

Proposal for a panel at the PSA Conference 5-8 April 2020 in Edinburgh

Quo Vadis Radical Democracy?

Panel chairs: Dannica Fleuß (Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg) and Hans Asenbaum (IASS Potsdam)

This panel raises the question what the future holds for radical democracy both on a conceptual and a practical level. The term “radical democracy” was originally used to describe anarchist and socialist conceptions of council democracy. In the 1960s and 70s it served debates about participatory democracy calling for a democratization of every sphere of life. In recent years, however, radical democracy has become closely associated with agonistic perspectives on pluralist contestation. At a conceptual level, this raises the following questions: Are radical and agonistic democracy the same? How does radical democracy relate to the work of autonomist Marxist thinkers? Does radical democracy stand in opposition to more reformist approaches to revitalizing democracy? How “radical” is deliberative democracy?

The manifold approaches to radical democracy have always been intimately linked with a critique of existing liberal democratic institutions and demands for social transformations. Therefore, these conceptual debates lead to some practical questions: What are the means for social transformation proposed by agonistic and autonomist Marxist approaches to radical democracy? Are they compatible with the means for social transformation proposed by deliberative democracy? Can, for example, deliberative mini-publics be part of radical democratic transformations? This panel is also interested in the responses various radical democratic approaches can provide to cope with present and future challenges for democracy such as digitalization, populism, climate change, and mass migration.

Radical Democracy and Questions of Political Crisis

Paulina Tambakaki (University of Westminster)

The paper examines the ways that different versions of radical democracy address questions of political crisis. It suggests that despite their differences they all suggest that the problem with democracy today lies in the way that its institutions operate. Seen to dominate and distort processes of popular communication (according to critical deliberative democrats); normalise and exclude identities, differences and sentiments that do not conform with prevalent norms (according to agonistic theories); and impoverish and exploit the masses that democracies are supposed to serve (according to radical theories), democratic institutions both instigate and undermine the need to repair democracy. They instigate processes of democratic repair because some kind of loss – of control, trust or possibility – is behind scenarios of repair. Institutions, nonetheless, also prevent democratic repair because it is, in the end, their inadvertent operations and, crucially for my argument, the inescapability of such operations, which prevents repair: institutionalised oppressions, closures, and exploitation.

To be sure, these are ‘impediments’ always worth studying and calling into question. Critical deliberative theory, agonism, and radical theorising do just that. They keep a sharp focus on institutional structures and they alert us to their limits. In so doing, they certainly reinforce the argument that the challenges confronting democratic structures must be probed further. But they miss its urgency and specificity, when they always fall back on institutional functions to explain the obstacles confronting repair. They underestimate the nature of the contemporary

challenges confronting democracy – hence the focus on repair. They also misplace the nature of the loss that is produced today. The paper, which positions this loss at the affective register, intimates that a focus on experiential politics holds better promise for triggering democratic transformations.

Deliberative Anarchism

William Smith (The Chinese University of Hongkong)

Abstract: This paper considers a hitherto neglected way of thinking about radical democracy in the twenty-first century, through positing a constructive dialogue between deliberative democracy and contemporary anarchism. Such a dialogue is not as counterintuitive as it may first appear. Deliberative democrats such as Jürgen Habermas have famously alluded, albeit in a somewhat metaphorical way, to the ‘anarchic’ communicative processes that both underpin and lay siege to legitimate democratic institutions. And contemporary anarchists, unlike their classical forebears, endorse indisputably deliberative democratic motifs like non-hierarchical consensus-building and horizontal communication within and across differentially situated groups. This paper will draw on these connections to explore the idea of deliberative anarchism. The plausibility of this ideal rests on the intuition that there is a kind of overlapping consensus between deliberative democrats and contemporary anarchists on their most basic normative commitments, which include egalitarianism, autonomy, and political emancipation. Their differences often revolve around issues of political strategy and tactics, with deliberative democrats far more willing than anarchists to work within rather than against existing institutions and power structures. These differences cannot and should not be fully resolved. At the same time, this paper advances the provocative thesis that what unites deliberative democrats and contemporary anarchists is often much more significant than what divides them. This is illustrated through taking a closer look at the paradigmatic anarchist practice of ‘direct action’, showing how its prefigurative, egalitarian and autonomist dimensions can be powerfully re-framed through reference to the ideals of deliberative democracy.

Green Radical Democracy: Dynamics of collective identification in climate politics

Amanda Machin (University Witten/Herdecke)

Recent climate protests indicate a growing public awareness and concern regarding the issue of climate change. Children, grandparents, scientists, farmers, activists and ‘yellow vests’ rally to decry the inaction of their representatives and to demand policy change. Is this a demonstration that prevailing institutions of representative democracy are in crisis? Or does it, on the contrary, rather illustrate their continuing authority? By deferring to experts and leaders are these protests merely shoring up the prevailing socio-economic structures? Or do they potentially challenge existing power relations?

In this contribution I ask whether contemporary environmental concerns might offer the opportunity for a moment of radical democracy. I focus particularly on the (re)construction of collective political identities. My starting point is that the articulation of a ‘we’ antagonistically

defined against a ‘they’ is integral to radical democracy, and that structural change in environmental politics makes requisite a strong collective identification.

Drawing on agonistic political theory, I consider how a collective ‘we’ might be formulated and embodied in climate politics to lay the ground for a green radical democracy. I emphasise three dynamics (1) the cleavage of the political realm around collective identifications (2) the emergence of passions within embodied climate protests that accompanies collective identification and (3) the inevitability of exclusion from these identifications. Dominant approaches to environmental policy that prioritise reaching a rational consensus are unable to grasp these dynamics. The paper highlights the challenges and possibilities

Lessons from the radical democracy kaleidoscope: social movements through Marxist and a deliberative democratic lenses.

Lorenzo Cini (Scuola Normale Superiore) & Andrea Felicetti (KU Leuven)

Radical democracy theory and practice has always been contested since the rise of anarchist and socialist conceptions (and practices) of council democracy in the early 1900s (and, even before, through the political writings of Karl Marx). In the 1960s and 70s radical democracy was identified with participatory theory (Pateman 1971) and more recently it was more closely associated with agonistic perspectives (Mouffe 2005). Today, the radical democratic landscape is populated by a number of distinct approaches that only occasionally are capable of speaking to each other. In this paper, we seek to contribute to the debate not by means of a philological analysis on radical democracy, but by starting a discussion on whether and how contemporary Marxist theory and deliberative democracy can be effectively combined to advance a radical democratic transformation of contemporary societies. In particular, we separately (but complementarily) engage with both approaches to shed light on specific theoretical and practical issues related to the social subjects/actors that are today considered as the principal carriers of radical democratic change, namely, social movements. After the introduction, we discuss the prospect for social transformation and the role envisioned for movements first in Marxist theory (Jessop 2002, Olin Wright 2019, Harvey 2018, Hardt and Negri 2019) and then in deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2000, Fung, 2005, Mansbridge 2013). On the basis of these analyses, we develop new insight about social movements as actors of radical democracy and we offer practical suggestions to guide actions (and visions) of today’s progressive social movements. The paper ends with a critical reflection on opportunities and challenges that arise when reflecting on radical democracy across different approaches.