if these implications are to be considered by the philosopher herself as possible for implementation, they have to be informed by what is happening in the real world, even if this 'realist' reference is only negative, critical one. This aim also inform the idea and the goal of this thesis. Taking as the point of departure the diagnosis of the post-political condition presented by Mouffe and Žižek in their works, I examined and assessed their theories as potential alternatives for real existing democracies. In the course of my research I concluded that the criticism deployed by Mouffe against liberal democratic theories in the context of post-politics is legitimate only to limited extent, when confronted with the actual liberal democratic theories of Dworkin and Christiano; moreover, the prescriptive content of her theory seem to be not that distant from their postulates: she accepts liberal democracy as a desirable political form of society and the one within which radical democratic goals can be realized. The main difference lies in the political and social ontology, where Mouffe acknowledges the ontological importance of the political; at the same time it is the strongest criticism.

Žižek's theory is more radical in that he stresses the necessity of transcending liberal democracy for the sake of more free and egalitarian society. The difference between the two theorists stems from the different articulation between 'capitalism' and 'democracy'. The claim that the socioeconomic is also ultimately (and always already) political leads Mouffe to conceptual and theoretical detachment of 'capitalism' and 'democracy'. This detachment enables her to accept these notions as the names for inequality of power in the realm of economic and the equalizing principle respectively. Žižek, on the other hand, sees the

¹⁸⁶ Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 3. (Aug., 1957), 343-368.

historically grounded link between capitalism and democracy, and thus for him 'democracy' cannot serve as the name for the emancipatory project. Indeed, whereas 'capitalism' designates the totalizing force that transcends its own limits and internalizes its own critique and externality, 'democracy' is just the ideological phantasy that sustains the domination of capitalism. The two theories, however, have their own limitations: Žižek's proposal ultimately remains empty; Mouffe's prescription, despite the radical language of critique of liberal democratic theories, is not fundamentally different.

The contribution of this thesis has been threefold. First, I confronted the radical critiques of liberal democracies with actual liberal democratic theories represented by Christiano and Dworkin; this is a contribution to the dialogue between different traditions of political philosophy. Although finding the common language in which Christiano and Dworkin on the one hand and Mouffe on the other could be impartially described proved to be impossible (this very fact highlights the differences that separate them); it however showed that informed and genuine dialogue between these traditions is possible. As challenging as it was, it proved also to be enriching. Second, I compared the theories of Mouffe and Žižek in a novel way, by highlighting the differences in the articulation between 'capitalism' and 'democracy' and drawing conclusions from this for both theories and advocated political praxes. Third, I suggested a possible way out of the shortcomings the theories of Mouffe and Žižek suffer from if taken separately. I suggested 'radical democratic communism' as a way of appreciating local struggles without giving up the aim of transcending the *status quo* into radically different, more egalitarian and free, socio-political order; and proposed Anderson's conception of relational equality as the normative core and guidance for political action.

The conclusions of this thesis point to several topic areas worth further investigation. First, of mostly theoretical value, would be a more thorough confrontation of the liberal democratic theories with their critics from other traditions that analytical philosophy,

including not only open criticism but also implicit charges. This confrontation should assume the form I applied in thesis, that is the attempt to translate the theories and critiques into languages of their interlocutors. Second, the relation between the socioeconomic and the political in general and between democracy and capitalism in particular is worth investigating. As this research shows, the particular way of articulating 'capitalism' with 'democracy' has profound theoretical implications even among authors who seemingly come from the same tradition. Moreover, recent political and economic developments – the world economic crisis of 2008 and its aftermaths – renders the topic timely. Third, a more elaborate normative content for the theory that transcends liberal democracy is worth searching for. Any failure in such an enterprise should be grounded theoretically (even if the theory is heavily informed by reality), not preemptively declared by reference to historical failures. Commitment to freedom and equality in concrete life of all men impose, to quote Marx again, “the categoric imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence”¹⁸⁷ – whatever their origin.

¹⁸⁷ Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction.”

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