

Radical democracy, biopolitical emancipation and anarchic dilemmas

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Introduction

Contemporary visions of radical democracy mark themselves off from other democratic paradigms through the stronger accent that they place on contingency, antagonism, contestation and openness. This emphasis provides a point of convergence for the otherwise disparate figures sketched out by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, on the one hand, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, on the other.¹ In the last decade, however, conceptual developments in this body of thought combined with political events and controversies to sharpen various divisions in radical democracy, highlighting the limits of the different approaches and calling for a renewal of thought. Theoretical dichotomies such as ‘vertical’, hegemonic organisation versus a ‘horizontal’ articulation of differences, and ‘abundance of being’ versus ‘constitutive lack’ tie in with political conflicts in grassroots movements, which revolve around the need for centralised coordination and state-oriented action.² This entwinement has given a more passionate inflection to abstract discussions and has heightened the practical relevance of democratic thought.

The paper seeks to foster a more acute understanding of radical democratic emancipation through an internal engagement with alternative theories, which are pitted against one another and are cross-fertilised along certain dimensions. The aim is not to procure a new ‘model’ of radical democracy or a dialectical synthesis of oppositions. It is rather to open up themes for reworking, to map out directions for revision in the various currents of radical thought and to indicate ways of negotiating tensions which would further emancipatory causes.

Transcendental hegemony?

Laclau’s conception of democracy is anchored in a theory that knits together contingency, negativity, exclusion, hegemony and representation. The dismissal of

¹ See E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London, New York: Verso, 1985); E. Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London, New York: Verso, 1990); *Emancipation(s)* (London, New York: Verso, 1996); C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, New York: Verso, 2000); M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); *Multitude* (London: Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, 2004); R. M. Unger, *False Necessity* (London, New York: Verso, 2001); *Democracy Realised. The progressive alternative* (London, New York: 1998).

² For the controversy between horizontal and vertical perspectives see, among others, M. de Angelis, “PR like PProcess! Strategy from the Bottom-Up,” *Ephemera* 5.2 (2005); S. Tormey, “From Utopian Worlds to Utopian Spaces,” *Ephemera* 5.2 (2005); “After Gleneagles: Where next,” *Shut them Down!*, ed. D. Harvie, K. Milburn et al. (Leeds and New York: Dissent and Autonomedia, 2005); M. Hardt, “Porto Alegre: Today’s Bandung?,” *New Left Review* 14 (March-April 2002); L. Thomassen, “Beyond Representation?” and A. Robinson, S. Tormey, “Beyond Representation? A rejoinder,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 60.1 (2007). For the distinctions between ‘abundance’ and ‘lack’, see L. Tonder and L. Thomassen, “Introduction: rethinking radical democracy between abundance and lack,” *Radical democracy*, ed. L. Tonder and L. Thomassen (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 1-8.

overarching historical teleologies, necessary laws and platonic archetypes is the common currency of much discourse on radical democracy. What singles out Laclau's intervention, developed with the aid of Chantal Mouffe, is the primacy it imputes to lack, negativity, antagonism, exclusion and hegemonic power, which are seen as intrinsic to social contingency.³ Society is essentially unfixed because it lacks a necessary structure, a fully unifying foundation or a bundle of inescapable laws.⁴ Negativity is fundamental in that social settlements remain always vulnerable to disturbances and social antagonisms. Hegemony, for Laclau, designates primarily a process of community-building through social conflict. Different forces and projects which strive to shape the contours of the community stage their particular aims as universal or representative of common interests.⁵ One of the differences –the different demands and groups which are united in their opposition to a common opponent- is partly emptied of its particular meaning and takes on the function of a universal agent who speaks and acts in the name of collective interests. Power enters twice this operation. First, since no necessary laws dictate which particular agent will play the key part in constructing the community, the uneven distribution of power between different actors decides who gains the upper hand. Second, since collective entities are formed by means of a radical exclusion of antagonistic forces, power pervades the relations between the community and the forces it negates.⁶

Beside antagonism, exclusion, hegemony and power, Laclau asserts thus the grounding and irreducible role of representation.⁷ In the most abstract sense, representation is fundamental because different political projects strive to identify themselves with social order itself, and particular sectors come to incarnate the universal values of the community. Neither 'social order' nor the 'universal values of the community' bear intrinsic contents. Hence, particular actors represent a 'universality' which is essentially indefinite.⁸ Laclau has pressed the further claim that political representatives become increasingly crucial for the creation of collective identities under conditions of growing fragmentation and social complexity. Representatives help to weave together a collective will out of fragmented and marginalised social actors. Moreover, representation enables collective agency because it affords the vehicle through which different groups can gain some purchase on large-scale processes of social interaction, in which not all members of the group could be present and formulate a common position. The more complex and interconnected social relations become, the more decisive will be the political function of representatives.⁹

This entire onto-political interpretation frames Laclau's ideal of democracy. From the outset, hegemony has been conceived as a 'useful instrument in the struggle for a

³ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 144-145, 191; Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, 18-21, 29-30; "Structure, History and the Political" in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (London, New York: Verso, 2000), 207-212; "The future of radical democracy," *Radical democracy*, ed. Tonder and Thomassen, 256-258; "Glimpsing the future," *Laclau. A critical reader*, ed. S. Critchley and O. Marchart (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), 324-325.

⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 71, 95-6, 111-112, 122; Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 122-3.

⁵ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 43, 54-57.

⁶ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 42-43 and "Structure, History and the Political," 207-208.

⁷ On uneven power see Laclau, "Structure, History and the Political," 207-8; on representation see "Identity and Hegemony: the Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics" in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 57 and *Emancipation(s)*, 99.

⁸ Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 57 and "Structure, History and the Political," 211.

⁹ This argument is developed in Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 98-100.

radical, libertarian and plural democracy.’¹⁰ It provides a conceptual apparatus through which to formulate and advance a radical democratic project under late capitalist conditions. This program is driven by the will to institutionalize the ‘moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete character’;¹¹ to give fuller scope to social contingency in formal politics and civil society by setting up arrangements which allow for the constant renegotiation and reweaving of social relations.¹² Radical democracy, thus understood, shows the non-necessary nature of its foundations by keeping ‘always open and ultimately undecided’ the connection between particular contents and social order as such, which is shorn of fixed elements.¹³

The democratic regime advocated by Laclau (and Mouffe) is intent on extending and deepening across society the twin principles of freedom and equality.¹⁴ Democracy should maximise the autonomy of differences –different groups, social spheres, demands and modes of living- by expanding the logic of equality. Each struggle or cultural and individual particularity should accede to the maximum possible space to freely assert itself and flourish, yet it should be also tied together with other differences through strands of common identity and egalitarian principles. For Laclau, however, the meaning of radical democracy must be figured out independently of substantive normative contents or institutional formulas.¹⁵ This is in line with the quest for openness which aspires to make all configurations of society amenable to questioning. Another significant reason that Laclau adduces for this suspicion of institutional or other specification is that radical democracy is very much about giving a political voice to excluded social sectors, which seek to empower themselves through the expansion or revision of democratic settlements. To enable the inclusion of the ‘underdog’ the institutions of radical democracy must remain always available to transformation.¹⁶

The manifold tensions that course through Laclau's construction of radical democracy can all be traced back to the cardinal tenets of the hegemonic theory in which it is embedded: the inescapability of antagonism, exclusion, power-over and representation. These assumptions can spell trouble in a democratic association which professes a dual commitment to freedom and equality. Insisting on the unavoidability of asymmetrical power relations and repression seems to set stringent limits to egalitarian emancipation. It can play into the hands of conservatism and may undermine the prospects of further democratisation.¹⁷

Laclau (and Mouffe) have turned the tables on such misgivings by arguing that their background theses serve the cause of deeper democracy, which is conversely jeopardised by the fantasmatic projection of an absolutely free, inclusive and harmonious society.¹⁸ Although power asymmetries, exclusion and conflict are

¹⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 4; see also “Constructing Universality” in Butler, Laclau and Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 294-295.

¹¹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 190.

¹² Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 188.

¹³ Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony,” 85.

¹⁴ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 176, 184, 190-192; Laclau, “The future of radical democracy,” 259.

¹⁵ Laclau, “Glimpsing the future,” 295, 298.

¹⁶ Laclau, “Glimpsing the future,” 295, 297.

¹⁷ For such a critique of ‘Lacanian’ theory (which includes Laclau) see A. Robinson, “The Political Theory of Constitutive Lack: A Critique,” *Theory & Event* 8.1 (2005).

¹⁸ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 113-116; “Structure, History and the Political,” 208; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 33-34.

intrinsic to any social formation, their particular instances are not. Aware of their imperfection and yet striving to stand up to their ideals, democracies should sustain arrangements that facilitate the exposure and questioning of their repressive elements. They should be always on the lookout for institutional and relational forms that minimize hierarchy and domination. Endless suspicion and higher institutional mutability promote the fight against inequality and oppression. By contrast, the illusion that any social structure could be ever cleansed of power inequalities and exclusions serves to immunise potential remainders of repression. Radical democracy is uncompromisingly agonistic: it is highly aware of the persisting limits to its full realisation, refuses yet to concede the necessity of any specific limitations and is bent on expanding its effective scope by contesting present constraints.

There is definitely a bite to this line of reasoning. Yet, the strong anti-perfectionism of Laclau and Mouffe is not as problem-free as they make it out. The doctrine that unequal power and repression are inevitable as such could curb the egalitarian impulses and the emancipatory ambitions of democracy as it is likely to nurture acceptance of such flaws: isn't there a serious danger of turning more tolerant of *specific* instances of domination and exclusion as we would tend to 'understand' their persistence on the assumption that domination and exclusion are after all inevitable?

These aporias of Laclau's democracy are compounded by other axioms of the theory of hegemony, which force on democratic politics a hierarchical, exclusionary and oppositional model of association. As outlined above, in Laclau's politics of hegemony a particular power captures the empty signifier of the communal order and foists its principles on the other constituents of the social whole –be it a political alliance resisting the established regime or a new social formation. The hegemonic force operates as an active representative and organiser of the totality, and enjoys a partial autonomy from the represented. The community is defined by necessary exclusions and the confrontation with an enemy. Radical democracy is a particular instance of this general scheme, whose strictures inform and delimit emancipatory politics.¹⁹

Laclau has vested his logic of hegemony with a quasi-transcendental, ontological status.²⁰ 'Hegemony thus defines the essence of the political...'.²¹ But closer inspection and contrast with alternative conceptions shower doubt on such claims. The logic in question comes replete with substantive determinations, whose dubious standing is barely concealed by means of slippages and ambiguities in Laclau's writing. For instance, the claim that representation plays a fundamental role becomes rather obvious once it is granted that there are no objective universal agents and principles, but only variable powers and laws which perform general functions. The increased need for mediating structures can be also readily conceded. But neither of these near-truisms, nor the need to elect representatives in global deliberative forums suffice to warrant Laclau's elevation of representatives to *indispensable half-autonomous* actors.²² Constituencies can engage in the required renegotiations through tightly controlled delegates, while communication technologies open up

¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Chapter 4, 149-193.

²⁰ Laclau, "Identity and Hegemony," 44.

²¹ Laclau, "The future of radical democracy," 258. For the transcendental status Laclau attributes to hegemony see also "Glimpsing the future," 298, particularly, 322-3 and "Structure, History and the Political," 188-193; see also S. Zizek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism?" in Butler, Laclau and Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, 106, 111.

²² See Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 98-99.

unprecedented possibilities for direct civic involvement in complex webs of interaction.

Similarly, the rejection of ultimate determining laws of society licences the conclusion that all social arrangements are premised on the power of social agents to initiate and sustain them. In an open-ended history, this power will rule out different possibilities that could come into effect under similar circumstances. But power-to does not translate into repressive power-over unless alternative options are actually upheld by other agents. Laclau acknowledges this contingent condition,²³ yet he contends unqualifiedly that ‘social relations...are always power relations’²⁴ In the same way, it is quite commonsensical that any finite social form entails exclusions and acquires a definite shape by delimiting itself from other entities. But it does not follow that such limits need to be antagonistic,²⁵ or that the very being of social configurations is predicated on the continuing preclusion of certain differences. Limits could be porous, discontinuous, expansive and flexible.

Enter the multitude

In this context, the thrust of the three famous works co-authored by Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, *Multitude* and the most recent one, *Commonwealth* is that setting out from similar premises –society as an aleatory outcome of social struggle and creation-²⁶ they have traced the lineaments of a different figure of radical democracy and liberty, which brings into relief the stains of particularity in Laclau’s hegemony. By delineating a substantive alternative they show tangibly how Laclau reifies a particular scheme of political organization. This suggests the possibility of a choice between different strategies of democratization. The multitude implies that ‘hegemony’ may not be the inescapable horizon of critical politics in late modernity.

The multitude designates a new mode of social production, a collective subject and a political logic that have emerged from post-fordist forms of ‘immaterial labour’ or ‘biopolitical production’.²⁷ Despite persisting divergences, conditions of production display ever more commonalities across different societies.²⁸ Expansive webs of communication, the diffusion of information and knowledge, the extension of social relations through new technologies, the growing similarities of social and economic environments build closer ties among all those who work under the rule of capital. Through extensive cooperation, immaterial labour brings forth new common knowledge, communication and social relationships. ‘Anyone who works with information or knowledge -...from agriculturists who develop the specific properties of seeds to software programmers’ relies on the common knowledge passed down from others and in turns creates new common knowledge.²⁹ The multitude stages thus *the common* in its duality, the webs of cooperation and communication in which the transformations of labour are already embedded and the new common ideas, affects and relationships that are being produced.

The immaterial labour of the common has not fully supplanted traditional industrial labour. But it has transfigured the entire contemporary scene of labour and production

²³ Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, 31, 34.

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁵ Laclau himself has come to see this point, but he has not yet worked out the implications of this late recognition. See “Glimpsing the future,” 318-319.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 93.

²⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 287-294 and *Multitude*, 66, 109, 114-115, 198, 219, 350.

²⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 114-115, 125-129, 187.

²⁹ M, xv.

in its image.³⁰ Service work, information technologies, communicative and affective labour are not only central to the fastest-growing occupations in dominant countries. They reorganize also traditional productive practices e.g. in 'the way the control of information in seeds, for example, is affecting agriculture.'³¹ And, most tellingly, the network structure which is emblematic of immaterial production gets diffused across social life as a way to arrange and understand everything, from imperial armies to migration patterns and neural functions.³²

'Biopolitical' labour is distinguished by a number of features, some of which -such as the expansion of contractual precariousness- are clearly unwelcome. But it exhibits two powerful characteristics that spread to other modes of labour and carry an emancipatory potential. First, its *biopolitical* nature consists in that it is not limited to the manufacture of material goods in a narrow economic sense but it also transforms and generates knowledge, affects, images, communication, social relationships and forms of life. Biopolitical production breaks down the barriers that separate the economic field from all other social domains, as it affects and engenders all facets of social life: economic, cultural and political.³³ Consequently, it involves directly the construction of new subjectivities in society.³⁴ This may carry powerful liberating effects since the new subjectivities that are being forged in immaterial production and the new figures of sociality that expand across the various spheres of life are strongly egalitarian and libertarian at the same time.

To explore this possibility we can start by fleshing out the difference between the 'biopolitics' of the multitude and the biopower of sovereign state authorities. Biopolitical production is frontally opposed to biopower construed as the power of a sovereign political force that rules directly over the life and death of populations subject to its control; the negative biopower of genocide, military destruction and police activity and the positive biopower of imperial rulers that sustains social hierarchies across the globe, based on continuous war action.³⁵ Both biopolitical production and imperial biopower engage social life in its entirety, but in a radically different manner. Biopower is a sovereign 'transcendent' authority that stands over society while biopolitical production is immanent to social existence and constructs social relations through decentralised collaboration.³⁶

Hence, the second liberating hallmark of the multitude, which reveals its democratic potential, is that it embodies a distinctive type of social and political organization which informs not only biopolitical labour but also the patterns of contemporary resistance to imperial biopower.³⁷ The 'distributed network' is made up of different units which link up with one another as nodes in a complex net. Connections unfold horizontally and possess no centre and no definite boundaries. All nodes can communicate directly with each other, while new nodes can join in indefinitely. All differences retain their singularity, yet they share similar conditions and are nested in the same net of communication. Commonality resides mainly in the dynamic

³⁰ M 65, 108-115.

³¹ M 115.

³² M 115, 142.

³³ M, xvi.

³⁴ M 66, 78.

³⁵ M, 18-21.

³⁶ M, 94-95.

³⁷ On the network structure of the multitude and its features see Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 294-299 and *Multitude*, xiii-xv, 57, 83, 142, 288, 336-340.

collaboration and interaction of differences. The Internet is the paradigm case of such a networked community.³⁸

This account draws its bearings from the realm of material production, but Hardt and Negri also track the emergence of network structures in imperial power itself and the counter-imperial struggles from the Zapatistas to Seattle onwards.³⁹ The distributed network enacts a new institutional logic which enables the multitude to become a constituent power that institutes new social relationships.⁴⁰ For now, the crux is that the multitude embodies a distinctive mode of socio-political association, which breaks 'hegemony' asunder.⁴¹

Events like Seattle and later militant actions in summit conferences, Social Forums and internet communities offer various examples of the horizontal workings of network mobilization.⁴² There is no principal actor which rises vertically above other differences, stands in for the whole and partly subsumes singularities under a particular identity in the hierarchical style of Laclau's hegemony. The common does not arise from the subordination of differences to an overarching particularity; it is rooted in interaction and collaboration among the singular constituents themselves. Participation and collective decision-making take the place of less-than-fully-accountable representatives and leaders. The swarm intelligence of the multitude can coordinate action through the autonomous input and engagement of its singularities, which can thus operate mediating structures and govern their community without centralised leadership or representation. Hardt and Negri evoke open-resource programming to illustrate an effective decentralised procedure that can pull together a myriad of independent actors and bring them to reach a collective outcome without a priori exclusions and hierarchies.⁴³ Each one freely contributes proposals and amendments to a common pool, which develops continually and produces a tangible result that works for all. There is no centralized command structure but an irreducible plurality of collaborating nodes.

Finally, the network exemplifies a social formation which is structured and yet is not defined on the basis of exclusion and antagonism. Many differences may remain outside its bounds, but exclusions could be incorporated at the next turn without bringing about the collapse of the community. Frontiers are permeable, fuzzy and admit of indefinitely new accretions.⁴⁴ In effect, Negri and Hardt propose the deleuzian 'rhizome' of the multitude as an alternative to both the hegemonic sovereignty of modern politics and the post-modern anarchy of dispersed differences.⁴⁵

Rhizomatic articulation displaces the antithetical binary identity/difference, which mandates exclusions and subordinates differences to an encompassing identity. In its stead, the complementary bind of singularity/community produces alignments and convergences through the horizontal interaction of autonomous units. This is what sets the multitude apart from dominant modern conceptions of the social subject of emancipation: the 'people', which reduces the diversity of the population to a single, unitary identity; the 'masses' where multiplicity is drowned in 'an indistinct, uniform

³⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xiv-xv.

³⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xii, 82-88, 217-218 and *Empire*, 160-163, 308-319.

⁴⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 350.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 86-87, 208-211, 217-218, 340.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 337-340.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 225-226.

⁴⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 217-218, 222, 288 and *Empire*, 299.

conglomerate'; and the 'working class' which tends to separate the industrial proletariat from agricultural, service and other type of workers, as well as the poor and unwaged labourers. By contrast, the multitude is made up of a multiplicity of singular differences which cannot be submerged in the single identity of the people or the uniformity of the masses. The multitude seeks to capture also recent mutations in the global economy, in which the industrial proletariat is no longer hegemonic and production has turned biopolitical. The multitude can embrace all the different figures of social labour and production under the rule of capital.⁴⁶ The poor, for instance, are involved in biopolitical productivity through their inclusion in service work, their agricultural activities and their mobility in vast currents of migration.⁴⁷

The polyphonic and carnevalesque swarm of the multitude, as exemplified by the 'movement of movements' at the turn of the century, is not only an egalitarian and emancipatory collective which engages in political militancy against imperial power. It prefigures at the same time the advent of an 'absolute democracy' which furthers the free expression of differences and their equal connection, cutting against exclusion, domination and enclosure in antagonistic relations. 'The project of the multitude not only expresses the desire for a world of equality and freedom, not only demands an open and inclusive democratic global society, but also provides the means for achieving it.'⁴⁸ Because the multitude is 'an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common.'⁴⁹ The potential social subject of the multitude emerging from immaterial production makes possible today, for the first time, the realization of a democracy in which we all rule 'free to act and choose as each of us pleases.'⁵⁰ This offers a *prima facie* attractive picture of radical democracy that supersedes Laclau's model with its singular authorities, exclusionary limits and antagonistic fixations. How could we chart critically a path among these divergent routes to radical democracy?

Laclau has taken issue with Hardt and Negri on the grounds that they slide into a quasi-teleological 'immanentism' which obviates the need for political mediations, the active construction of a collective subject and the definition of a wider 'against'. On Laclau's reading, the multitude originates in spontaneous, underlying processes in social and political spheres. Its heterogeneous components coalesce through automatic mechanisms and natural tendencies. Such naïve presumptions are debilitating in theoretical and political ways. If politics is guided by self-propelled dynamics there is little, if any, need to think through the actual complexity of historical situations and to wrestle with thorny issues of organisation.⁵¹ On a deeper level, their conflict plays off an ontology of immanence and abundance (Hardt and Negri) against an ontology of lack and transcendence (Laclau).⁵² In an ontology of immanence and abundance, the plane of creative and proliferating differences is self-sufficient, self-producing and self-regulating. In an ontology of lack and transcendence, the coalescence of heterogeneous elements is never guaranteed in advance. Lack implies the need for active interventions and the political institution of equivalential chains. Something

⁴⁶ M, xiv-xv, 106-107.

⁴⁷ M 129.

⁴⁸ M, xi.

⁴⁹ M, xiv.

⁵⁰ M 241; see also 219.

⁵¹ For Laclau's critique, see *On Populist Reason*, 239-244.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 239-240.

beyond the spontaneous play of differences must be called in (this captures partly the meaning of 'transcendence' in Laclau).⁵³

Hardt and Negri make a case to the effect that the multitude and its polyphonic community spring from processes of economic transformation, and they put in place a collective subject which carries in embryo an 'absolute democracy' to come.⁵⁴ We are dealing with a real tendency or a 'real potential', 'the living alternative that grows within Empire.'⁵⁵ They suggest that their vision will be realised through the historical 'maturation' of social developments, which again calls to mind an obsolete Marxist teleology with disabling effects: '[T]he constituent power of the multitude has matured to such an extent that it is becoming able, through its networks of communication and cooperation...to sustain an alternative democratic society on its own.'⁵⁶ On the other hand, they increasingly stress that historical trends do not suffice. The multitude is yet to be constituted as a political subject. The common social flesh that arises from biopolitical productivity has not congealed yet in a concrete body and could take on various shapes that serve different political purposes. The democracy of the multitude is a project that calls for concerted political efforts.⁵⁷ Capitalist crisis will not produce automatically its collapse and the multiplicity of biopolitical singularities will not achieve spontaneously their exodus from global capital on the way to full autonomy.⁵⁸

Yet Laclau is onto something. Negri and Hardt do hold out certain historical assurances.⁵⁹ They construe a specific template of organisation as already prefigured and embedded in social dynamics and they insist that the network logic of the multitude provides a ready-made model of political articulation directly capable of instituting an 'absolute democracy' on their terms.⁶⁰ They 'propose the multitude as an adequate concept for organizing politically the project of exodus and liberation.'⁶¹ They seem to pre-empt thereby fundamental questions and choices on political structure and strategy.

How cogent, then, is this figure of the multitude as an alternative construction of democratic agency and association that promises to break with hegemonic politics? To begin with, Hardt and Negri are right to respond to Laclau by dismissing the false dilemma between spontaneity and hegemony. The political conjunction of singularities in common webs of interaction is not spontaneous, 'but that does not mean that hegemony and unification, the formation of a sovereign and unified power-whether it be a state, a party, or a people- is the necessary condition for politics.'⁶²

To stipulate that Laclau's hegemony is a necessary process of late modern politics or politics at large, that half-autonomous functions of representation are intrinsic to politics and that exclusionary limits are constitutive of society is to endorse ontological theses with a strong pretence to universal validity. This gesture clashes

⁵³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 240, 244; "The future of radical democracy," 257-258; Tonder and Thomassen, "Introduction: rethinking radical democracy between abundance and lack," 1-8; Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 337.

⁵⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 294, 257-258, 409-411 and *Multitude*, 88, 94-95, 114-115, 219-222, 227, 336-337, 350-351, 357.

⁵⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 222; xiii.

⁵⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 357; see also *Empire*, 411.

⁵⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 57 and *Multitude*, 159, 220, 226, 354-355, Commonwealth 169.

⁵⁸ Commonwealth 165.

⁵⁹ See endnote 61.

⁶⁰ M 350-351.

⁶¹ Com. 166.

⁶² Com 175.

with the founding premise of anti-essentialist thought, which forswears the presence of invariable laws. As the contrast between the theories of hegemony and the rhizomatic multitude has already indicated, the conditions of social openness, its precise meaning and its implications lend themselves to diverse interpretations. Even the baseline commitment to a variously definable ‘social contingency’ need not raise a claim to universal validity. The idea that society is open to unpredetermined change can be held in the manner of a non-necessary, contestable assumption, which remains available to revision;⁶³ this is all the more true for any particular elaboration of social contingency, its presuppositions and its entailments.

The essentialist leanings of the hegemonic approach could be partly ascribed to its failure to reckon with the praxis dimension of creative agency, which takes centre stage in the alternative views of democracy propounded by Hannah Arendt, Giles Deleuze, Cornelius Castoriadis, John Holloway and, of course, Michael Hardt and Tony Negri.⁶⁴ These conceptions evince a keener sense of social openness as they remain alert to the possibility of the radically new. By contrast, in Laclau’s thought, social contingency is primarily associated with antagonism and tensions, the incompleteness and subversion of stable identities or the undecidability of social structures.⁶⁵ Generative action is not sufficiently rendered by terms such as ‘articulation’, the ‘establishment of equivalential chains’, ‘hegemonic formations’ and equivalent formulas which populate Laclau’s discourse on social construction.⁶⁶ All these expressions could equally refer to different combinations of a closed set of elements.

The failure to grasp the innovative potential of agency impacts on the very constitution of a radical democracy which would acknowledge and institutionalise the indeterminacy of society. If indeterminacy resides mainly in ‘lack’ and conflictuality, a radicalised democracy should nurture mainly the ongoing struggle and alternation of different hegemonic powers, whose antagonism brings into light the substantive ‘emptiness’ of society.⁶⁷ Creative agency and its empowerment need not be given their due. Hence, a democracy reformed along Laclau’s lines may be less supportive of freedom and equality. The creation of the new enables agents to break through preconceived alternatives and given conditions by calling something other into existence. The same practice of freedom can help, moreover, to develop freer and more equal relations. Feminists and gay liberation movements could illustrate that, when all available options are overly restrictive or rooted in relations of domination, the effective expansion of freedom may require the creation of new values, forms of life and types of relationship.⁶⁸

⁶³ On this mode of ontological affirmation see S. White, *Sustaining affirmation: the strengths of weak ontology in political theory* (Princeton N.J., Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶⁴ See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); C. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (London: Continuum, 1988); J. Holloway, *Change the world without taking power* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Hardt and Negri, *Empire; Multitude*.

⁶⁵ See here above, pp. XX and Laclau, “The future of radical democracy,” 258-261.

⁶⁶ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 105-147.

⁶⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 193; Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 34-35, 100; “Identity and Hegemony,” 85-86.

⁶⁸ L.M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 61-63, 99-103, 162; R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, L.A.: University of California Press, 1995), 229-230; M. Foucault, “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will” and “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *Ethics. Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. V.1, ed. P. Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000).

Neglect of generative action entails, finally, that social openness in Laclau's democracy could be hollow or very limited. If what mainly matters for undoing social fixity and rigidity is an open struggle of different projects, closure might perpetuate itself in the numerus clausus of substantive alternatives. Democracy could remain caught up in a limited set of options, and an eternal recycling of the same alternatives could pass off as social openness.

From this vantage point, the democracy of the multitude envisioned by Hardt and Negri seems to offer a valuable corrective, as it draws its energies from creative excesses, productive capacities and differentiation. Democratic politics centres on the constituent power of agency, which gives rise to new relationships, new types of knowledge and new patterns of communication and coordination.⁶⁹ The hallmark of the revolutionary democracy to come is that it will unleash the demiurgic forces of an endless diversity of people, under conditions of freedom and equality.⁷⁰

The broader Spinozist and Deleuzian current that has arisen in contemporary theory has also enhanced our appreciation of resistances that are devalued or pass unnoticed in political thought with little taste for creative action.⁷¹ The politics of temporary 'utopian spaces' in squatted centres, autonomous communities and festival-like demonstrations releases spontaneous, imaginative energies. It negates prevailing relations by carving out fluid spheres of free and equal communication, solidarity and diversification, where power is reclaimed by ordinary individuals. These provisional or limited initiatives do not often result in stable and extensive social transformation, but they are real exercises in creative action. They train their participants into working out their inventive potentials and they can nourish active hope for the possibility of new autonomous worlds.

On the other hand, however, the Spinozist-Deleuzian trends bear a risk. As they cultivate the idea that contemporary societies are pregnant with emergent possibilities,⁷² they tend to underestimate the effort that must be put into thinking up and actualising alternative schemes of organisation, which will sustain creative agency on free and equal terms.⁷³ They deflect attention away from the practical task of developing new institutional designs that can bolster creative autonomy in the complex realities of contemporary societies. This effect of debilitation is made worse by their fixation on horizontal networks, which are made out to be the principal and largely sufficient vehicle of empowered democracy.⁷⁴ The suggestion that the proliferation of autonomous micro-spaces, decentralised action and network decision-making will suffice in the main to put us on the track of a fuller democracy can translate into a dogmatism that blocks political imagination from exploring other pertinent sites and avenues of social change. It also lends itself easily to charges of sociological and political naiveté, if grass-roots decentralised collectives are to be the

⁶⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 61, 92, 204, 357-358, 394, 405-406, 413; *Multitude*, 146-147, 348-351.

⁷⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 220-222, 350-351, 355-357.

⁷¹ See among others Tormey, "From Utopian Worlds to Utopian Spaces,"; "After Gleneagles: Where next"; B. Ardit, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 126-147.

⁷² Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 294, 257-258, 409-411; *Multitude*, 88, 94-95, 114-115, 219-222, 336-337, 350-351, 357; S. Tormey, "From Utopian Worlds to Utopian Spaces," 402-406; "After Gleneagles: Where next," 345-349.

⁷³ A similar critique has been developed by Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 239-244 and M. Saar, "Book review. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*," *Constellations* 13.3 (2006), 129-130.

⁷⁴ See Com 166-176.

sole or the chief strategy through which to address contemporary power relations and to reorder highly complex social bonds.

Hardt and Negri mobilise two kinds of arguments to back up their thesis that horizontal, fluid and non-representative webs of autonomous particularities are the key that will unlock the gates leading to 'absolute democracy.'⁷⁵ Their arguments can be distinguished into empirical and ontological. The empirical case lies in their foregoing account of biopolitical labour. This is supposed to demonstrate that contemporary webs of production operate through the open, non-hierarchical cooperation of a diversity of productive singularities, which are coordinated like 'an orchestra...without a conductor, [that] would fall silent if anyone were to step onto the podium.'⁷⁶ They go on to argue that if this non-sovereign, non-hegemonic model of collective self-organization can be established in the daily creation of the common, the political capacity of the multitude for collective decision-making and self-direction is no longer a question.⁷⁷

The ontological case suggests that the constitution of the common is the manifestation of an anthropological 'power of love.' In their political anthropology, they see love and the common as primary forces. 'Evil', the distortion and obstruction of the loving, plural power of the common through racism, fascism and other hierarchical and identitarian institutions, is held to be derivative -a corruption of the primary forces with no original and independent existence.⁷⁸ The power of love is exercised in patterns of organization which are always open and horizontal. Thanks to its primary power, every time it is blocked and corrupted in fixed vertical relations, love manages to break through these limits and re-opens itself to the free participation of all singularities.⁷⁹ '[S]ince evil derives from love, the power of evil is necessarily less...acting through love we have the power to combat evil...the battle is ours to fight and win.'⁸⁰

The empirical reasoning can be countered in at least two different ways. First, through a straightforward refutation based on available counter-evidence. Charles Leadbeater shows, for example, that collective intelligence and creativity in network communities, such as those engaged in open-source programming, is hierarchically managed by a central core group of initiators who keep control over decision-making at the various stages of collective creation.⁸¹ Second, political strategies for resistance and social-transformation should remain highly sensitive to the variable features of different contexts and conjunctures or they will not be strategic enough. So, it remains a strategically open question whether decentralised struggles, autonomous collectives and indirect resistance through flight, ironic subversion and imaginative action could stabilise transformative results and unsettle the present balance of power at different times and spaces.

The ontological argument is vulnerable to an internal critique which can take us to the heart of vexing dilemmas that upset Hardt and Negri's enthusiastic embrace of the autonomous multitude as the body of absolute democracy. While they affirm the primary force of love and its capacity to prevail, they also reiterate that we lack any

⁷⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 294, 257-258, 409-411 and *Multitude*, 88, 94-95, 114-115, 219-222, 227, 336-337, 350-351, 357. Com 165-166.

⁷⁶ Com.173.

⁷⁷ Com 175-176.

⁷⁸ Com. 192-193.

⁷⁹ Com. 192-199.

⁸⁰ Com. 198.

⁸¹ Leadbeater, *We-Think*, London: Profile Books, 2009.

guarantees and that there is nothing innate and automatic about love going well.⁸² This ambivalence is indicative of a broader oscillation, which becomes manifest again when they acknowledge that singularities often conflict with one another,⁸³ while they insist at the same time that horizontally organized multiplicities can combine full freedom and equality, 'the consensus of singularities and the autonomy of each',⁸⁴ without constituting any unified and sovereign power.⁸⁵ Obviously, if differences are liable to clash, processes of collective unification and the exercise of sovereign power over dissidents will become necessary when binding collective decisions are in order and antagonisms are not resolved in a manner that commands the free assent of all. And what could warrant the certainty that all antagonisms of contending differences can be overcome and universal agreements are always attainable?

Such guarantees are hard to find in a world that is fundamentally contingent and rife with unpredictable possibilities. The likelihood of irresolvable divisions seems intrinsic to a universe of heterogeneous singularities which are capable of creative self-differentiation but are not bound together by an all-encompassing identity or invariant laws of human nature, reason and history which secure a pre-established harmony or guarantee a final convergence.⁸⁶ This is precisely the world inhabited by the horizontal multiplicities of Hardt and Negri. And this world affords them no security against the recurrence of sovereign, hegemonic structures within the very relations and institutions of the multitude; no security against the need for excluding certain options and suppressing minoritarian preferences when the free convergence and coordination of different desires is not forthcoming. In an indeterminate and plural cosmos, we could not eliminate the possibility of social conflict confronting us with a choice between political stalemate, endless civil war or coercive imposition of particular social preferences. We could not rule out the reassertion of hegemonic, sovereign rule. And this reassertion is not a *secondary* possibility, it is inherent in the openness of a world that can be antagonistically divided because it is not unified a priori by universal laws of reason, nature or history. This follows in effect from Hardt and Negri's own analysis, although they seem unwilling to recognise it. If, as they state, the force of love lacks any guaranteed automatism and can always go bad, then it is inherently susceptible of corruption. Its corruptibility is endemic to its power and 'evil' cannot be treated as secondary and derivative in any unambiguous sense that could fully separate it from its antithesis.

Arguably, what prevents Hardt and Negri from drawing out the full implications of their own ontological assumptions is that they seriously destabilise the proposition of the multitude as the embodiment of absolute democracy and, ultimately, the very notion of an absolute democracy which has overcome sovereign practices and coercive unification in a secure and durable manner. If collective decision-making in horizontal plural communities may occasionally require the suppression of alternatives and the political subordination of dissenters, the dividing lines between the horizontal, voluntary politics of the multitude and the hierarchical, unifying politics of forceful hegemony become blurred. Hardt and Negri reckon the need to deploy the common power of love as a combat force against evil, when social relations degenerate into hierarchical, authoritarian and identitarian patterns.⁸⁷ They

⁸² Com. 194

⁸³ Com 357-358.

⁸⁴ Com 196

⁸⁵ Com. 175, 359

⁸⁶ Com. 358, 378-9,

⁸⁷ Com. 195.

also advocate the establishment of institutional processes through which the multitude can protect itself against external repression and internal destructive conflicts.⁸⁸ But an institutionalized collective force that excludes and suppresses other social forces and agents is in effect a sovereign political authority. It will be little different from a sovereign state if it also employs legal and formalised means of enforcing its will. And it is not obvious at all that a community of freedom should rule out in principle any such means in favour of informal coercion and diffuse social deterrents if it wants to safeguard itself effectively and in an orderly fashion against potential enemies of equal liberty.

An autonomous and egalitarian society may need to exercise sovereign authority on many more occasions, not only for defending itself but also for enforcing collective decisions when social preferences clash irreconcilably in particular matters or in more fundamental choices that bear on the very understanding of equal freedom by different social subjects. This is the possibility that is occluded by Hardt and Negri because it disrupts the opposition they set up between hegemonic politics and the potential for radical emancipation contained in the biopolitical multitude. Coming to terms with the possibility in question would require them to give up on the dream that the horizontal network of multiple singularities is the finally found embodiment of absolute freedom and equality that breaks the chains of sovereignty.

But their dilemma is not really fatal. To begin with, possibility does not amount to necessity. Antagonistic differences which need to be resolved through sovereign repression are merely likely. In an open space of historical contingency, they are not a historical inevitability that will always rule out the achievement of free consensual collaboration. The politics of hegemony, in its most abstract sense, is not a fate, but an always present eventuality, on a par with the politics of an non-hierarchical multiplicity of freely converging differences.

Second, there are always specific political distinctions to be drawn between different modes of political connection and rule, with more or less participation, more or less hierarchy, exclusion, coercion and submission to leaders or unaccountable representatives. When fully politicized, decentralised rhizomatic coordination and vertical, centralised organization will be judged concretely on their respective merits as the most adequate way of advancing emancipatory goals under variable circumstances. When equal freedom is at stake, there are definitely many political reasons to commend voluntary and non-hierarchical arrangements where singularities can collaborate symmetrically while enjoying the maximum degree of autonomous self-differentiation. There may be no guarantees that such relations are attainable under all conditions, but there are not any transcendental barriers to their possibility and, consequently, no final limits to our efforts to achieve them.

The recognition that even horizontal modes of political articulation may entail repression and exclusions can serve in effect to foster equal liberty by keeping communities alert to potential residues of subjection and by keeping these residues open to contest. The admission that the choice between autonomous network forms and representative, centralised structures is a political one which must be decided in a strategically intelligent manner can also help to pursue the most effective course of action for the expansion of equal liberty. By holding this higher end analytically distinct from its alternative practical embodiments we uphold the freedom of collective agents to decide reflectively and recurrently the particular forms that can best realise their egalitarian and libertarian objectives in variable circumstances.

⁸⁸

Com. 359.

