

# HEGEMONY AND THE RADICALISATION OF DEMOCRACY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH CHANTAL MOUFFE

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### 1. HEGEMONY

**Thomas Decreus and Matthias Lievens:** The concept of hegemony is central throughout your work. In a recent publication in *Constellations*, Stefan Rummens<sup>1</sup> argued that there exists an ambiguity in your ideas about hegemony and democracy. Following Lefort, he claims that in a democracy, a fundamental distinction should be made between the people as a whole and a particular majority that is in power. This majority can never claim to fully represent the people. He argues that the logic of hegemony, as you and Ernesto Laclau analysed it in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985)<sup>2</sup>, leads exactly to this: the representation of a totality by a particularity. Yet, in your later book *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) you claim: “[The] democratic character [of a certain actor] can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself or himself the representation of the totality”.<sup>3</sup> Does this mean that you actually agree with the critique offered by Stefan Rummens (and that his critique does not really apply to your work)? In that case, how should we then understand the concept of hegemonic struggle within a democratic context? Can it be understood differently than according to the logic in which a particularity represents the whole? Is there a certain evolution in the theorisation of hegemony and its relation with democracy in your work since *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*?

**Chantal Mouffe:** I think Stefan Rummens missed my argument, because we do not have a difference with Lefort on this point. According to Stefan Rummens, Lefort claimed that in a democracy we should make a distinction between the people as a whole and a particular majority that holds power. But I do not really think that Lefort said something like that. What Lefort claims is that in a democracy the place of power is an empty place. And I very much agree with

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan RUMMENS, ‘Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle? Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Model of Politics’, *Constellations* 16/2009, pp. 377-391.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. MOUFFE en E. LACLAU, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London/ New York, Verso, 1985, p. 134-145.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. MOUFFE, *The Democratic Paradox*, London/New York, Verso, 2009, p. 22.

that. What Lefort states is that in a democracy, nobody can totally occupy the place of power. Totalitarianism, in contrast, is always an attempt to do that, and to keep on reoccupying this place. Of course, the empty place of power is always occupied, otherwise you would not have a political order. But the real difference between a democratic and a totalitarian regime lies in the fact that in the former, the occupation is always temporary and contestable. I think what Ernesto Laclau and I wrote on hegemony comes to the same. Stefan Rummens thinks that the hegemonic relation is one where a particularity represents the totality. In a way that is true, but he forgets to take into account the fact that we made it very clear that this particularity never succeeds in occupying the empty place totally, to represent the totality in a perfect and thus not contestable way. The hegemonic struggle is always an attempt to present a certain understanding of the people as a whole. But this can never succeed. There can never be a universality that can be perfectly realised, because any universality is in fact a particularity that presents itself as a universality. There is an element of this particularity that always remains within the universal. That is why pure universality does not exist. This is perfectly in line with what I say in *The Democratic Paradox*. I state there that in a democracy, no limited social actor can attribute to itself the representation of the totality. And in fact that is precisely how I understand the point of view of Lefort about the empty place of power. It is exactly the same thing. Every hegemonic representation will always be contested, because other groups will also present themselves as representing the totality. This is basically what politics is about. It is about who is able to convince the people.

The most important aspect to recognise in a democracy is that in the end, the people will always be divided. The people can and will never be united as one. There is, as Lefort calls it, an original division of society. Any sound democracy has to recognise this social division. Politics is about the recognition of this original division. But that does not mean that we should embrace the liberal point of view that claims that we should get rid of any kind of common good. Politics is always about the common good, but democratic politics is at the same time about the recognition of the impossibility of this common good. Politics must be about the common good, although a common good as such is impossible. In democratic politics you cannot say: "I'm defending my own interests". That is simply not a political position. At least you need to attempt to represent the common good and support the common good, while recognising that there is no ultimate or fixed common good. Here the concept of hegemony enters our story again. Hegemony is exactly about the construction of a people, making people identify with a certain conception of the common good even if a final common good remains impossible to reach. I think Stefan Rummens did not get that point.

**TD & ML:** You seem to connect the logic of hegemony very strongly with democracy. But could we not also speak of hegemony in totalitarian states? Concerning such states, it could also be stated that there is particularity (the Party, the Leader) that tries to represent the universality of the people.

**CM:** I do not agree with that. Let me be clear about what we mean by 'totalitarianism' here. I understand totalitarianism in the way Lefort understood this concept. For me and for Lefort totalitarianism is the attempt, after the democratic revolution, to reoccupy the empty place of power. Totalitarianism can only come after democracy. It is democracy that opens up the danger of totalitarianism. This is not the same thing as stating that democracy leads to totalitarianism.

Lefort never said that. What he did say is that there will always be the desire for a definitive reconciliation, a re-installment of the people as one. That is something very problematic for pluralist societies.

But as you say, I connect the logic of hegemony very strongly to democratic societies because I do not think totalitarian regimes are hegemonic. Totalitarianism is more the imposition of one party. It is a party that declares not to represent the people, but to *be* the people. This is not the result of a hegemonic logic. It is a dogmatic assertion, a claim that a group can occupy by right the place of power. Given this statement, I would indeed say that the hegemonic logic, as I described it, is only relevant in the context of democratic societies.

**TD & ML:** Continuing the former question: is there a difference in how Laclau and you conceive of hegemony today? For example, would you agree with Laclau's statement about populism being an essential feature of democracy?<sup>4</sup> Is his theorisation of populism compatible with your conception of agonistic democracy?

**CM:** I do not think there is a difference in the way Laclau and I conceive of hegemony. I do agree with his statement that populism is an essential feature of democracy. But of course, one has to understand populism here as the construction of a people. Because this is what populism is truly about. And it is also what democracy is about. In democratic politics, we try to constitute a people. This is what I would call the populist dimension of democratic politics. If there is a difference between me and Laclau on this matter, it is not a theoretical but rather a practical one. This practical difference is that he is mainly concerned with Latin America, while I am particularly focusing on Western Europe. In Western Europe you have forms of populism which are sometimes hard to compare with the Latin American ones and vice versa.

## 2. ANTAGONISM AND AGONISM

**TD & ML:** The central role of a radical notion of the political, understood as antagonism, is what distinguishes your theoretical approach from that of many other contemporary political thinkers. But what is the conceptual status of the category of antagonism? In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, you conceived of antagonism as the very limit of every objectivity. It is comparable to the place of the Lacanian notion of the Real as the limit of the symbolic order. This leads to the famous thesis about antagonism as the impossibility of society: Society exists only because antagonism provides it with limits, but this same antagonism simultaneously subverts these limits. In your later work, you seem no longer to refer to this Lacanian framework. Antagonism then is defined as a conflict in which the opposite forces do not share a common symbolic framework, which is for example the case when fundamentalist groups clash with democratic societies. Could we state that there is a shift in how you conceive of antagonism?

**CM:** It is true that in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, we presented antagonism as the very limit of objectivity and as a place comparable to the Lacanian Real. But later on, we realised — in fact it

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<sup>4</sup> E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*, London/New York, Verso, 2007, p. 169.

was Ernesto Laclau who has elaborated this in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (1990)<sup>5</sup> — that prior to the category of antagonism there is the category of dislocation. Compared to dislocation, antagonism is already a form of symbolic inscription. And thus, dislocation is what indicates the limit of every objectivity, comparable to the Lacanian Real. Antagonism then, is a symbolic inscription of this Real. In this sense, the category of antagonism is in fact a category that situates itself between the ontological and the ontic. It is what Derrida would call ‘*charnière*’ or ‘hinge’. As such, a category like antagonism belongs to the ontological, but since it contains already some kind of symbolic inscription, it is also an ontic category. It is true that in my posterior work I became more interested in the symbolic ontic inscription.

So there is indeed some kind of slight shift, but this is due to the fact that we have introduced the category of dislocation as being prior to the category of antagonism. Once this becomes clear, it becomes understandable that you can study the way antagonisms are inscribed in the symbolic order.

**TD & ML:** You also turned to Carl Schmitt in order to conceptualise the way dislocation is symbolically inscribed as antagonism. You seem to make a move away from an orientation towards the philosophy of Lacan, and towards a greater interest for a Schmittian approach to antagonism. Could you tell us something about the influence Schmitt had on your work?

**CM:** All the reflections on the limits of objectivity, the constitutive outside and antagonism find their roots in poststructuralist thinking and Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Yet, Schmitt became very important for me for other reasons. As you know, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was basically a critique of Marxism and its failure to understand the nature of the political. But this failure is not only present in Marxism. It also holds for liberalism, which was undergoing a revival in French thought, after we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For me the solution was not to embrace liberalism and to forget about Marxism, exactly because both philosophies fail to recognise the political. It is at this point that Schmitt became important for me, because I think the Schmittian perspective offers a powerful tool to start criticising liberalism. But using Schmitt to criticise liberalism brought me into a very ambiguous position. I tended to agree with his critique of liberalism, but I did not want to follow him in his rejection of liberal democracy. This is why the first piece I wrote on Schmitt, published in *Revue française de science politique*, was titled: ‘Penser la démocratie moderne avec, et contre, Carl Schmitt’.<sup>6</sup>

Schmitt didn’t believe in the possibility of pluralism within a political association. According to him, that could only lead to civil war. So he rejected the notion of a democratic pluralism and declared that liberal democracy was an unviable regime. My aim was to reformulate the liberal democratic framework in such a way that it allows a political dimension — in Schmitt’s sense. This is why Schmitt was a real challenge for me, because he simply claimed that this project is impossible. So I had to argue with and against him. I used his premises in order to criticise liberalism but ended up with a conception opposite to Schmitt in order to envisage the possibility of a liberal democratic pluralism.

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<sup>5</sup> E. LACLAU, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London/New York, Verso, 1990, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ch. MOUFFE, ‘Penser la démocratie moderne avec, et contre, Carl Schmitt’, *Revue française de science politique* 42/1992, pp. 83-96.

The problem with Schmitt is that he thinks that antagonism and conflict, or the political as conflict, can only be understood in terms of the friend/enemy distinction. He only talks about enemies. Of course, if conflict can only express itself in these terms, then I agree with Schmitt that legitimate conflict is strictly speaking not possible within one political association, because this would lead to civil war. But there is another way in which the antagonism or the friend/enemy distinction can manifest itself, namely in an agonistic way. When we speak about agonism, the conflict is not one between friends and enemies but between adversaries who recognise the legitimacy of each others' position. The conflict between these adversaries remains a conflict, a power struggle wherein no final reconciliation is possible, but it is a tamed conflict. Yet, I want to emphasise that it is not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between antagonism and agonism. These two categories are not completely separated. For me, between antagonism and agonism there exists a continuum. Some agonistic conflicts can have antagonistic elements in them, and in some antagonisms there can be found some agonistic elements. I have also insisted, against a liberal interpretation of agonistic politics, that antagonism can never be completely eliminated. When I speak about a domesticated conflict, it does not mean that antagonism or an untamed conflict has become impossible. There remains a form of antagonism in every agonism. Otherwise agonistic opponents would become mere competitors who can reach reconciliation or rational agreement. So a pure agonism is impossible for me. Or maybe it is possible, but you cannot call it political anymore. But the same holds for a pure antagonism. That is possible, but it is rare. An example of an almost pure antagonism is the clash between Al-Qaeda and the West. But most kinds of politics are situated somewhere in-between agonism and antagonism. Besides that, what counts as agonism or antagonism is part of the hegemonic struggle. It is not an objective matter.

To conclude, by introducing the notion of agonism, I wanted to show that it is possible to imagine a pluralist society starting from a Schmittian perspective. It was a way of criticising the shortcomings of liberalism, without denying the importance and the value of liberal democratic regimes as they exist today. At this point, Schmitt has been very important to me.

**TD & ML:** In your model of agonistic democracy, there is a hegemonic struggle over the meaning of the ideas of 'freedom' and 'equality.' These ideas constitute the core of the symbolic order shared by the agonistic groups within a democratic society. But how can we then understand the very existence of this democratic symbolic order in the first place? Is this symbolic order also the outcome of a hegemonic struggle? If so, should we not distinguish then between two sorts of hegemonic struggles: one that lies at the basis of the democratic symbolic order and one that takes place within that symbolic order?

**CM:** The way I consider the symbolic order does not allow for such a distinction between a hegemonic struggle within this order and one at the basis of the symbolic order. You cannot really distinguish between what is within the symbolic order and the symbolic order itself. The symbolic order, which is always a hegemonic order, is a specific articulation of practices around certain nodal points. These nodal points structure the conflicts within the symbolic order. There are no struggles that fall 'inside' or 'outside' the symbolic order. What hegemonic struggles try to do is to disarticulate and rearticulate those practices and to establish different nodal points. It is impossible to distinguish between a hegemonic struggle about a certain symbolic order and one that takes place within a certain symbolic order.

When we connect these ideas about the symbolic order with the notion of democratic revolution through which the democratic symbolic order started to exist, we could say that the democratic revolution created some nodal points which did not exist before. Once these nodal points, freedom and equality, were instituted, the question became how to understand these principles and how to put them into practice. This is what democratic politics is all about. In liberal democracies there always exists a particular hegemonic articulation of the concepts of freedom and equality and of their relation. For example, in his book *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1980), C.B. Macpherson shows how the idea of democracy was connected with the idea of liberalism through political struggle. This struggle is always a hegemonic one. Moreover, the struggle about the institution of nodal points and that about how to put these nodal points — ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ in democratic societies — in relation to each other are not really separable. They should not be considered as two completely different hegemonic struggles.

**TD & ML:** In your essay ‘Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community’, you write the following: “To the idea that the exercise of citizenship consists in adopting a universal point of view, made equivalent to Reason and reserved to men, I am opposing the idea that it consists in identifying with the ethico-political principles of modern democracy and that there can be as many forms of citizenship as there are interpretations of those principles”.<sup>7</sup> Especially the second part of this quote triggers a debate. Do you mean that different forms of citizenship can coexist within one social formation? Doesn’t that undermine the egalitarian idea of citizenship? Do you intend to speak about citizenship practices here, or also about the principles that ground democratic institutions? If the latter is the case, do you think different forms of citizenship can coexist within the single institutional framework of the political community?

**CM:** This question assumes that I have a liberal understanding of citizenship. However, this is not the case. I understand citizenship in the tradition of civic republicanism. This means that citizenship is not just a legal status, but rather a form of action. So when I speak about ‘form’ in this case, I do not mean different legal statuses or different categories of citizens. What I mean is that there are different forms in which one can act as a citizen. Too often, we are told that we should act as citizens, as if that means that we would then all act in the same way. You can only say this when you take for granted that there is a kind of common good. I, on the contrary, claim that there are only different interpretations of the common good. As a consequence, I claim that there are as many forms of citizenships as there are interpretations of the principles of democracy.

In this context I also speak of an agonistic form of citizenship. That implies that you can act as a radical democratic citizen, a liberal citizen, a conservative citizen ... So acting as a citizen does not mean acting in a homogeneous way. Instead, we need to accept the plurality of different and legitimate forms of understanding citizenship. And I think the agonistic struggle is very much about that: it is about the way we understand or interpret the fundamental democratic principles and the way we act according to our understanding of them. But I certainly reject the idea of different forms of legal citizenship, because that comes down to accepting legal pluralism. I am not in favour of that.

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<sup>7</sup> Ch. MOUFFE, ‘Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community’, in: ID., *The Return of the Political*, London/New York, Verso, p. 71.

### 3. AN ETHICO-POLITICAL PROJECT: RADICAL DEMOCRACY

**TD & ML:** Throughout your work you developed a theoretical framework which allows us to analyse a number of important problems of contemporary democracies. We are thinking in particular about the connection you analysed between consensus-based policies and phenomena such as terrorism and the rise of right wing populism. Traditional political philosophies such as liberalism have great difficulties in accounting for these phenomena. In this sense your theory is extremely valuable as a descriptive or analytic tool. But of course, your philosophical work goes beyond that. It is also about promoting and establishing a certain conception of democracy, namely ‘radical democracy’. There seems to be a normative drive behind this project of radical democracy: to enlarge the spaces where the constitutive principles of democracy, liberty and equality, are effective. It is normative in the sense that the theory contains a project for social and political change. How does this normative dimension relate to the more analytical or descriptive parts of your work? Or, to rephrase this question in a more general way, how should we conceive of the relation between descriptive and normative moments in political philosophy? Is a merely descriptive political theory possible?

**CM:** I do not believe that there are things which are exclusively descriptive. Nothing is merely descriptive, and certainly not political theory. There is always a normative element in any kind of description. Instead of calling it descriptive, I would label my view on politics as analytical. It is an attempt to try to understand how politics works. It is on the basis of this kind of analytical research that I claim for example that political identities are always collective identities. Of course, such statements have nothing to do with any left-wing politics. My agonistic model can be used by many different political camps, including the right. Ideas on how politics works are not tied to a particular political ideology. The right understands this much better than the left, I think. For example, the right has also picked up Gramsci. I remember that there was once a congress in France with the title ‘For a Right-Wing Gramscianism.’ Of course, that is perfectly possible. The category of hegemony was developed by leftist thinkers, but it can be appropriated by the right. It is a way to describe how politics works and to analyse politics.

The proposal of radical democracy, on the other hand, is of a different order. It is a political project and not just a way of analysing politics. In a book such as *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we were working at two different levels. I would say that our first motivation was a political one: we wanted to give an answer to the crisis of classical Marxism and social democracy. Since the sixties, new social movements had appeared and the traditional left had not been able to give an adequate answer to them. These movements could no longer be understood in terms of class or structure/superstructure. Neither could social democracy give their proper place to these kinds of movements. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* tried to provide an answer to this problem. The first thing we opposed was the economism and essentialism of Marxism and the idea that social consciousness corresponds to one’s social position. We argued that it was necessary to bring in some features of post-structuralism in order to understand these new movements and struggles. We felt that, in order to take the left beyond its impasse, we had to reformulate the question and introduce some theoretical elements which would allow us to criticise essentialism. Our main target was the essentialism of Marxism. We used post-structuralism in order to understand the

discursive formation of collective identities. But we also emphasised the fact that it is necessary to politically articulate the new movements. And this is where Gramsci played an important role. From him we got the idea that you need to create a collective will. Like Gramsci, we claimed that you cannot leave these struggles on their own, but that you need to articulate them and inscribe them in larger struggles. You have to make a connection, for example, between anti-racist and feminist movements. The political strategy which would allow for these articulations is what we called radical democracy. So we were formulating this proposal in order to redefine the socialist project in terms of radical democracy. To take up this project of radical democracy, we also had to put into question the idea that there is a final ground of the social. So the two aspects, the theoretical one and the political one, were interwoven. But they are different and cannot be reduced to each other. I emphasise this point because some people believe that our project for radical democracy can be automatically deduced from our theoretical position. I claim that you cannot do this. The right can also use our theoretical position. There is absolutely no necessary link between our analysis and a particular political project. But I am convinced, on the other hand, that we could not formulate our project of radical democracy if we did not abandon essentialism. That was a necessary, but not a sufficient condition.

Is our political project then a normative one? Is there a normative drive behind what we do? Maybe. But I do not like to call it 'normative,' I would rather call it 'ethico-political'. By this notion I mean that the ethical and the political are intertwined and depend on each other. Normative theory denies this. It places ethics outside or above the realm of the political. I have always been very critical of this kind of normative political theory. I think it is completely useless to say: "this is how the world should be" without referring to a political context. This implies a very realist position. It is not the same as accepting the way things are. What I am interested in is to try to understand how the world works in order to see how it can be changed. It is about defining the situation and from that perspective trying to create a different situation. In order to go from situation one to situation two, a transformation is needed, and the drive behind this transformation is always an ethico-political one.

**TD & ML:** With your notion of radical democracy, you tried to retain the emancipatory thrust of a certain spirit of Marxism, while building a theory on entirely different ontological grounds. This made it possible to get rid of all remaining essentialism and foundationalism, and develop a keener understanding of the political constitution of the social. It seems to us that the idea that the social is politically constituted could also contribute to a renewal of the critique of capitalism (which could be said to conceal its political ground behind fetishistic market laws). This aspect is far less developed in your work, though. How would you conceive of the connection between radical democracy and (anti-)capitalism?

**CM:** I think our theory can certainly contribute to a renewal of the critique of capitalism. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we made it very clear that radical democracy contains an anti-capitalist element. But we are also critical towards what I would call the 'new revolutionaries' such as Žižek who present capitalism as a massive block that has to be overthrown. We need to criticise this kind of anti-capitalist rhetoric. According to me, there are many forms of capitalism, and as a consequence, the anti-capitalist struggle cannot be monolithic. It is a struggle that takes place in many different places and at many different levels.



I think it is also a mistake to believe that all forms of oppression are caused by capitalism. For example, you cannot say that sexism or racism will come to an end if we get rid of capitalism. Nevertheless, I do agree that class struggle remains utterly important, but it is not the magic key that provides the solution for all struggles. You cannot blame capitalism for everything.

**TD & ML:** In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* you consider the Jacobin imaginary of classic Marxism, based on the idea of a supposed re-foundation of society, as outdated. Nevertheless, you embrace the notion of the democratic revolution, and you state you want to deepen it. This notion of democratic revolution usually refers to the radical break between the ancien régime and modern, democratic politics. Was this democratic revolution not such a radical re-foundation of society?

**CM:** I would put things differently. I think you mix up two levels of reflection in this question. One is a political level, and the other a theoretical level. On a theoretical level, I agree with you that a radical re-foundation of society is impossible, because in order to have a radical re-foundation, you will need to accept that society has a foundation, a ground. In my post-foundationalist approach, however, there is no ground. Consequently, you cannot have a radical re-foundation, if there is not a foundation in the first place. This is a strictly theoretical argument.

But if you want to speak at the political level about the Jacobin, revolutionary imaginary as something that can be used in democracies as we know them today, I would say that we indeed do not need such an imaginary. I do not think we need a revolution. The project I am standing for is that of a radical democracy, a radicalisation of democracy. Today, we already have democratic institutions, we just need to radicalise them. My argument is that in liberal democratic societies, the process of radicalisation does not need a moment of political revolution. That is an argument I made particularly in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. According to me, you cannot think of more radical ethico-political principles than basic principles of democracy, namely: liberty and equality for all. The problem with contemporary liberal democracies is not their basic principles, but the fact that they do not put these principles fully into practice. A radicalisation of democracy means putting these principles really into practice.

Of course, suppose that we did not have these democratic institutions, for example in the case of a totalitarian state, a revolution would probably be needed. But this has nothing to do with a foundation or re-foundation of society. It is simply a matter of political conditions: if you do not have the democratic institutions you cannot radicalise them. And, in some cases you will need an institutional break in order to create democratic institutions. And at that moment, the Jacobin imaginary of revolution might be justifiable.

I think if you consider both the theoretical and the practical level, the basic question actually falls apart. At the theoretical level, I claim that there is really never a ground and so the democratic revolution cannot be considered as a re-foundation. But at the political level, in some cases where you don't have democratic institutions, you might need a moment of radical rupture in order to establish them. But, according to me, we do not need such a thing in contemporary, western societies. We can radicalise what already exists.

**TD & ML:** When *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published, the left was in a defensive period which goes on until today. Ernesto Laclau and you suggested the changes going on at the time (the loss of the existing left imaginary, the rise of new social movements) represented a chance, a

step forward. Where do we stand now, 25 years later, according to you? What is the balance of the struggle for 'radical and plural democracy' during this period? Are we still in the same period characterised by a defensive position for the left? Can you point to particular struggles or events that went in the direction of the kind of democracy you advocate?

**CM:** I think that things are much worse today than they were when we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. When we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we were still under the hegemony of social democracy. We criticised social democracy because it was not able to grasp the meaning of new social movements and because of the fact that social democracy had become too bureaucratic. Nevertheless, we still had a lot of social rights in that era. We just wanted to radicalise social democracy. That was what the project of radical democracy was about. Thatcher also criticised social democracy for being too bureaucratic and old-fashioned. And this explained the success of her neoliberal offensive. But of course, Thatcher used this critique to do something totally different. She did not radicalise social democracy, she just abolished it. It was the end of the hegemony of social democracy and the beginning of the hegemony of neoliberalism. The result of this neoliberal hegemony has been dramatic. Some basic social rights were lost. At the time when we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we never expected that things would turn out so badly. I still advocate the project of radical democracy, but we are no longer in an offensive stage. We are forced to defend the rights we still have, not only social, but also civil rights. Since the discourse about the war on terror we have lost a number of civil rights as well. This is why I think things are much more difficult today than when we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

**TD & ML:** Do you see any chances in overcoming this defensive position? Do you see any opportunities for a renewal of the struggle for radical democracy today?

**CM:** I believe a great opportunity was lost with the recent financial crisis. If the left had been able to offer a real alternative to neoliberalism, there could have been a chance to break neoliberal hegemony. The financial crisis was a moment of opening, it was the first time neoliberal hegemony began to show some cracks. Before the crisis we were told that the Anglo-American model of capitalism was the only choice we had. But with the crisis, the emperor was suddenly without clothes. Unfortunately, the left could not provide an alternative. In many countries because of their neoliberal policies they were even partly responsible for the crisis. They were in fact part of the problem! This is the reason I think the crisis has not at all favoured the left in most countries. Nevertheless, the crisis gives reason for some minor optimism. Although we really missed an opportunity, the crisis has shown that the market by itself is not enough. State intervention was suddenly needed. So things have changed, at least symbolically. The neoliberal triumphalism has been shattered. I hope this can become the starting point for thinking about an alternative. I know there are not many concrete proposals nowadays, but there is at least a feeling that some things really need to change. So yes, there are some reasons to be slightly optimistic.

Another matter is the global justice movements that are truly aware of the need for an alternative. Although these movements used to be successful, they were very much affected by the events of 9/11. I also think there are some problems with many of these movements because they mostly have a very strong anti-institutional attitude. They do not want to work with parties and trade unions and they want to rely only on civil society. I think that such a position is a dead

end. I am convinced that it is necessary to work within the institutions, although, on the other hand, parties and institutions are also not enough. What is needed is a synergy between parties and social movements. I hope this is something which will happen.

#### 4. ART, PASSIONS AND REPRESENTATION

**TD & ML:** You regularly give lectures in cultural centres, and you engage in debates with artists. In what way can art be a factor in realising agonist democracy? Or, put in more general terms, how do you conceive of the relation between art and politics?

**CM:** Within a Gramscian hegemonic approach, it is clear that cultural and artistic practices have a very important role, because this is one of the places where subjectivity is constructed. If we accept the fact that identities are never simply given, but that we are always dealing with forms of identification, then we need to pay special attention to those places where identification is constituted. I think the fields of culture and art are very important in this regard. Once you understand this, you also have to conclude that the relation between art and politics is not really a relation between two separate things. According to me, there is an aesthetic dimension in politics and a political dimension in art. The aesthetic dimension in politics is, for instance, to use a term from Lefort, the '*mise en forme*', '*mise en sens du social*'. Or it is what Rancière called '*le partage du sensible*'. Concerning the political dimension in art, we can say that every cultural or artistic practice either contributes to the existing hegemonic order or subverts it. There is no art which is completely apolitical. That is why I do not like the distinction between political and non-political art because it starts from the idea that there would exist something like apolitical art. Instead of political art I prefer to speak of critical art. Critical art is art that challenges the existing hegemonic order. Of course there can be many different forms of critical art. That is why I always defended a very pluralist conception of what can be considered as critical art. I am very much against people who claim that only one genre or form of art can be critical. Sometimes, for example, the sublime is opposed to the beautiful which is presented as reactionary. There exists a tendency to say that the most transgressive art is also the most radical art. But I think both the sublime and the beautiful can be very subversive. Transgression is not necessarily subversive. On the contrary, a large part of the market thrives on transgression. It loves transgression.

Moreover the negative moment of de-identification is not sufficient because de-identification is only useful if you start from an essentialist point of view, for example traditional Marxism. From such a point of view, de-identification is enough in order to discover one's true identity. As if it would be enough to lift the weight of the dominant ideology to see what has been hidden underneath it. Once you accept that it is always through inscription and through certain practices that identities are constituted, you have to conclude that de-identification is not enough. It is not enough to formulate a critique, and to show how dreadful things are. Many artists believe that denunciation suffices. I think you indeed need to destabilise something in order to change the perspective, to make people see things in a different way. Sometimes overtly political art does not do that, because it is too obvious. But processes of de-identification need to be accompanied by processes of re-identification.

**TD & ML:** What do you exactly mean when you talk about re-identification? Is it really the task of the artist to offer that? Is the artist capable of providing re-identification?

**CM:** I am certainly not thinking about some kind of socialist art. I just want to say that the element of denunciation or de-identification is not enough. When I said that art should be able to change your perspective, that means stopping to see things in a particular way and start to see them in a *different* way. The latter I would call re-identification. Maybe the term is a bit too strong for referring to the fact that an artist or art in general has to offer a different perspective. One should not interpret re-identification in a very strong sense.

**TD & ML:** You give a central place to passions in politics, as they play a crucial role in processes of identification. Today we see how traditional forms of collective identification are falling apart. There is no evident identification any more between certain social groups and certain political ideologies. Moreover, these do not seem to have been entirely replaced by new forms of political ideology and new collective identifications. Why is that? Referring to the influence of consensus-oriented philosophies can only be part of the answer. Indeed, the question then becomes: why have these philosophies become so influential at a certain moment? Did the political system throw away its potential to forge collective identities in favour of a more consensual and individualistic approach? Or do we have to turn the picture upside-down? Has there been a process from the bottom up, whereby people stopped identifying with political camps as they were represented in the political space? Has the commercial field taken over the formation of identities (one doesn't wear Nike Shoes, but one 'is' Nike)? How to understand this seeming depoliticisation? And can the re-establishment of the left/right divide contribute to solving this? How do we understand depoliticisation and the 'cleavage' between citizens and politics from within your framework?

**CM:** I would say that the lack of possibilities for identification is the result of the hegemony of neoliberalism. But of course, how do we have to understand this hegemony? Some people would say that the current state of affairs is caused by economic changes. It has to do with the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, or from fordism to post-fordism. In a way that is correct. But the question is: are these transitions purely economic? I do not think so. According to me they are, in the end, politically driven. At a certain point, there was a problem with 'the excess of democracy' in the eyes of the thinkers of the Trilateral Commission. For theorists such as Samuel Huntington trade unions and civil rights movements had gained too much power. In their eyes the crisis of capitalism was caused by a democratisation process that had gone too far. This way of thinking paved the way for the neoliberal offensive. Neoliberalism is however a very complex thing. It contains ideological and economic elements. There are of course significant economic changes: neoliberalism is connected to new ways of regulating and organising capitalism. Flexibility has become one of the key words today: everybody has to be flexible. But these economic changes cannot be conceived of as purely economic changes, they are also the result of political processes. This is very well illustrated in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999)<sup>8</sup> by Boltanski and Chiapello. They show how capitalism was able to incorporate the demands of new social movements, and thus to neutralise the goals those movements were struggling for. The

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<sup>8</sup> L. BOLTANSKI and E. CHIAPELLO, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London/New York, Verso, 2005, 165.

demands were somehow satisfied, but in a way that took away their subversive edge. This explains the transition to post-fordism which I think is a process best understood in terms of the Gramscian concept of passive revolution.

I lived in Britain during the time of Thatcherism. You could clearly see in that period that there was an offensive going on: a new capitalist order was installed in a political way. The Left was not able to offer an answer to it. This was very clear when Tony Blair came to power. He basically accepted the hegemonic framework which had been established by Thatcherism. He just continued its policies: the process of privatisation went further. In the view of New Labour and many social democratic parties there was no alternative to the neoliberal order. The only thing to do was to manage this order in a more human way. This explains why today there is such a depoliticisation: if the parties of the centre-right and the centre-left basically offer the same product, people are not motivated to vote anymore. It is here that the question of passion comes back in. I think that in order for people to be interested in politics, they need something that moves them, that gives them hope, that impassions them. This implies that there should be political forms of identification, ideas with which people can identify themselves and which really promise that some things will change. It is on the basis of this understanding that I have tried to analyse the development of right-wing populism. An explanation for their success is the fact that they are often the only ones who pretend to offer an alternative and promise to give power back to the people.

**TD & ML:** So the key issue in this process of depoliticisation is political representation?

**CM:** Yes, I totally agree with that. That is why I insist on the importance of the left-right divide. For me the division between left and right is so important because it is a way in which the original division of society can be institutionalised: it makes conflicts between different alternatives legitimate and understandable. When the division between left and right is blurred, representation of conflict is rendered more difficult. Today this is the case. For example, Tony Blair used to say that “we are all middle class”, so we should all be able to agree with one another. The idea of conflict just disappeared. But according to me, politics is by nature partisan and it is through partisanship that you can mobilise passion. So yes, that comes basically to the question of representation.

I want to add to this that there are some phenomena today that worry me. Besides the fact that this deficit of representation is not good for democracy because it causes depoliticisation, it can also lead to violent forms of revolt. I have two particular examples in mind here: the riots in Athens (December 2008) and the uprisings in the French banlieues (November 2005). Those were explosions of a violence that was not articulated politically and there were no concrete demands. What is noticeable is that in both cases, it were young people who were responsible for this. Contrary to what has sometimes been said, in France these riots were not ethnically or racially motivated and many white people took part in them. What these revolts had in common was that they were led by young people who felt completely deprived of political voice. Nobody is taking account of their demands. No party is speaking on behalf of them. So the only way left to express themselves is through destruction. This clearly shows how a crisis of representation can have very negative and violent consequences. The alternative I propose is an agonistic kind of politics which gives a voice to all those groups.

**TD & ML:** Does the project of radical democracy provide sufficient tools for establishing a different hegemony? More precisely, is it capable of capturing people's passions and imagination? Is it not too abstract and formal for that? We see for example that the kind of messianism of Negri and Hardt is better able to motivate engaged people. Doesn't the project of radical democracy also need such a messianism in order to become hegemonic?

**CM:** It is of course much easier to mobilise people when you tell them that there is a final goal they can reach. Indeed, that is why the books of Hardt and Negri are quite popular: they propose a kind of messianic hope. But I think this kind of messianism is also very dangerous. What we need is not another messianism offering an absolute democracy, but a kind of secularised democratic politics. Radical democracy is such a kind of politics, because it states that democracy is an unending process. We need a kind of hope that acknowledges this infinity. There is a quote by Samuel Beckett that expresses this pretty well. It says: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'<sup>9</sup> I think this is really the kind of hope and spirit we need. This is not an easy task. But it is something we should try to manage.

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<sup>9</sup> S. BECKETT, *Worstward Ho*, London, John Calder, 1983, p. 7.