

# Viva la Elección?

*On the Left Populist Strategy for Democratic Socialism*



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The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.

– Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

**Master thesis**

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**Title:** Viva la Elección? On the Left Populist Strategy for Democratic Socialism

**Abstract:** This thesis critically reflects on the work of Chantal Mouffe regarding democratic socialism. Although Mouffe claims that socialism makes up a vital part of her left populist strategy, it is somewhat unclear what exact kind of socialism she envisions. By differentiating democratic socialism from authoritarian socialism and social democracy, and comparing Mouffe's preferred system of socialism to these three models, this thesis arrives at three major points of critique. First of all, the left populist alliance between heterogeneous struggles against a common adversary is unstable, and therefore in constant need of the powerful presence of this adversary. Secondly, Mouffe's focus on the electoral path to socialism limits her effectiveness. Lastly, if her strategy overcomes these difficulties, the socialism she wants to see implemented seems to be more in line with the historical experience of social democracy. Still, Mouffe provides socialist theorists with some important insights, and it is through her work that we can arrive at an alternative strategy.

**Keywords:** left populism, democratic socialism, socialist strategy, agonistic democracy, Mouffe

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## **Introduction: Socialism in a Perpetual State of Crisis**

The combination of socialism and democracy has never been an easy one. Ever since its revolutionary Marxist heydays, the broad political movement which seeks the implementation of some form of democratic socialism, commonly known as ‘the Left’, finds itself in a perpetual state of intense difficulty. There are times where progressives believe to be on the winning side, but these periods never remain and are almost always followed by events that put the movement in even deeper crisis. The problems for socialism seem to be countless: take for instance its incapability to make serious electoral inroads after an economic crisis, its ever-loosening grip on the increasingly smaller and less powerful working class, the experience that it cannot govern unless it is willing to make painful compromises to the forces of capitalism, or the fact that it is in complete ideological disarray after the defeat of the Soviet Union and the establishment of global liberal hegemony. Given these problems, some even argue that the Left should stop the struggle to create a socialist society. It seems that we have reached the era of what Mark Fisher (2009) calls ‘capitalist realism’. Capitalism has managed to present itself as the only realistically viable political and economic system, and it has become almost impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it. In this era, socialism remains as an empty concept completely devoid of the radical meaning it once had (Zizek, 2008).

But where there is a problem, there are usually those who claim to have found the solution. The socialist crisis has given birth to a whole (academic) movement of people who have addressed the question of what socialism can still mean in contemporary times. Among these people is Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism or left populism is a popular strand of left-wing thought, with enthusiasm for her work not limited to the world of critical and (post-)Marxist academia, but also expanding to political and social life. Mouffe’s writings have inspired various political parties and movements, such as Jeremy Corbyn’s British Labour Party, the presidential campaigns of self-declared democratic socialists Bernie Sanders in the United States of America and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and the formation of Podemos (We Can) in Spain and Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) in Greece (Thomassen, 2016). According to Mouffe, what these left populist or ‘Mouffean’ movements have in common is that they propose a radical left transformative agenda, and more importantly, adopt a conflictual strategy by drawing a new ‘political frontier’ between the people they claim to represent and the political and financial elites (Klemperer & Mouffe, 2021).

It was exactly these movements which shortly after the financial banking crisis of 2008 and the resulting public outrage gave new hope that the Left could show that its ideas were still relevant (Raekstad, 2019). And not without concrete successes. Podemos for example, entered the Spanish Congress of Deputies in 2015 with a great result of 49 seats, marking an end to the two-party system

that had existed in Spain since the restoration of democracy (Orriols & Cordero, 2016). In a similar way, Syriza and its political leader Alexis Tsipras built a platform that was regarded by the Greek people as a reasonable alternative to the existing political elite, while still maintaining its radicality (Zizek, 2012). This even led to Tsipras' election as the prime minister of Greece. Although Bernie Sanders and Jean-Luc Mélenchon never succeeded in their quest to the highest offices of their countries, they did manage to become top contenders starting from an underdog position, respectively inspiring million American and French citizens with their energetic campaign rallies. The same can be said of Jeremy Corbyn and the Momentum movement, who turned the establishment force that was the centre-left British Labour Party into the biggest European left-wing organisation with almost 600,000 members (Mouffe, 2018).

However, this enthusiasm was short-lived, as soon became clear that there were limits to the successes of left populist movements in liberal democracies. These failures broadly fall in two categories: either they came into power but bowed down to the forces of capitalism, or they never came into power and therefore adopted their strategy. Syriza and Podemos fall in the first category, while Mélenchon, Sanders and Corbyn fall in the latter. This can be exemplified if we take a closer look at some of these failures. Syriza for instance thanked its electoral successes to its resistance to the austerity policies imposed upon Greece by the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the European Union, collectively known as the *Troika*. But once it got into power, it accepted the imposition of policies that were much more severe, including pension and public spending cuts, mass privatisation, tax increases on the working class and anti-union legislation. Although Syriza was pressured heavily, it made a conscious choice to remain within the Eurozone and 'save' its capitalist economy (Mudde, 2017).

The surrender of Syriza to the Troika served as a major blow with great symbolic value to its sister party Podemos, which until then was on the verge of replacing the Spanish social democratic party (PSOE) as the dominant left-of-centre force in Spain. That changed when it was forced to admit that if it were to be confronted with a similar dilemma while in government, it would also opt for surrender (Kioupkiolis & Katsambekis, 2018). As a consequence, the mood around Podemos shifted. Not soon thereafter they would find themselves in a relatively marginal position. In order to revive the party, its leadership believed that a strategy change was needed, which is why it entered a coalition government as a junior partner to PSOE (Gillespie, 2017). Entering such a coalition comes with a price: instead of uniting with the social movements that inspired the creation of the political platform (De Nadal, 2021), it now often finds itself in direct opposition to these movements. For instance, when anti-eviction platform La PAH came with an ambitious legislative proposal for the new housing law, Podemos' head of organisation Lilith Verstrynge responded by saying that Podemos cannot adopt this proposal because it has to face the 'political reality of coalition', and that things can only change little by little (Gilmartin & Verstrynge, 2022). Nowadays, Podemos' hopes are not vested on a new radical

programme that can bring Spain closer to a socialist society, but it has shifted its focus to the governmental skills of its labour minister Yolanda Díaz and her ability to enact moderate welfare reforms (Gilmartin, 2022). Díaz slogan *diálogo* (dialogue) – which she practices by insisting on finding compromises with entrepreneurs in order to ensure gains that are both in their interests and in the interests of the Spanish workers (Gerbaudo, 2022) – is in itself a total rupture with the radical and populist style of early Podemos.

When it comes to Mélenchon and his party La France Insoumise (Unbowed France or LFI), a similar process is unfolding. When he lost the presidency of France for the second time in a row to former Minister of the Economy and investment banker Emmanuel Macron, his party decided that the only way that they could still stop Macron was to form an alliance with other (centre-)left-wing parties, including the moderate social democrats of the Parti Socialiste (Socialist Party or PS) and the pro-European Union greens of the Europe Écologie Les Verts (Europe Ecology – The Greens or EELV) (Marlière, 2022). This new coalition, known as the Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologiste et Sociale (New People’s Ecologist and Social Union or NUPES) runs on a notably less radical programme than LFI had done previously, as it shows no intention of breaking with capitalism. Instead, NUPES focusses on moderate and pragmatic bread-and-butter policies such as a lower pension age and a higher minimum wage. Mélenchon also rarely makes use of the populist rhetoric that made him popular in the first place, and opts for a more presidential style (Divès, 2022).

Paolo Gerbaudo (2022) shows that when it comes to left populist movements, a clear trend is visible: most have abandoned their radical roots in favour of a more reformist, softened stance. Rather than challenging the dominant system, their goal has changed to becoming part of the system in a similar role to the one social democratic parties have played since the Second World War. This position has become vacant since these traditional left-of-centre parties have embraced liberal pro-market policies. Hence, the ‘populist moment’ seems to be over (Jäger, 2019).

Despite the dire state of left populist movements in Western liberal democracies, advocates for left populism like Giorgos Venizelos and Yannis Stavrakakis continue to believe in its potential. According to them, declarations that left populism has failed indefinitely “often betray a linear and deterministic logic – and thus seem to ignore the fluidity and contingency of the political and the continually reactivated cycles of political antagonism” (Stavrakakis & Venizelos, 2020). The Left thus has to try again and again, until it eventually succeeds. On a similar note, Mouffe stated:

“Yes, I will admit that currently the right moment does not seem to be there. But the solution must come from this strategy. [...] I hold on to a statement made by Gramsci. He wrote: *What we need is not the pessimism of intelligence, but the optimism of the will*. That is what I want

to focus on right now. [...] I do not see an alternative” (Mouffe & Bodegraven, 2019, p. 33-34).

This type of wishful thinking should leave every critical academic unsatisfied. Rather, given recent political developments, Mouffe’s theory is in need of a theoretical evaluation. Potential shortcomings of agonistic pluralism need to be discussed and alternative strategies for democratic socialism need to be explored. This thesis provides this critical evaluation by answering the following research question: *To what extent can Chantal Mouffe’s theory serve as a strategy for democratic socialism?*

In order to answer this question, this thesis will first give an overview of what socialism has meant throughout history, and what experiences need to be avoided to still be able to speak of a democratic socialism. The second chapter will elaborate on Mouffe’s theory. Besides being a socialist strategy, it also serves other interrelated purposes. The third chapter will give a critical reflection on her work. The fourth and final chapter will try to show that there are some elements of her theory that are worth saving when it comes to implementing democratic socialism. It also tries to show how to arrive an alternative strategy by learning from what is missing in Mouffe her theory.



# **Chapter 1: Social Democracy, Authoritarian Socialism and Democratic Socialism**

According to Peter Self, “no widespread socio-economic order has as yet emerged which can be confidently or closely associated with the ideas of socialism” (Self, 2017, p. 414). Therefore, socialism is more a theoretical idea than an actually existing political system. Still, the world has seen regimes that are described as socialist, ranging from the totalitarian Stalin regime in the USSR to the Scandinavian social democratic welfare states. These experiences of authoritarian socialism and social democracy leave theorists of democratic socialism like Marxist political sociologist Nicos Poulantzas (1978) largely dissatisfied. According to them, socialism has to be something beyond a state-controlled economic and political system.

In order to take away part of the confusion around the conceptualisation of socialism, this chapter gives a short, generalised overview of the history of socialist thought, and shows how this has resulted in authoritarian socialism and social democracy. It then proceeds to explain how both these models differ from democratic socialism and grants a working definition of this type of socialism.

## **1.1 A general history of socialist thought**

Contrary to popular belief, Karl Marx was not the one who coined the term socialism. Far before Marx’s ideology entered the scene, early socialists already presented alternatives to the capitalist status quo. In their eyes, capitalism failed to address social problems like inequality, poverty and dangerous working conditions (Self, 2017). Some general ideas on how to replace the competition-driven market society with an organised one controlled by the working class were already in circulation. Medieval philosophers like Thomas More based their critique on capitalism on its incompatibility with the moral teachings of the church, while early French utopian socialists like Proudhon opposed private property rights and believed in actual economic equality (Laider, 1927). And approximately at the same time as the publication of Marx’s most important works, socialist anarchism was also a force to be reckoned with. Anarcho-socialists like Pjotr Kropotkin, Emma Goldman and Elisée Reclus were like Marxists often prepared to use violence to destroy the existing political order, but differed in the sense that they were reluctant to use political power to remake society (Fleming, 1979).

Early and anarcho-socialists all have had their influence on contemporary socialist thought, but they are largely overshadowed by the impact of Marx’s works. He came up with a coherent theory that challenges capitalism in many ways to this day. Any modern account of socialist ideology can directly or indirectly be attributed to the legacy of Marxism. Marx devoted most of his life to criticising capitalism and its internal contradictions, and therefore did not see it as his primary task to come up

with utopias (Paden, 2002). However, while looking closely at his work, one can discover a general outline for a post-capitalist society.

### *1.1.1 Marxism and socialism*

Marxism is grounded in philosopher Georg Hegel's conception of history. As Hegel lays out in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) all historic events are marked by opposite opinions, contrasting claims and contradictory elements. The history of humanity 'moves forward' due to the constant dialectic of contradictory elements, which eventually results in the dissolvment of conflict between these elements (Desmond, 1985). This can be exemplified when one looks at the history of Christianity. The development of Christian thought is a long process. When this process reached its peak during the Middle Ages, a countermovement appeared in the form of Protestantism, meaning that a dialectic clash between opposing conceptions of Christian religion has come into being. It is through this dialectic of Protestantism and Catholicism that the history of Christianity develops. This process will reach its climax when the two become integrated, creating a new category (Heiss, 1963).

Marx (critically) adopts this dialectic understanding of history by stating that "all of written history of society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels, 2018, p. 21). The rise and fall of all dominant economic and political systems (feudalism, despotism, capitalism and so on) can be attributed to the dialectic process between opposing social classes (White, 1996). It is this same process he calls dialectic or historical materialism, which will result in the destruction of capitalism and hitherto all class conflictual relations (Bukharin, 2011).

In arguably Marx's (1976) most famous work *Das Kapital (Capital)* he gives an outline of how this would work. According to him, profit is something that stems from the labour of the working class. It is because of their employment of the means of production that raw materials are made into a product that holds more value. Despite the fact that the working class is responsible for this added value, the capitalist economic system makes sure that profit does not belong to them. It belongs instead to those who own the means of production: the capitalist shareholder class or bourgeoisie. The working class (or to speak in Marxist terms, the proletariat) only gets a small percentage of their added value in the form of wage (Marx, 1969). Capitalism thus relies on a situation in which the working class does not own or control the means of production, and therefore has to sell their labour to the bourgeoisie in exchange for wages to be able to survive (Roseberry, 1997).

Driven by profit maximisation, the bourgeoisie tries to do everything in its power to reduce its costs. This sets two processes into motion. First of all, large corporations who hold the most economic power are able to do this more effectively. The petty bourgeoisie or middle class (small traders, small-scale producers, small property owners) will then become the dinosaur in the room: unable to compete with

the most powerful of the bourgeoisie they will soon go extinct (Poulantzas, 2008a). Marx (1976) calls this process the 'accumulation of capital' and sees it as one of the defining characters of the capitalist system. The means of the production will fall in the hands of an increasingly smaller group of people, thereby destroying the middle class and simplifying the social structure of society in the sense that it will only consist of two classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Luxemburg, 2003). Secondly, maximising profits can be done by reducing the cost of labour. According to Marx (1976), without the intervention of the state, the capitalist class will lower the wages of the working class to the point that they are barely able to make ends meet. By doing so, the capitalists ensure their own demise, as this not only has a dramatic effect on the conditions of the proletariat, but also on the system itself. Given the growing size of the proletariat and its decreasing ability to buy products, consumption will lower dramatically leading to an economic crisis that capitalism will not be able to overcome. Capitalism will thus fall due to its own internal contradictions (McNall, 1990).

Considering the unsustainability of capitalism, there is an economic necessity for an alternative economic and political system. One that does not rely on the dispossession of capital by the bourgeoisie. Such a society becomes a possibility when the working class unites as a political force and seizes the power of the state that was till then held by the bourgeoisie. The goal of this is to establish a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Draper, 1962). Although it is debatable whether Marx actually used the term dictatorship of the proletariat (Moore, 1957), it is clear that the state form Marx envisioned has to be seen in a different context than the contemporary connotation of the term dictatorship. Nowadays it refers to the absolute rule of a single strongman or a small group of elites. Such a conception of a dictatorship would mean a dictatorship *over* the proletariat, where according to Marxist theorist Karl Kautsky (1981) it is clear that Marx meant a dictatorship *of* the proletariat, thus consisting of members or elected representatives of said class. It is indeed true that Marx did not make a distinction between a workers' government and the dictatorship of the proletariat. He never emphasised the oppressive tasks of the dictatorship, in the way that has been done by some twentieth century Marxists (Johnstone, 1971).

The general task of this new proletarian government is to seize the means of production from the bourgeoisie and put it under the democratic control of the masses. They are the ones who decide through co-operative forms of economic organisation like workers' councils what gets produced. This means that they seize this power from the forces of the market and the bourgeois state (Jossa, 2010). Marx (1996a) believed that this mode of production would exceed capitalism in terms of efficiency, which would lead to an abundance of goods, capital and services, freely accessible to all. No longer can people be differentiated and put into social classes on the basis of their individual possession of the means of production. The proletarian government has thus effectively succeeded in creating a classless society.

Where there are no classes, there can also be no class conflict. As shown, Marx believes that history is primarily guided by class conflict. With the end of class conflict, society has effectively reached the end of history, by which is meant the end of all political conflict (Williams, 2000). The state, which according to Marx has the primary role of regulating and managing conflict in the interests of a certain class, thus no longer serves a purpose and can therefore wither away (Moore, 1957). Marx envisioned an economic and political system free from states, where the centre of power lies in democratically controlled workers' councils. This classless, stateless, democratic society is what Marx understands as socialism (Hudis, 2019).

### *1.1.2 Authoritarian statist socialism*

Marx saw the bourgeois capitalist society as a necessary pre-condition for his vision of socialism, as only full-grown capitalist economies with a clear dichotomy between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie contained the material and social foundations for socialism (Milliband, 1989).

Accordingly, late nineteenth century Germany, with its highly industrialised economy and democratic institutions, was fit for a proletarian revolution. Russia, with its backward economy run by a Tsarist regime and the presence of the peasantry who formed a third social class, not so much (Kingston-Mann, 1983). Vladimir Lenin was fiercely critical of this notion. He was convinced that the socialist revolution in Russia could not wait for centuries until the Russian economy could finally be ascribed as fully capitalist. He therefore came up with a strategic theory that incorporates the peasantry as part of the revolutionary class (Kingston-Mann, 1980). Lenin would grow to be the leader of the first successful socialist revolution and created his own strand of Marxism: Marxism-Leninism (Krausz, 2015).

What characterises Marxism-Leninism is the central role of soviets, which are democratically elected councils. In his early works, Lenin tasked these soviets with the representation of the oppressed classes. The soviet thus had a clear political role; it was the catalyst of the revolution, as well as a model for organising post-revolutionary society. The bourgeois state and parliament should be replaced with this new political form (Lenin, 1993). Lenin thus had a similar position on socialism as Marx: socialism in Marxist-Leninist terms is a society dedicated to the interests of and ruled by the working and peasantry class. Control of the working class' own fate is central within Lenin's socialism. In the material sense, this entails access to health care, financial security, the right to a job and so on), while in the political sense, this comes down to the right to participate in government (Fleming, 1989).

Lenin's position shifted nearly 180 degrees after the Bolsheviks assumed power. He was suddenly confronted with a chaotic political situation stemming both from internal (economic crises, civil war)

and external influences (foreign powers trying to intervene in order to restore the Tsarist regime) (Carley, 1989). Following these events, Lenin demoted the role of the soviets to executive organs of the socialist state. The councils were not meant to become a permanent political form of self-governance, but only had a temporary instrumental role. The real centre of power laid in the hands of the Bolshevik party, the soviets were only there to execute the vision of a small revolutionary vanguard (Ask Popp-Madsen & Kets, 2021). Besides their function, Lenin also changed the composition of the soviets. Rather than being ruled by representatives of the oppressed classes, the soviets should also for an important part compose of technical, financial and managerial experts. As Lenin states:

“without the guidance of experts in the various field of knowledge, technology and experience, the transition to socialism will be impossible, because socialism calls for a conscious mass advance to greater productivity to greater productivity of labour compared with capitalism, and on the basis achieved by capitalism” (Lenin, 1972, p. 241).

This also means that the bourgeoisie should no longer be destroyed, since specialists are, “because of the whole social environment which made them specialists” (Lenin, 1972, p. 241) mainly bourgeois. Instead, the bourgeoisie should be subordinated to the proletariat. As Poulantzas (1978) points out, these change that Lenin made to the soviets means that Leninism will sooner or later result in statist despotism or the dictatorship of a few elitist experts. This is unavoidable according to him, because of its reliance on the soviet councils composed of experts and under the strict control of the socialist state. It is thus also no coincidence that the Soviet model of socialism would turn out to be a trajectory to an authoritarian statist regime which today is associated with the term communism or ‘real socialism’.

After the death of Lenin in 1924, Joseph Stalin assumed power as the General Secretary of the Bolshevik Party. He further destroyed the democratic foundation on which Marxist socialism is build (Carr, 1979). Although there is some dispute on whether Stalinism must be regarded as an actual ideology, it can be boiled down to a couple of central premises. In the field of economics, Stalinism neglects the worker as it is mainly concerned with proving to be more productive than its economic counterpart, capitalism, the system adopted by Western countries (Fitzpatrick, 1986). It tries to show its ideological supremacy not by granting affluent lives to its subordinates, but by competing in mostly symbolical battles. Examples of this are the space race (Kohonen, 2009), the pursuance of gigantomaniac projects like constantly overly exceeding production target quotas (Meek, 1953) and the planning of megalomaniac architecture projects like the Palace of the Soviets (Josephson, 1995). In the realm of politics, Stalinism reduces class struggle to the repression of mass struggles. The masses subordinate to the party, which in itself is subservient to the state, which serves the political leader

(Gerratana, 1977). Stalinist regimes rely on the suppression of dissident voices and a bureaucratic state apparatus that gives the proletariat virtually no say in the rule of society and economy (Benton, 1996). The world has seen many similar authoritarian states of real socialism, which despite their institutional and ideological differences all concentrate power in the hands of the few. Examples of this are the Tito regime in Yugoslavia, the German Democratic Republic in Eastern Germany, Maoist China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Cox, 1991).

### *1.1.3 Social democracy*

Another well-known critique on Marx stems from evolutionary socialism, a proto-social democratic ideology. With his essay *On Evolutionary Socialism*, Eduard Bernstein (1961) was among the first self-declared socialists who suggested that Marx's account of historical materialism was flawed. Capitalism, according to Bernstein, had proven to be quite resilient against its own internal contradictions. He did recognise the downsides of the economic system, but he also saw its immense potential for production and wealth generation (Bernman, 2007). These insights about the workings of capitalism made Bernstein (1961) believe that socialist strategy needed an adaptation. No longer should Marxists attempt to destroy the bourgeois state and economy through a proletarian revolution; they should use the power of the state instead to offer to the workers the prospect of sharing in the wealth of capitalist society. In other words, the poor are to become rich (Luxemburg, 1973). Contrary to orthodox Marxists, revisionists like Bernstein prioritised capturing political power through participation in legislative elections, so that they could enact their version of evolutionary socialism through modest reforms in parliament (Bernman, 2007). Although they stemmed from the Marxist tradition, they increasingly dismissed their support to this ideology as they came to embrace representative (liberal) democracy, reform work, and appealing to groups outside of the traditional proletariat (Esping-Andersen & Van Kersbergen, 1992). The premise of evolutionary socialists was heavily criticised by Marxists who still saw the necessity of socialist revolution, most notably by Bernstein's fellow German Social Democratic Party member Rosa Luxemburg in her essay *Reform or Revolution* (1973). But despite its critics, the idea that socialism could be achieved through gradual reforms started to get more and more mainstream support.

It is here that we can see the origin of the split between so-called reformist (social democrats) and revolutionaries (Schorske, 1983). Social democracy would grow out to be a political tradition that stressed the importance of adopting a more pragmatic stance towards the forces of capitalism. Social democratic parties were willing to negotiate, compromise and occasionally form coalition governments with liberal and conservative parties (Meyer & Hinchman, 2007). The establishment of a socialist society (meaning collective ownership of the means of production in a classless society) was still one of the goals of the social democratic project, although it served more like a spot on the horizon (Przeworski, 1986). Social democratic theorists, politicians and parties dismissed the Marxist

historical necessity of a socialist society and settled for the gradual improvement of the lives of the working class and the poor through the democratic parliamentary way (Self, 2017). This most dominantly proceeded with the help of two mechanisms: policy and measures that help grow the economy so that full employment can be materialised, and the welfare state, which helps those who are temporarily without a job (Crouch, 2001). Social democrats therefore do not seek the destruction of the state but see the opportunity to use its apparatuses to their own advantage.

This message was not without electoral success: its popularity grew among the members of the working class, leading to a strong electoral presence of pragmatic social democratic parties in Western European countries during the period shortly after the end of the Second World War (Esping-Andersen & Van Kersbergen, 1992). Under the pressure of a politically well-organised labour class, most political parties in Western European democracies (even those stemming from opposing ideological traditions) came to an agreement about the need of an extension of the social welfare state (De Haan, 2012). This somewhat uneasy compromise between capital and labour is known as the social democratic (or Keynesian) consensus and proved to be quite robust for some time. Governments saw it as their task to have a strong grip on the economy and to manage it in such a way that both steadily economic growth, low levels of unemployment, and rising personal living standards could be achieved (Seyd, 1987). During this period, social democrats gradually began to lose their desire for a socialist society, because many concurred that the mixed economy created through the social democratic consensus delivered much of what socialists had fought for all these years (Heidar, 1978), by which is meant substantial gains for workers, relatively low differences in both income and capital between the rich and the poor, and the further democratisation of society (Streeck, 2011).

This relatively prosperous and harmonious period lasted until the mid 70's, when it was interrupted by the 1973 oil crisis. For the first time since the Second World War, economic growth slowed down, and inflation started to rise. The social democratic consensus showed to have its limits, as the Keynesian economic policies adopted by social democrats<sup>1</sup> were no match for the problems stemming from the economic crisis (Streeck, 2011). This new economic and political environment proved to be a viable breeding ground for politicians like Ronald Reagan in the United States, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ruud Lubbers in the Netherlands. They promised that their laissez-faire policies would mean a swift end to the economic crisis. Once in government, these leaders enacted severe austerity programs that destroyed most of the social welfare state and privatised key sectors that used to be controlled by the state, such as electricity and public transport (Mellink & Oudenampsen, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> Keynesianism is a macro-economic theory that argues for an active role for the government in the economy, especially during recessions and depressions. For a more detailed discussion on Keynesianism and its relation to social democracy see Adam Przeworski's work *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1986).

During this period, the social democratic consensus was gradually replaced with a new consensus: the neoliberal consensus. Neoliberalism is a much-contested concept and must be seen as a theory of political economic practices inspired by economic theorists like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and James Buchanan, rather than as a complete political ideology (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). In his work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, critical theorist David Harvey describes neoliberalism as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. [...] Furthermore, if markets do not exist [...] then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

The role of the state within the social democratic consensus differs thus radically from the role of the state within the neoliberal consensus. Rather than as a tool for wealth generation for the masses, neoliberals tend to see it as an obstacle.

Most socialists and social democrats were not quite sure how to respond to this new neoliberal consensus, which at first proved to be quite popular among certain demographics (which can be concluded if one looks at the electoral results of neoliberals during the 80's and 90's). Where some on the left kept opposing the doctrines of neoliberalism, others believed that given the economic and political situation, they had no other choice than to partly work within the capitalist framework (Crouch, 2017). Arguably the most well-known personification of this latter stance is former-prime minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair, who together with key figures within his New Labour party including sociologist and adviser Antony Giddens (1998) claimed that the political project of the Left was in dire need of a reformulation. With the demise of the Soviet Union and its satellite states in the early 1990's, 'real socialism' was dead, and thus a new 'third way' between traditional left-wing social democracy and the neoliberal consensus had to be established. The central goal within the third way social democratic ideology is to pursue some of the social goals of social democracy, while accepting and even embracing the hegemony of global capitalism and the individualisation of society. An example of this has been given by Giddens himself:

“With expanding individualism should come an extension of individual obligations. Unemployment benefits, for example, should carry the obligation to look actively for work, and it is up to governments to ensure that welfare systems do not discourage active search” (Giddens, 1998, p. 65).



Many other social democratic leaders adopted this ideology (or certain aspects of it), including Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Wim Kok in the Netherlands (Vandenbroucke, 2001). But despite their promises to bring about a society that was less harsh for the poor than neoliberalism, it turned out that this mostly was not the case. Once in power, third way social democrats enacted policy programs that did not differ fundamentally from the policy programs enacted by neoliberals and showed a similar hostility to socialist ideals (Crouch, 2001). Blair, Schröder and Kok made little effort to reverse previous neoliberal agendas, and even went as far as extending neoliberal ideas to the public sector in general and to the sphere of social and labour market policy in particular. Third way social democracy had not brought an end to neoliberalism, it only confirmed its hegemony (Plehwe, 2016). Accordingly, when Thatcher was asked what she saw as her greatest achievement whilst being prime minister, she famously replied with the words: “Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds” (Burns, 2008). Could it truly be that Thatcher was right, that there is no alternative to the capitalist mode of production? And where does that leave socialism?

## **1.2 Democratic socialism: historic experiences to be avoided**

The history of socialist thought shows two materialisations of socialist ideas, two existing systems that contain certain proponents of socialism: authoritarian state (or real) socialism and social democracy. This in itself is not a new insight, as it was Poulantzas who in 1978 stated that:

“The question of socialism and democracy, of the democratic road to socialism, is today posed with reference to two historical experiences, which in a way serve as examples of the twin limits or dangers to be avoided: the traditional social democratic experience, as illustrated in a number of Western European countries, and the Eastern example of what is called ‘real socialism’” (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 251).

Since 1978, a lot of things have happened. Authoritarian socialism has virtually been wiped out as a dominant global power, while social democratic ideology has taken the third way trajectory described previously. But to claim that things have only gone downhill for socialism after the 1990’s, either due to the fall of the Soviet Union or due to social democracy’s conversion to social liberal third way politics, would be false. Despite everything that distinguishes these cases, authoritarian socialism, classical social democracy, and third way social democracy exhibit a complicity: they all largely ignore the political goals of socialism, be it in slightly different ways.

First of all, what are these political goals? Fundamental in Marx his works and in the early writings of Lenin, is that socialism is not only a system that ensures that the working class is lifted out of extreme poverty and gets its fair share of the wealth it has generated through its labour, but also a system that

grants direct democratic control of the social and economic realms to the masses (Debrizzi, 1982). It thus envisions a radical egalitarian society, both in economic (the absence of social classes) and in political terms (the absence of power differences).

It is obvious that authoritarian socialism does not commit to the political goal of socialism: its elitist politics and top-down conception of socialism prevents it from being a radical democratic society (Milliband, 1977). Therefore, some socialists like Jean-Paul Sartre have denounced authoritarian socialism as a non- or even anti-Marxist political system (Birchall, 2004). But this does not do justice to the fact that the Marxist idea of socialism as the end of all politics can give authoritarian socialism its legitimacy. Classical Marxists argue that socialism is the only right conclusion to centuries of class conflict, and that once it becomes the dominant system it will prove to be a far more efficient mode of production while simultaneously changing societal relations in such a way that opposition to the socialist society will be non-existent or at least marginal (Blackledge, 2002). If it somehow does show up, what prevents the authoritarian socialist from denouncing it as the illegitimate demands of bourgeois counterrevolutionary or reactionary forces who need to be suppressed? (Polan, 1984). And as there is only one right outcome of history, why grant the working class the institutional means to shape their own future? Would it not be better if politics is left to an elitist group of experts with the most theoretical knowledge of Marxism?

There is thus no reason to claim that Marxist thought and totalitarianism have a priori nothing in common. Societies that present themselves as the end of all politics are at odds with (radical) democratic societies, who presuppose a certain openness and pluralism which prevents the creation of an ultimate indisputable foundation. In totalitarian regimes the state always presents itself as the sole possessor of this foundation (Laclau & Mouffe, 1998). This idea proved to be particularly well suited to legitimise the totalitarian Soviet Union, and many Marxists defended its crimes as if they were necessary measures to defend the cause of the Marxist utopia (Walicki, 1997).

But as there is not one sole correct interpretation of Marxism, a radical democratic articulation of Marxist socialism is possible. Such an articulation has to be actively defended against those who do claim that a single correct interpretation exists, and build their despotic power on the basis of their perceived possession of that interpretation. The quest to such a democratic articulation of Marxism is what led evolutionary socialists and social democrats to integrate socialist ideals within a liberal democratic context.

But perhaps against their best intentions, social democrats made similar mistakes. Their view of socialism is almost equally top-down as the view of authoritarian socialists. The only difference is that within social democracy the masses are able to elect their leaders. Authoritarian socialism and social

democracy share a deep mistrust of mass initiatives, as they rather see that socialism is gradually implemented through the political wheeling and dealing of a select group of elitist representatives. As Poulantzas states:

“[For the social democrat] occupation of the State involves replacing the top leaders by an enlightened left elite and, if necessary, making a few adjustments to the way in which the existing institutions function; it is left as understood that the State will thereby bring socialism from the masses from above. This is then the techno-bureaucratic statism of the experts” (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 255).

This prevents them from articulating a socialism that is also socialist in a political sense. As stated previously, social democrats and proto-social democrats like Bernstein are mostly preoccupied with a specific set of economic goals of socialism, meaning that the poor are to become rich. Democratization of the state and the economy plays no role of deep importance to social democrats. This, what economist Joseph Schumpeter (1976) refers to as ‘beefsteak socialism’, is what virtually all forms of social democracy ultimately boil down to; when it comes to the economic realm, social democracy adopts a relatively egalitarian standpoint, but when it comes to the political realm, it is fine with leaving power in the hands of a social democratic controlled state apparatus (Przeworski, 1986). The role of the proletariat is thus reduced to voting for social democratic representatives, who then use state power to increase their economic welfare.

This is also why it is a common misconception that third way social democrats have ‘betrayed’ the social democratic ideology. During the heydays of the social democratic consensus social democracy, in both its right- and left-wing variants, regarded the bourgeoisie as one of its antagonists, whose interests were opposed to the working-class interests of increasing overall prosperity (Rustin & Rutherford, 2004). Third way social democrats believe that due to different economic circumstances, this is no longer necessary. The interests of the working class can be met if social democrats adopt a less conflictual and more cooperative stance to the forces of capitalism, and if they abandon certain old school social democratic policies regarding the welfare state in favour of measures that increase economic growth (Giddens, 1998). That is where the main difference lies. The goals of social democracy and third way politics are rather similar, as both ideologies seek the enrichment of the working class. It is only their strategies that separates them from each other. Third way politics must therefore not be seen as an abandonment of social democratic values, as for instance Mouffe (2018) seems to be suggesting, but as the logical conclusion of social democratic politics given altering economic circumstances.

### 1.3 What is democratic socialism?

Now that it has been established that the two dominant historical experiences of socialism rely heavily on the state and a small group of elites, does a truly democratic socialism even exist? Well, the radical democratic tradition of socialism dates back to the works of Marx, since it was he who stated that the democratic revolution is preceded by the proletarian revolution. It was also Marx who envisioned a political community with a central role for democratic participation without status hierarchies (Gilbert, 1991). In the *Communist Manifesto* it is written that the proletariat has “to win the battle of democracy” (Marx & Engels, 2018, p. 60) and that “in the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels, 2018, p. 63).

Others have extended the relation between democracy and socialism, like for instance Norberto Bobbio (1987). He understands liberal socialism as the deepening of democratic values and the removal of their class boundaries. Libertarian or anarcho-socialism takes this a step further, as for example Mikhail Bakunin (1950) or more recently Noam Chomsky (2014) advocate for the abolition of authoritarian institutions that control certain means of production in order to replace them with decentralised structures based on direct democracy. Related to this strand of democratic socialist thought is council communism, which gets its theoretical foundation from among others Herman Gorter, Karl Schröder, Gustav Landauer and Anton Pannekoek (Muldoon, 2019). Council communists believe that the post-revolutionary society should be organised in bottom-up institutional structured workers’ councils, granting these councils a central political and economic role (Ask Popp-Madsen & Kets, 2021).

It is by looking at these theoretical examples and through their differentiation with the experiences of authoritarian socialism and social democracy that a truly democratic socialism can be discovered. Democratic socialism ultimately boils down to the question of power: power, both in the realm of the social and the economy, should not lie with the state or the bourgeoisie, but firmly in the hands of the masses. This means that democratic socialism can be generally defined as a *political and economic system that seeks the radical democratisation of the state and the economy*. It must be regarded as a radical participative democratic system wherein the task of ruling society is the task of the masses, going beyond the liberal conception of democracy that is limited to choosing representatives or political leaders.

## **Chapter 2: An Introduction to Chantal Mouffe's Radical Democratic Theory**

Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism tries to reconcile democracy with socialist thought. Given this intention, agonistic pluralism at first seems to be in line with democratic socialism as defined within Chapter 1. It seems to grant democratic socialism a strategy fit for the modern age. But what exactly does it entail? Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism can be read as a strategy for three interrelated goals. First of all, it tries to save pluralist societies from civil war by taming potential antagonistic relations between different collective identities into agonistic conflict, which according to her is not only compatible with liberal democracy but also vital to it. Secondly, it tries to revive liberal democracies that lean to consensus politics by arguing in favour of a conflictual model of democracy. Lastly, Mouffe aims to save the spirit of Marxist political thought by criticising its class reductionist and determinist tendency. This chapter gives an overview of all three of these strategies.

### **2.1 From the other as the antagonistic enemy to the other as the agonistic adversary**

In short, Mouffe's (2005a) argument on taming antagonism into agonism runs as follows. Modern, pluralist societies consist of multiple collective groups whose identity is established by the exclusion of a concrete other. All identities demarcate between an 'us', consisting of members belonging to the group, and a 'them', consisting of members who do not belong or are even in opposition to the group. Since all groups deem it necessary for their survival to dominate the political sphere, relations between these groups are potentially antagonistic. There is always a possibility that these groups feel threatened by each other's presence and start seeing each other as enemies who need to be eradicated, risking all out civil war. Mouffe fears the destructive consequences of civil war and therefore tries to come up with a more peaceful method wherein conflicting parties can still establish their dominance. She believes that the battlefield can be replaced with parliament, if antagonistic relations are 'tamed' into agonistic conflicts. Antagonism and agonism are distinct concepts in the sense that the former describes a relation between enemies, while the latter refers to the conflictual relation between peaceful adversaries. Or as Mouffe puts it:

“While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents. They are ‘adversaries’, not enemies (2005a, p. 20).

Mouffe accepts a permanent place for conflict in the political sphere but believes that if individuals are given the right tools, they can express and channel their conflicts into a positive way that will not result in the annihilation of society.

The crucial step in Mouffe's argumentation is that exclusion of the other is necessary for the creation of collective identities. This is by and large not an empirical argument, but a theoretical argument supported by Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance* and Carl Schmitt's conceptualisation of antagonism. The concept of *différance* is a play on words in the sense that it combines the terms differentiation and deferral. According to Derrida (1978), for elements to establish their minimal identity (their capacity to mean or to refer to something concrete), they require the distinguishing reference to another element. An element only receives its meaning if it can be demarcated from other elements that exist alongside it in the system. The differential relation between elements is what is meant by *différance*, hence its reference to differentiation. But what distinguishes *différance* from mere differentiation is that *différance* also signals that the process of differentiation never comes to a close, hence the inclusion of the term deferral. The whole process is begun anew with each occurrence or use of the element. Elements thus never receive their definitive meaning, but are constantly redefined due to their relation with other elements (Derrida, 1974).

Mouffe (2000) translates this to politics by stating that the same goes for political identities: political identities arise through the differentiation between the insiders of the group, us, and the outsiders of the group, the other. This even goes for all-inclusive categories, as those who for instance identify as cosmopolitans or global citizens necessarily demarcate between them and the other with nationalist or anti-globalist values (Mouffe, 2012). Translating *différance* to politics further implies that a certain political identity can never establish full hegemony over society, as it always requires the other. So, if a certain group has established dominance over another leading to the destruction or the incorporation of the other, a new differentiation necessarily emerges and the whole process starts again. Every attempt to establish dominance is inevitably met by resistance, as there is always an other present in society (Lawlor, 1991).

It is here where Mouffe (2000) makes the jump from *différance* to the inevitability of antagonism, by drawing on Schmitt's account of the political. According to Schmitt (2018), the differentiation between us and them enters the realm of the political when 'us' perceives the other as a threat to its existence. The other then becomes the enemy. The realm of the political is constituted of all relations between 'friend' and 'enemy'. These two concepts are to be taken in their concrete meanings and so not as mere metaphors for what actually are adversaries, or as Schmitt articulates it:

“The concepts friend and enemy have a real meaning; they obtain and retain this meaning especially through their reference to the real possibility of physically killing” (Schmitt, 2018, p. 6).

Note that Schmitt talks about a possibility; whether the relation between us and the other will actually resort to violence depends on the circumstances. But the possibility is always there and cannot, contrary to liberal claims, be eradicated (Ananiadis, 1999). What liberalism does according to Schmitt (2018), is trying to work around the political by presenting the state as a neutral institution, that allows for religious, moral, economic and ethical pluralism. According to Schmitt this is completely irresponsible as “every religious, moral, economic, ethical or other antithesis transforms itself into a political antithesis when it is strong enough effectively to group the people according to friend and enemy” (Schmitt, 2018, p. 9). By allowing for pluralism, liberal democratic states undermine their own authority and set themselves up for civil war. It is therefore that the state is tasked with the creation of political unity (Dyzenhaus, 1999).

Mouffe (1999) accepts Schmitt’s proposition as an important challenge to pluralist liberal democratic societies, as she like Schmitt believes that the antagonistic dimension of the political can never be fully eradicated. But she nonetheless denies the necessity of political unity. As shown earlier, Mouffe proposes an alternative way of dealing with the inevitability of antagonism. Instead of rejecting all forms of pluralism and conflict, societies should embrace it in a form that is compatible with democracy. Democracy should grant social groups the tools to establish what Derrida (1978, p. 280) called their “desire for the centre in the constitution of structure”, without spilling any unnecessary blood. A democratic society cannot exist if its members see each other as enemies that need to be eradicated. If this is the case, members will resort to what she sees as undemocratic means such as revolutionary violence and coercion. A regime that is constantly on the brink of civil war can never be stable enough to last for a longer period. The goal of liberal democracy therefore must be to transform antagonism into agonism, so that conflict can take a form that is not destructive for the political association.

The transformation of antagonism into agonism is enabled by a shared adhesion to “the political principles of a liberal democratic regime” (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 52), being liberty and equality. To ensure the survival of democracy a ‘conflictual consensus’ needs to be in place: actors may differ in their interpretation of liberty and equality, but nonetheless agree on their importance. Within the boundaries of this conflictual consensus, parties fight for their interpretation of these values to become hegemonic (Mouffe, 2013). Agonistic democracies grant parties seeking to establish their hegemony institutions and procedures through which potential antagonisms can be tamed into agonisms.

But why is it that Mouffe wants to save liberal democracy? Why go through all the pain and hard work of transforming antagonisms into agonism if it is also possible to eradicate plurality? According to Mouffe, the problem with “really existing liberal democracies is not their ideals, their ideals are wonderful” (Worsham, Olson & Mouffe, 1999, p. 163-164). The ideals behind Schmitt’s alternative of

a homogenous authoritarian state, are far from wonderful in the eyes of Mouffe (1999). It requires the imprisonment or cleansing of all who do not belong to the dominant group in society. Following Schmitt's argumentation, it may come as no surprise that he was quite enthusiastic about the Nazi-party seizure of power in Germany in 1933, and its intentions to persecute Jews, socialists and others he deemed to be enemies of the nation (Scheuerman, 1996). With her work, Mouffe wants to show that there is a positive viable alternative to Schmitt's grim authoritarianism, that does not require the destruction of liberal democracy but is possible through its reformation. By promising liberty and equality, liberal democracies carry a lot of potential. The problem is that this potential is currently not fulfilled.

## **2.2 From consensus-driven post-democracy to conflict-focussed democracy**

Mouffe's (1992) desire for the radical extension of equality and liberty puts her work in the academic tradition of radical democracy. Her texts on agonism can be seen as a reaction to another strand of radical democracy: deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy contains a broad spectrum of ideas, but can be generally defined as:

“a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 7).

Arguably the most sophisticated theorist on the topic of deliberative democracy, Jürgen Habermas (1998b) stressed that for reasons to be mutually acceptable and generally accessible, they must be based on communicative rationality. Participants engaging in communicative rationality do not seek their own advancement but try to create mutual understanding and agreement (Blau, 2022).

Deliberation between individuals who use rational arguments to support their claims opens up the possibility of a 'rational consensus', which in contrast to Mouffe's conflictual consensus is not a mere agreement on the importance of liberty and equality but a deep moral consensus that can extend to all political issues (Hillier, 2003). So, where Mouffe believes that there will always be dissensus about the implementation of liberty and equality, Habermas (1998a) believes that individuals should attempt to overcome this dissensus.

The core goal of deliberative democracy can be summarised as reaching a deep consensus through dialogue (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). It thus tries to create a political project without an adversary. It is not a miracle that deliberative democracy has become so popular these days, given the also popular contemporary idea that adversaries no longer exist, as argued by Francis Fukuyama (1992). Fukuyama even goes as far as claiming that society has reached the 'end of history', meaning that



Western liberal democracy (representative democracy with a capitalist mode of production) will soon become universalised as the final form of human government. Although he later nuanced this statement (Fukuyama & Mahbubani, 2010), it has inspired a great number of other political theorists, including the earlier mentioned sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998). He claims that given the end of history, politics should be less adversarial and more focussed on seeking consensus.

Mouffe (2005a) sees two problems with this post-political thinking. First of all, consensus-seeking requires political parties to minimise the ideological differences between them. This creates a rather paradoxical situation, wherein political parties who do not present substantially different projects but nonetheless still compete with each other for parliamentary seats have to find different ways to convince voters, thereby transforming political campaigns into advertisements most often centred around the personal capabilities of the candidate standing for office (Stavrakakis, 2007). Political parties are increasingly acting as corporations who try to sell their products on a capitalist market; although free market fundamentalists believe that capitalism breeds competition and innovation, most products are rather similar and are therefore in need of extensive marketing campaigns, or as Mouffe puts it:

“we do not have a voice if we only have the possibility to choose between centre-left and centre-right, which is similar to the possibility of choosing between Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola” (Oppelt & Mouffe, 2014, p. 273).

As a result, an increasing number of people do not see the point in voting, and refrain from political participation all together. This leaves more power in the hands of a small elite, who’s legitimacy is based on a decreasing number of votes and who therefore have to answer to an increasingly smaller electorate. This condition of democracy is referred to by Colin Crouch and Jacques Rancière as post-democracy, which the latter defines as:

“the governmental practice and conceptual legitimisation of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests” (Rancière, 1999, p. 101-102).

Crouch (2014) points out that in post-democratic societies formal institutions of democracy are still in place, meaning that elections are still held, there is no extensive regulation prohibiting free speech, and governments fall occasionally because they lose support in parliament. The application of these institutions is however limited and is gradually slipping back in the hands of privileged groups. Citizens are degraded to passive, apathetic recipients of rights, instead of actors who are actively

involved. This somewhat resembles Joseph Schumpeter's (1976) model of aggregative liberal democracy, which conceives of democracy as a system wherein the role of citizens is limited to either accepting or rejecting their leaders, thereby reserving day-to-day politics to a small competing elite. A crucial difference with post-democracy is that although Schumpeter welcomed elite rule, he saw it as the task of these elites to represent the interests of different groups of people. Post-democracy however, as it is entangled with neoliberal capitalism, replaces the demos with business interests as its legitimiser. Corporations replace the democratic will as the dominant force in contemporary post-democratic societies (Crouch, 2014).

Secondly, post-political thinkers like Fukuyama and Giddens underestimate the still existing resistance to global capitalism. Mouffe claims that in pluralist societies with power differences between people, consensus can never equally represent everyone's interests. This ties in to the notion of Michel Foucault (1979, p. 95), who states that "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power", meaning that there will always be groups who question the power of others and do so by trying to seek power themselves. There will always be a desire for an alternative, which is certainly the case in our world which is still marked by inequalities in various forms. As Crouch (2014) explains, the neoliberal ideal of not pursuing goals that cannot be achieved through the market is intrinsically unattractive to a large number of people who do not benefit from market-based solutions and privatised social services. Consensus-driven liberal democracies do not offer an alternative to this system, leaving those excluded with only two options: refrain from political participation or express their discontent in an antagonistic manner, leading to the disastrous consequences Schmitt warned for.

According to Mouffe (2005b), these consequences are already visible in our society, where electorally successful, radical right-wing parties have catered to the growing dissatisfaction with the post-political consensus, demarcating between an us consisting of 'the good, authentic people' with chauvinistic values and a them composed of a coalition of left-wing elites, artists and intellectuals, state bureaucrats, and first, second and third generation migrants. They are held responsible for the demolition of the welfare state, a loss of societal cohesion, and growing feelings of insecurity. Liberal politicians and theorists, unable to understand the emergence of resistance to the established consensus in political terms, responded by giving a moralistic condemnation of the populist right. According to Mouffe, the typical 'good democrat' claimed that "it was the 'brown plague' rearing its ugly head again, and it called for all the democratic forces to unite in resisting the reappearance of this evil force" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 72). Since right-wing populists also differentiate in their own way between good (the good people) and evil (all those who oppose the common will of the good people), politics has moved from the political sphere to what Mouffe calls 'the moral register'. Thereby, consensus-

driven theorists and politicians have not only failed to create a politics without an adversary but has also made matters worse by constructing a new frontier between moral enemies (Mouffe, 2005b).

Mouffe (2002) claims that democracy is too important to fall either due to slipping into post-democratic elite rule or to be destroyed by the antagonistic struggle between liberal democrats and the radical right. But how can citizens be encouraged to defend democracy? According to Mouffe, we need to acknowledge passion and emotion derived from confrontation as the central moving forces in the field of politics. Both liberal and deliberative models of democracy fail to give passions a democratic outlet since they put too much emphasis on rational ways of conflict resolving. Citizens need to be really able to identify themselves with democracy, and since Mouffe shows that the creation of a collective identity is only possible through the demarcation between an us and a them, agonistic pluralist democratic politics should allow for choosing between multiple hegemonic projects. Besides that, Mouffe (1993) requires citizens to adopt an active role in the form of what she calls a 'radical democratic citizenship', which combines the liberal ideals of rights and pluralism with the civic republican ideas of public spiritedness and ethico-political concern. Relations of domination can be challenged in 'agonistic public spaces', which are spaces where agonistic confrontation between people with conflicting views and interests can take place.

### **2.3 From class reductionism to the hegemonic articulation of a people**

But what exactly is the link between agonism and socialism? Admittedly, over the years this link has somewhat faded into the background. But to state that this connection is no longer there gives too little credit to Mouffe's dedication to socialism. According to Mouffe herself, it has always been one of her principal political goals to contribute to the debate on socialist strategy, which in her opinion is in dire need of a reformulation. She mainly takes issue with classical Marxists, who believe that the texts written by Marx still form the road to enlightenment 150 years after their publication. Mouffe sees herself as a post-Marxist; as someone who is critical of the applicability of Marxists ideas in the modern world but is nonetheless willing to save some of the core concepts of the theoretical tradition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014).

Mouffe's proposal to move away from classical Marxism is remarkable, given that the history of socialist thought shows that the further socialism has strayed away from Marx his theory, the more concessions have been made to capitalism and liberalism, ultimately transforming socialist struggle into a pro-capitalist status quo ideology. Does it then not make sense, as for instance Norman Geras (1988) contends, that socialist strategy returns to classical Marxism in order to rebuild the Left? But in the opinion of Mouffe, arguing in favour of a return to classical Marxism is as arguing that since Marx the world has not changed at all (Worsham, Olson, Mouffe, 1999). Marxists have a rather simplistic account of social identities, since they believe that society is primarily constituted by conflicts

between social classes. All other possible conflictual relations are discarded as less important and should not distract from the main goal which is creating a classless society (Mouzelis, 1980). According to Mouffe, this makes the Marxist analysis unfit for the modern age, as since the publication of Marx his works the world has seen a rise of countless new antagonisms. People are no longer solely divided on the basis of their social class, but also on the basis of their gender, skin colour, level of education, age, sexuality or whether someone is concerned about climate change or not (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). This has led to relatively new forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and-so-on, to whom Marxists are not willing to do more than pay lip service. They subsume these struggles into the larger struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie. The idea behind this is that if socialist movements adopt a successful economic strategy, this will necessarily result in the betterment of other conditions not directly related to the economy (Hartmann, 2010).

But according to Mouffe, there is no empirical as well as no theoretical proof that this will happen. It is theoretically still possible that a society wherein the means of production are owned by the collective, racism and sexism between individual members of society would still run deep. By holding on to this outdated believe in economism, Marxists movements seriously limit their effectiveness (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). For Mouffe (2018), this is exemplified in two specific crises of the dominant system: the crisis of the social democratic consensus resulting from the protests movements of 1968 and the economic crisis of 1973, and the crisis of neoliberalism mainly resulting from the 2008 financial crisis. What connects these two crises are that both can be called *interregnums*. Interregnum is a concept developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1996), who believed that the power of the dominant class does not solely rely on physical and military coercion, but also on the consent of the oppressed classes. This is possible through the formulation of a hegemonic formation, which Mouffe defines as:

“a configuration of social practices of different natures: economic, cultural, political, and juridical, whose articulation is secured around some key symbolic signifiers which shape the ‘common sense’ and provide the normative framework of a given society” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 43-44).

An interregnum is then a period that consists “precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci, 1996, p. 276). People are beginning to question the old hegemony, that is therefore losing its legitimising power, but there is not yet a new hegemony that can take its place. It is then the task of the progressive movement to establish a new hegemony, a new common sense wherein socialist ideals are seen as constitutive elements to democracy. But as Mouffe (2018) states, socialists failed to do so in the aftermath of both these interregnums because they were unable to

recognise the non-working class demands put forward by social movements emerging from their respective crises. According to her, the 1968 protests which began in the streets of Paris and short thereafter spread across the globe gave rise to anti-imperialist, anti-war, anti-racist, environmentalist and second wave feminists protest groups, as well as a call for less bureaucracy and paternalism associated with statist left-wing ideologies (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). The 2008 financial crisis on the other hand, brought with it groups like the 15-M Movement in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the United States, whose calls for the democratisation of the state and the economy are responsible for a populist moment, defined by Mouffe as “a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 12).

What is needed according to Mouffe is to reject class reductionism and the assumption that different forms of social struggle are necessarily connected, as such a link is not given by nature but can be fabricated. Socialists, feminists, anti-racists, environmentalists and democrats need to be united under a common political project, that grants equal importance to all forms of social struggle. The working class should no longer serve as a privileged agent whose demands dominate over others, but there needs to be a what Mouffe calls ‘democratic equivalence’ established between them. A democratic equivalence goes further than a simple alliance between given interests in the sense that it is always hegemonic:

“it modifies the very identity of the forces engaging in that alliance. For the defence of the interests of the workers not to be made at the expense of the rights of women, immigrants or consumers, it is necessary to establish an equivalence between these different struggles” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 167).

What Mouffe wants to do is to create a new common sense that sees struggles against power not as individualistic isolated phenomena but as interconnected struggles against a common adversary. A good example of such a democratic equivalent political project composed of different social struggles is the concept of climate justice, fittingly summarised in the words of Brazilian trade-unionist Chico Mendes (1989, p. 7): “environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening”. If we want to make sure that environmentalism does not come at the expense of industrial workers, it is necessary to create an articulation that connects social justice with environmentalism. For instance, by arguing that the closing of environmentally unfriendly industries is accompanied by a radical redistribution of wealth, thereby effectively creating a democratic equivalence between the workers’ and the environmentalist struggle (Shantz, 2004). Mouffe (2018) herself names the Green New Deal introduced by United States senator Bernie Sanders as a prime example of a hegemonic project, because it unites all kinds of legislative workers’, women’s, civil rights, consumers’ and environmentalist issues under one political project.

The creation of a democratic equivalence between not necessarily connected struggles is no easy task. To limit the chances of these groups turning on each other, Mouffe deems it necessary to constantly remind them of their common adversary. Mouffe's political project only has a chance of succeeding if it is an adversarial (agonistic) project, because "without defining an adversary, no hegemonic offensive can be launched" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 36). Her earlier work (especially her joint work with the late Ernesto Laclau *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* first published in 1985) lacks the answer to the question who exactly this common adversary is. In her more recent work on the other hand, she refers to 'the oligarchy', who have managed to disentangle the existing hegemony of the social democratic articulation of democracy. In its place, they have established a neoliberal hegemonic formation that articulates democracy "with the free market, private property and unfettered individualism" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 44). This has according to Mouffe resulted in the erosion of the two pillars of democracy, being equality and popular sovereignty, thereby effectively turning democracy into post-democracy. The goal of the left should therefore be to not only pursue a socialist project, but unite various groups who finds themselves in opposition to neoliberalism under one radical democratic project (Mouffe, 2018). This does not mean that Mouffe believes that socialism should not still play an important role:

"Of course, every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are the root of numerous relations of subordination; but socialism is *one* of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014, p. 162).

In conclusion, Mouffe aims to save socialism from classical Marxism by making it a part of the broader political project of radical democracy. This project can only succeed if it establishes a democratic equivalence between different forms of social struggle, thereby constructing a hegemonic articulation of 'the people' who find themselves in an agonistic relation with 'the oligarchy'. This ties in with Laclau's (2005) account of populism, which he defines as a strategy of constructing a political frontier between two groups calling for the mobilisation of the underdog against those in power. It is for this reason that Mouffe's strategy – not in the least by herself – has been called a left populist one. The goal of this left populism is to replace the current hegemony with a radical democratic hegemony in a peaceful democratic manner. But can this left populism provide a truly democratic socialism that is fundamentally different from the statist types of authoritarian socialism in Eastern Europe and the social democratic experience as illustrated in a number of Western European countries?

## **Chapter 3: Questioning the Radicalness of Agonistic Radical Democracy**

Since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the idea of agonistic pluralism has drawn extensive criticism from those who question its relation to socialism and radicalness. Most prominent and arguably harshest among these critics is Norman Geras (1998), who claims that Laclau and Mouffe have an incorrect interpretation of Marxist thought and offer “a product of the very advanced stage of an intellectual malady” (Geras, 1998, p. 45) in its place. More recently, the debate on agonism has mostly revolved around whether Mouffe’s critique on deliberative democracy is grounded and if agonistic pluralism should replace it<sup>2</sup>, while the question whether it serves as the prior stage to socialism has been largely ignored. This fits in the modern tendency to see socialism as an ideal of the past. As Tony Blair once stated: “class war is over, we are all middle class now”, hence there is no need for a socialist struggle that seeks the end of class society (Bloodworth, 2019). But as Erik Olin Wright (2010) shows, class conflicts still persist to this very day: growing wealth inequalities, powerful multinational corporations and resistances to these practices make up a large part of the political arena today. The border between the working class and middle class may have become more fluid, but middle-class life under capitalism has also become increasingly more precarious (Standing, 2011): think for instance of the higher deployment of temporary contracts by employers and the damaging consequences this has for workers’ health (Pirani & Salvini, 2015). This gives a renewed necessity to contribute to the debate on agonism and socialism. Based on the idea of democratic socialism as an alternative to statist authoritarian socialism and reformist social democracy described in Chapter 1, this chapter draws three criticisms on Mouffe’s strategy regarding socialism. First of all, Mouffe’s political project relies on the presence of the oligarchy, making it hard to imagine if it can ever eliminate this category as a powerful political force. Secondly, Mouffe seems to ignore a number of important caveats regarding the electoral path to socialism. And lastly, Mouffe’s idea of socialism seems to be quite vague and moderate, fuelling the suspicion that her strategy will lead to social democracy instead.

### **3.1 Cementing the position of the oligarchy**

Mouffe’s intention to tame antagonistic conflicts between friends and enemies into agonistic conflicts between adversaries means she turns away from the traditional Marxist belief that polarisation of class relations needs to be increased in order to create a socialist society. As stated before, history according to Marx is a process of increasingly conflicting antitheses until it reaches its final form of confrontation: that of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. Whether this conflict will be resolved depends on the capacity of the proletariat and its party to replace the bourgeoisie as rulers of society and install a dictatorship of the proletariat (Dotti, 1999). The task of this dictatorship of the proletariat

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance: *Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle? Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Model of Politics* by Stefan Rummens (2009)

is then to redistribute the means of production from the bourgeoisie into the hands of the collective, creating a classless society. (Draper, 1964.)

A classless society is thus one of the main proponents of socialism. This classless society is not possible without the destruction of the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class. Classical Marxists therefore clearly regard the bourgeoisie as an enemy in the Schmittean sense of the word (Dotti, 1999). Since Mouffe believes that the destruction of a social group is undemocratic and therefore problematic, it seems that two goals of Mouffe's theory contradict each other. These two goals are her intention to tame antagonistic conflict so that it can be transformed into regulated agonistic conflict, and her goal to reach a socialist society. If it is undemocratic to destroy the capitalist class, how can socialism ever become a reality?

It is important to note that Mouffe's political project has a different adversary than the traditional Marxist project. As stated before, for her the oligarchy is the main antagonist (or agonist) in the struggle against capitalism. What differentiates the oligarchy from the bourgeoisie is their individual conceptualisations. For a classical Marxists, what makes the bourgeoisie a social class is their possession of the means of production. If their ownership is taken away from them in a to-be-formed socialist society, the bourgeoisie would effectively cease to exist (Heartfield, 1996). Mouffe (2000) however, by building on the Derridean concept *différance*, believes that we cannot regard any social identity as a natural category. It is only through their differentiation with others that an identity comes into being. Consequently, the oligarchy cannot be called a social identity because of their material position, but because they identify as such by differentiating between them and other opposing groups. If the people strip them of their economic and political power, they can still hold oligarchic values that differentiates them from those who do not hold these values. They may thus still form a social group. It is through this understanding of the oligarchy that Mouffe arrives at the conclusion that it is not necessary for socialists to view the oligarchy as an enemy to be destroyed, but that a socialist society is also possible if the socialist struggle is tamed into an agonistic struggle for political power.

Zizek (2006) points out that for populists like Mouffe, the cause of the people's troubles is ultimately always the 'other' that has corrupted the system in such a way that it ignores or actively works against the demands and the interests of the people. If the people want to see their demands met, they should focus on getting rid of those who corrupt the system. Zizek therefore argues that populism can never lead to real systemic change. But does left populism even provide a realistic possibility of getting rid of the other? What would happen if the people manage to successfully seize power from the oligarchy? Ridden from its power, it is doubtful whether the oligarchy is still regarded as a serious political adversary by the people. For Marx (1976), this means that society has reached the end of history: as society is primarily constituted by the antagonistic class relation between the bourgeoisie



and the proletariat, the disappearance of class means the end of all antagonisms. But Mouffe (2000) sees the eradication of the antagonistic dimension of the political as an impossibility. Since Mouffe's alliance is an unstable coalition of heterogeneous demands which are only united because of their struggle against a joint enemy (being the oligarchy), chances are high that with the disappearance of this enemy the alliance will break and new antagonisms will form that divide the people, for instance in a religious, racial or male versus non-male form. If it is no longer necessary to see each other as allies in a struggle against a common adversary, the alliance will cease to exist due to infighting. To remain a united political force, it needs the constant threat of the oligarchy retaking power.

This means that, although perhaps not intentionally, Mouffe's political project has cemented the position of the oligarchy as a powerful force. It allows for and needs the existence of a wealthy group who has more access to political and economic power than others. This is not only contrary to the political goals of democratic socialism, which aims for the eradication of power differences, but it is also undemocratic. To be deserving of the title 'radical democracy', agonistic democracy should at least aim for the destruction of anti-democratic elements such as a powerful oligarchic class. But Mouffe only seems to be willing to tame the undemocratic features of the current system. It is thus not only hard to imagine how her strategy can actually bring about a democratic socialist society, but it also questionable if agonistic radical democracy is truly radical.

### **3.2 The improbability of the electoral path to socialism**

As has become clear by now, Mouffe places a lot of her hope in a radical democratic society in the hands of a to be formed coalition of social movements struggling against all kinds of subordination. But how can this coalition actually seize power in order to achieve a socialist society? As Poulantzas (1978) points out, for the traditional Leninist the answer to this question is clear: socialism can only be achieved if a single vanguardist proletarian party guides the masses to a revolution that cause a total rupture with the existing socio-political order. The liberal state must be seen as a creation of the bourgeoisie, who have designed its apparatuses in such a way that it always benefits them. The existence of the liberal state in itself is an obstacle to the realisation of socialism, and it is only through the destruction of this institution by an exterior force that socialism can come into being.

The traditional social democratic response to this proposition has always been to argue that the state can instead be used to the advantage of the working class, which is possible because they interpret the liberal state as a neutral institution whose role is to reconcile the interests of various social groups. For a social democrat, "the state is a subject, bearing an intrinsic rationality that is incarnated by political elites and the very mechanism of representative democracy" (Poulantzas, 1978, p. 255). Accordingly, the goal of social democratic politics is to seek governmental power through electoral means, so that they can moderately adjust this reconciliation of interests into the favour of the oppressed. Real

change lies in voting for social democratic representatives who then use this gained parliamentary power to compromise with agents stemming from different political backgrounds. This explains why social democrats at times have an uneasy relation with the uncompromising style of social movements emerging from civil society (Milliband & Liebman, 1985). Think for instance of Barack Obama<sup>3</sup> (2016), who while delivering a speech in front of the 2016 Democratic National Convention responded to hecklers who booed Republican candidate Donald Trump with the words: “Don’t boo -- vote!”. In other words, do not resist in non-electoral ways, but put all your energy in going to the ballot box.

But the problem with this strategy according to Mouffe (2018) is that it fails to challenge the existing neoliberal hegemonic social formation. By only looking at already existing interests in society and trying to enact political change in accordance with the interest of the group that it claims to represent, social democrats fail to understand how interests are influenced by hegemonic practices and therefore will never achieve a new progressive hegemony. Tony Blair in this case serves as a good example, since he claimed that real socialist policies can only be enacted when one adopts a pragmatic and reformist stance. But once in office, the policies put forward by his administration lacked a clear socialist dimension and only cemented the hegemony of the neoliberal articulation of democracy (Plehwe, 2016).

Rather than choosing for either the revolutionary or the reformist strategy, Mouffe (2018) discards what in her eyes is a false dichotomy and argues in favour of an alternative she calls radical reformism. Radical reformism rejects the necessity of a total rupture with the political regime as argued by revolutionaries and believes that it is through the institutions of liberal democracy that the neoliberalism can be defeated and replaced by a new progressive hegemony.

The position of radical reformism would be countered if the state was a mere instrument of the bourgeoisie to subordinate the proletarian masses and to come out as victorious in the class struggle. But if the state truly bears an antagonistic relation to the working class, how can we explain for the proletarian victories shortly after the Second World War, such as the experience of mass trade unions, electorally successful social democratic parties and perhaps most importantly large-scale state interventions in the capitalist economy going directly against the interests of the capitalist class? Therefore, Mouffe believes that we should see the state as a terrain of struggle in itself. It is here that Mouffe again adopts a Gramscian concept. Gramsci saw the twentieth century bourgeois state as an ‘integral state’, meaning that the state is “a network of social relations for the production of consent,

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<sup>3</sup> Although Obama and his Democratic Party are not technically social democrats, they do stand in the tradition of ‘American progressivism’, an ideology regarded by for instance Norman Birnbaum (2010) as the American equivalent of European social democracy.

for the integration of the subaltern classes into the expansive project of historical development of the leading social group” (Thomas, 2009, p. 143). The integral state is composed both of a political society and a civil society, meaning that apart from the traditional apparatuses of government it also includes a variety of other apparatuses and public spaces outside of these traditional institutions. Political society is the sphere through which the state makes use of direct oppressive measures, for instance by the implementation of laws or the deployment of police forces, while civil society consists of public spaces (schools, universities, public spaces, media and so on) where different forces are engaged in a hegemonic struggle (Humphrys, 2018).

Mouffe therefore argues for what can be seen as a sort of dual strategy. In order to change the common sense in society it is necessary to engage in the hegemonic struggle that takes place within civil society. Here she sees a role for social movements, who through their tactics of organised protests and disruption can help win people over (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). She also stresses the importance of artistic and cultural practices. Art can induce emotional responses, and for a left populist strategy to be able to change people’s common sense, it is critical to reach human beings at the affective level (Mouffe, 2008).

But this must always be accompanied by a second element, being an electoral strategy. Movements that do not participate in elections usually fail to make any serious inroads. According to Mouffe, one only has to look at the history of social movements to see that this is true. For instance, the sentiment to refrain from voting in the French presidential elections among those participating in the 1968 student protests in Paris has not resulted in a France free from all forms of oppression, but in the electoral victory of right-wing president Charles de Gaulle, who emerged stronger than before (Van Scheltinga & Mouffe, 2019). More recently, at the height of their popularity in 2011, the anti-austerity 15-M Movement in Spain accomplished to attract between 6.5 and 8 million people to participate in their events, which included protests, sit-ins and general strikes (Castañeda, 2012). But it did little to stop austerity, since in the same year the centre right Partido Popular (People’s Party or PP) managed to achieve an overall majority in the Congress of Deputies by running on an electoral platform composed of all kinds of austerity policy proposals. In the opinion of Mouffe, it was only when some of the participants decided to form the political party Podemos that they were able to bring about tangible results. Social movements need a political direction, because if they lack one, they will eventually die out (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016). For Mouffe, this political direction must be in the form of participating in elections.

By constructing her argument, Mouffe focusses on the historical experience of social movements that did not engage with existing liberal democratic institutions. But she largely ignores another important historical experience: parties that emerge from social movements sooner or later become

institutionalised, meaning that they become part of the system and lose their radical potential. As Jean-Paul Sartre (2008) stated, socialist parties carry with them this contradiction that they are necessary to give social struggles a political direction, but once this political direction is established, parties have the tendency to subordinate all struggles to their political direction and therefore become a break on radical change. On a similar note, Jacques Rancière (1999) argues that virtually all political parties have a bureaucratic and managerial character, which means that enacting change through party politics is often a frustrating and slow process. The constant compromising of parties leads to watered-down proposals that only change things little by little. If a party enters government, things get even more complicated, as the struggle now not only needs to be subordinated to the party itself, but also to the by the party formed government. So, if political struggle dominantly has to reside through party politics, as Mouffe seems to be suggesting, then the struggle loses most of its spontaneity, radicalness, and effectiveness.

But even if a socialist party did manage to keep its radicalness once in government, it remains questionable whether it can actually implement socialism. Because, if we, like Mouffe (2018), understand the state as a complex articulation of various state apparatuses and branches wherein multiple groups struggle for hegemony, forming a government does not necessarily grant control over the branches and apparatuses which play the most dominant role within the state. As Poulantzas (1978) shows, the state is not a monolithic bloc, but a strategic field. This enables the bourgeoisie to move the real power of the state to areas that cannot be reached by electoral means. These areas can for instance be the state administration, constitutional councils, the army or the police, which enjoy relative independence from the government. Therefore, if a socialist government wants to radically change society, there is a high chance that this process will be frustrated by these independent apparatuses. History is full of instances where secondary or even decorative apparatuses suddenly take on a decisive role in order to oppose social change. The unelected British House of Lords has for instance blocked multiple nationalisation bills of the centre-left Labour governments led by Harold Wilson and James Callaghan between 1974 and 1979 (Poulantzas, 1978). Or in a more extreme example, when Salvador Allende was elected as president of Chile in 1970, it only took three years before the army under the guidance of general Augusto Pinochet responded by staging a coup against his administration, with the help and support of the Chilean bourgeoisie (Bridges, 1974).

To conclude, the problem is not necessarily that Mouffe tries to implement socialism through the parliamentary way. As Ralph Milliband (1977) shows, even Marx himself was open to such a strategy. He believed that at minimum, revolutionaries should not refrain from making use of parliamentary representation for their own purposes, although he was very sceptical of its chances of succeeding, especially in states with relatively weak democratic institutions. The crucial difference is that according to Marx an electoral path towards socialism *could* exist, while Mouffe believes that this path

*should* exist. If her strategy fails (which is likely due to the reasons mentioned above), there is no plan B.

### **3.3 Mouffeian socialism: what kind of socialism?**

So far, this thesis has discussed two potential problems relating to Mouffe's strategy: the precariousness of the alliance of heterogeneous social demands and the limits of the electoral path to socialism. But what if this strategy, despite its problems, proves to be successful? What kind of socialism does Mouffe then want to see realised? Mouffe (2018) is very explicit in stating that her goal is not to propose a fully-fledged political programme. Parties or movements adopting a left populist strategy can follow many different trajectories: at what kind of hegemonic articulation of democracy they arrive depends on the contexts and national traditions. But that is not to say that Mouffe's works do not contain any conceptualisation of socialism. Mouffe understands socialism as the democratisation of the state and of the economy, and therefore seems to ascribe to the democratic socialist ideology laid out in Chapter 1. But if we take a critical look at how she elaborates on these two concepts, one can question whether her democratic socialism fundamentally differs from social democracy.

#### *3.3.1 Mouffeian socialism: democratisation of the economy*

Concerning the democratisation of the economy, Mouffe is rather inconsistent, as her work contains a number of contradictory statements. For instance, although she stresses that "the process of radicalising democracy necessarily includes an anti-capitalist dimension as many forms of subordination that will need to be challenged are the consequence of capitalist relations of production" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 49), it remains somewhat unclear what kind of economic system should replace capitalism. Mouffe (2018) calls for a 'social appropriation of the means of production', which would mean a radical break with capitalism. She however also states that a new left-wing project should focus on taming capitalism through "the encouragement of a massive development of many non-profit activities by associations, interacting with both the private and the public economies, to provide for the emergence of a truly pluralistic economy, instead of a purely market one" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 126).

Mouffe is further fiercely critical of a modern trend in capitalist economies she calls 'accumulation by dispossession', by which she means "the centralisation of wealth and power in the hands of a few through a series of key practices of neoliberalism like privatisation and financialisation" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 59). But she is not a supporter of a mass nationalisation of existing private corporations, which would combat this neoliberal process. In her opinion nationalisation is a component of state socialism, and its use should be limited to certain key services, such as water, energy, health care, and public transportation. This in itself is not a radical break with socialism, since nationalisation is not necessarily a socialist strategy. For instance, Friedrich Engels (1987) believed that nationalisation

under a bourgeois state cannot be socialist, because under a bourgeois state production is controlled by a minority in control of the government. It therefore does nothing to undermine capitalist exploitation. But he was willing to admit that under a working-class controlled government, nationalisation can be a socialist measure that precedes the democratic organisation of production. By dismissing mass nationalisation and without giving an alternative, the question remains whether Mouffe actually seeks the democratisation of the economy, or merely wants to establish a new social democratic model of compromise between labour and capital. What is at least clear is that she does not want to return to the old social democratic consensus which made use of Keynesian economic practices, because by promoting consumer demand and economic growth, “Keynesian solutions are the motors of environmental destruction” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 52).

To see what Mouffe really understands as the democratisation of the economy, it might be useful to get a grip on what kind of workplace democracy she envisions. Rather tellingly, Mouffe's sole contribution to this topic is an article published in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, in which she together with philosopher Nancy Fraser, author Susan Neiman, sociologist Saskia Sassen, economist Thomas Piketty, and other academics argues for the need of the democratisation of work due to the economic crisis stemming from the measures meant to prevent the spreading of the COVID-19 virus. In this article, they suggest that besides the board and the shareholders a third power should be established in the form of chambers representing workers. If the board wants to enact certain changes, it first has to get approval from these chambers. (Fraser et al., 2020). This shows that Mouffe believes that workplace democracy should have a controlling function but does not necessarily have to have an executive function. She seems to be fine with the idea of the bourgeoisie holding power over firms, as long as this power is partly tamed and obstructed by controlling bodies of workers' representatives.

Why does she maintain such a vague and in some cases moderate stance on the democratisation of the economy? It is reasonable to believe that rather than a lack of interest in this subject, this is a deliberate tactic. As pointed out earlier, Mouffe's dethroning of the working class as a privileged agent and admitting a plurality of voices of equal intensity into the socialist struggle raise a number of problems. One of these problems is that it leaves a big question mark over how a socialist economy can actually be achieved. It might be in the working-class interest to create socialism, but it is not necessarily in the interest of the feminist, the environmentalist, the anti-racist and so on. As David Forgacs (1998, p. 35) points out in his reaction to Mouffe's work: “in crude terms, what is one actually going to *do* about the private property of one's middle-class partners in a hegemonic alliance?” By intentionally remaining vague on what kind of socialism should be enacted after the hegemonic alliance has taken power and focussing on what this alliance is fighting against, Mouffe is able to attract a large group of people to her project, including those who do not necessarily want a socialist system. Of course, for strategic reasons an alliance that seeks to implement socialism should

consists of a broader group of people than only those who have read all the economic works of Engels and Marx to the point that they know it inside out. It is however uncertain whether it can tolerate Mouffe preferred broadness and deliver something more than some form of mixed economy. To answer the question whether Mouffe actually seeks the democratisation of the economy, there is not enough theoretical evidence that she does.

### *3.3.2 Mouffean socialism: democratisation of the state*

When it comes to the democratisation of the state, Mouffe (2018) is a lot clearer. In her critique on deliberative democracy can be discovered that she is not a big supporter of direct participative democracy. According to Mouffe, deliberative democrats and other democratic theorists who argue that representative democracy needs to be replaced by forms wherein people have a direct say in decision-making underestimate the importance of electoral political parties in a pluralist democracy. In her own words:

“Society is divided and crisscrossed by power relations and antagonisms, and representative institutions play a crucial role in allowing for the institutionalisation of this conflictual dimension. For example, in a pluralist democracy, political parties provide discursive frameworks that allow people to make sense of the social world in which they are inscribed and to perceive its fault lines (Mouffe, 2018, p. 55).

Political parties provide ‘symbolic markers’ that allow people to situate themselves in the social world. To know in what to believe and in what to fight for (or against) in a democracy is easier if there are multiple parties to choose from, which organise around existing antagonisms in society. For instance: a person is a supporter of the social democratic party of this person’s country, which means that this person is a social democrat who has certain interests and believes in certain ideals. This puts this person into an agonistic relationship with those who fight for a different society. According to Mouffe, the current ills of liberal democracy do not derive from the fact that they rely on representative institutions, but that these representative institutions are no longer truly representative. The remedy lies not in abandoning representation all together but in making these institutions more representative.

There is not necessarily a problematic relation between democratic socialism and representative democracy. The Paris Commune for instance – the radical democratic government that ruled the capital of France for a short period in 1871 and regarded by Marx (1996b) as a real-life example of his conception of a worker-controlled government – was ruled by democratically elected leaders. Even libertarian/anarcho-socialist Noam Chomsky (2014) believes that due to the highly complex nature of modern societies, it is not realistic to expect that people can find the time and the resources to discuss and decide every single political issue, and that therefore some form of representation is inevitable.

The important difference however is that in liberal democratic systems the balance of power leans in favour of elected representatives, who enjoy a great deal of power independent from the people, where in libertarian-socialists systems power firmly lies in the hands of the people. As Chomsky puts it:

“the question is, are we represented by, as they put it, countrymen like ourselves, or are we represented by our betters? The authority to make important decision ought not just to *formally* lie in the hands of the people, but to *actually* lie in the hands of the people”  
(Chomsky, 2014, p. 24).

Those who designed the Paris Commune managed to put this ideal into practice. Authority, legitimacy and power was generated not top-down but from the bottom up. Its institutional structure was split into local wards and districts, which delegated representatives to more a more central coordinating institution. These representatives could be instantly recalled and replaced, making political participation a part of everybody life. It thus took a more radical and decentralised approach to democracy than liberal democratic systems (Ask Popp-Madsen & Kets, 2021).

As Manon Westphal (2018) points out, agonistic democrats like Mouffe fail to explore the institutional settings that are conducive to their preferred form of democracy. Where radical democratic socialists like Chomsky explain what kind of institutional reforms are needed to make society more democratic, agonistic democracy has a clear institutional deficit. This seems to be deliberate, because rather than adopting an institutional approach to representation, Mouffe (2018) believes that making democracy more representative lies in transforming political parties and platforms in such a way that they better reflect the interests, values, and desires of the people. To be representative, Mouffe (2005a) argues with Niklas Luhmann (1990) that democracy requires a ‘splitting of the summit’: a clear differentiation between government and the opposition which supposes that clearly differentiated party programs and policies are on offer, giving the people the possibility to decide between different ways of organising society. By asking the question what the purpose of elections are, we can observe that for Mouffe elections revolve around the selection of representative leaders, and not democratic participation and equal exercise of power.

Does this mean that the role of the citizen is limited to choosing between different parties or representatives? Well, not necessarily, as Mouffe (2018) believes that besides the struggle for hegemony within civil society, forms of participatory democracy (like referenda and participatory budgeting) can be useful supplements to liberal democracy. But they should be no more than that, as they can never replace representative democracy. Mouffe believes that radical institutional reform of liberal democracy is unnecessary, because liberal democracy already grants political parties and representative bodies to the people. This puts into question the radicalness of Mouffe’s radical



democracy. It is important to understand democratic socialism as distinct from state socialism and social democracy because the latter two ignore the political and put decision-making power in the hands of a few elites (in the case of state socialism) or in a multitude of elected elites (in the case of social democracy) while democratic socialism tries to democratise the state so that decision-making lies as much as possible in the hands of the people. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that Mouffe's socialism does not fall in the category of social democracy when it comes to democratising the state.

### **3.4 Agonistic radical democracy: social democracy or democratic socialism?**

Mouffe's work on socialism mainly focusses on breaking away from two historical experiences of left-wing politics: classical or orthodox Marxism and third way social democracy. She criticises classical Marxism because it will inevitably result in a dictatorial regime, and third way social democracy because it is unwilling to oppose key neoliberal practices like privatisation and austerity, and therefore only cements their hegemony. Her criticism on the historical experience of social democracy before its turn to third way social liberalism is limited to some small remarks on its economic infeasibility since the 1973 oil crisis (Mouffe, 2000) and its incompatibility with the environmental goals of Mouffe's project. Politically, there is not that much wrong with social democracy. As Mouffe states: "social democracy, in both its right- and left-wing variants, always had capitalism as one of its antagonists, and its task was to confront holistically the systemic problems of inequality and instability generated by capitalism" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 111). She is even willing to admit that her own position shares many key features with social democracy, as she understands social democracy as the marriage between socialist ideals and liberal democracy. So, Mouffe's main concerns relating to the socialist political project are that it formulates an agonistic adversary (and thus can be ideologically differentiated from centre- and right-wing parties) and shows a willingness to interact with liberal democratic institutions. As long as it does that, it can generally count on her support.

But to understand social democracy as a mere combination of liberal democracy and socialism is too simple of a thought, because socialism and social democracy have different conceptions of in whose hands power should ultimately lie. As pointed out in Chapter 1, social democracy is mainly concerned with the struggle for a more egalitarian division of wealth: revisionists like Bernstein make it their goal to grant the working class their fair share in the wealth generated by the capitalist economy, so that the poor can become rich (Luxemburg, 1973). But it ignores the more political struggle for power: as Poulantzas (1978) states, virtually all variants of social democracy have a deep distrust of mass initiatives and are more comfortable with the idea of a small elite who enacts reforms that are in the interest of the working class. If they recognise the necessity to democratise the state and the economy at all, they do not believe that this should be done by the masses. The role of the working class is limited to actions like the occasional strike organised by leadership of the trade union, the yearly visit

to the social democratic party conference and, perhaps most importantly, granting democratic legitimacy to said small elite by voting for them in elections (Tambakaki, 2019).

Mouffe to some extent shares this social democratic distrust of mass action. Although she stresses the importance of mass movements and spontaneous action to change the common sense within civil society, direct participative forms of democracy are at best of secondary importance or should even be discarded altogether. It is therefore that she arrives at an electoral strategy to socialism, and a democratisation of both the economy and the state that grants most democratic control to representatives rather than directly in the hands of the masses. Add to this the instability of the coalition needed for Mouffe's project and the consequence this has for the powerful position of the oligarchy, and the conclusion can be reached that Mouffe's socialist strategy can never amount to much more than social democracy. Her theory must be regarded as a social democratic theory, which perhaps is more radical on some issues than previous forms of this ideology but fails to deliver the political goals of socialism: the goal of direct democratic control over both the economy and the state.

## **Chapter 4: Towards a Truly Democratic Socialism**

Now that it has been established that Mouffe's strategy fails to deliver a brand of socialism that is substantially different from social democracy, does this mean that her theory does not contain any societal or scientific relevance? And what are the consequences for the feasibility of a democratic socialism? This chapter answers these questions by arguing that there are elements in Mouffe's theory that are worth saving for a democratic socialist strategy, and by giving a general outlook of an alternative strategy.

### **4.1 What elements of Mouffeian socialism are worth saving?**

We should not disregard a couple of important insights of Mouffe's take on socialism. First of all, Mouffe grants Marxists the much-needed reminder that the working class (understood as a material position in relation to the productive forces in society) should no longer be regarded as a privileged agent through which all change should reside. Classical Marxists give a central role to the objective material interests of the working class within their strategy. This reduces the task of socialist revolutionaries to showing the masses that capitalism works against their own interests and convincing them that socialism is a system in accordance with their interests (Hall, 1983). There are of course still some categories of people in modern capitalism for whom their material interests with respect to socialism are clear: precarious workers, low-skilled manual labourers and the long-term unemployed have a clear incentive to oppose capitalism and engage in a struggle for a democratic system wherein wealth and power are equally divided (Olin Wright, 2010). But much against the expectations of Marx, contemporary capitalism does not consist of only two opposite classes but has created a group who according to Erik Olin Wright occupy contradictory locations within class relations, as they "have quite complex and often inconsistent interests with respect to capitalism" (Olin Wright, 2019, p. 6).

The number of people that primarily identify as working class has shrunk over the years. Those who sell their labour in exchange for a salary increasingly identify as consumers, highly educated professionals, managers and so on. Think for instance of the popular notion of the 'American Dream', which has spread the myth that in the United States of America there are no classes and there most definitely are no poor people: only those who are rich and those who are not yet rich but will be one day if they keep on working hard enough (Rottenberg, 2004). It is hard to imagine how a strategy that tries to mobilise the masses purely based on their material interests will work under these circumstances. Although Marx (1996a) and Engels (1999) were wary of using moral arguments in favour of socialism, as they dismissed these efforts as 'utopian' and 'non-scientific', they can be of great help to a modern democratic socialist strategy. As Wright (2010) points out, people who occupy contradictory locations within class relations need to feel that there is a moral necessity for socialism.

What Mouffe's insights on class reductionism further contribute to the academic debates on Marxism and socialism is that there are multiple forms of oppression that cannot all be explained through a class analysis. A socialism that reduces all politics to class struggle ignores the complexity of modern societies. To claim that non-class struggles should be disregarded as bourgeois does not do justice to the fact that the working class itself can be helped by engaging in these struggles (Belkhir, 2001). The traditional conception of the working class as white men working heavy industrial jobs has been outdated for a long time. The contemporary working class is much more diverse in the types of jobs they occupy, as many industrial workers have been replaced by machines and most working class people occupy jobs in the service industry (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). In virtually all Western democracies, plurality in terms of social identities such as race, gender, sexuality and country of origin also create a more diverse working class (Bettie, 1995). This means that many workers experience other forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism and homophobia, and might even believe that these forms of oppression are a much bigger burden than class-related oppression. By including the broad category within her strategy, and by giving social struggles wherein class does not play a decisive role equal importance, Mouffe provides a vital answer to how socialist movements should deal with these forms of oppression. Part of the importance of her work lies in that it contributes to the reconstruction of a new leftist identity, that breaks with class reductionist tendencies within Marxism and is therefore fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This importance cannot be underestimated.

These positive remarks about Mouffe's willingness to give equal importance to different kinds of struggles may come as a surprise given that in Chapter 3 a critique on the instability of such a coalition and the consequences this has for the position of the oligarchy was discussed. As stated previously, Mouffe is right in pointing out that classical Marxists are in the wrong when they accuse her of capitulating to 'bourgeois ideology'. But by claiming that "there is no point in answering those criticisms that proceed from the very conception of politics against which I have been arguing" (Mouffe, 2018, p. 80), she takes it a step too far. As for instance Zizek (1997) and Brown (2018) point out, some articulations of multicultural tolerance heavily rely on an acceptance of global capital. This means that social demands can and are increasingly being fulfilled by the capitalist market. As Jodi Dean explains:

"As new social movements transformed the lifeworld into something to be questioned and changed, they disrupted fixed identities and created opportunities for experimentation. The market entered as provider of these opportunities for experimentation" (Dean, 2005, p. 166).

Multinational corporations like Nike, Shell, Facebook, and Amazon all seem to have embraced the ideas of social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the Pride Movement, and have made it an integral part of the branding campaigns they use to make large profits. For example: every

year during Pride Month many corporations change their logos on social media to a version containing a rainbow, the symbol used by many within the LGBTQ-community (Sobande, 2019). With the embracing of certain social demands by large corporations, 'identity-politics' has lost its radical edge and can be turned into a weapon to help strengthen the power of capital (Zizek, 1997).

The classical Marxist response to bourgeois formulations of social demands has always been to denounce them. Late German socialist Clara Zetkin for instance had stressed that Marxist-feminists must always refrain from collaborating with bourgeois feminists, even on issues of common concern like women suffrage (Ghodsee, 2004). Mouffe on the other hand tries to solve the tension between socialist and other social demands by formulating a hegemonic articulation, that grants democratic equivalence between these struggles and tries to create a new common sense that sees these demands as inseparable from each other. But it is hard to imagine that there can ever exist a hegemonic articulation that connects the socialist struggle with struggles that are in direct conflict to the goals of socialism. It is true that not all feminist, ecologist, anti-racist and democratic demands are a priori bourgeois, as it is also not true that all these demands can be sufficiently addressed by a socialist system. But the fault in Mouffe her theory mainly lies in that she does not specify the boundaries of a coalition consisting of multiple heterogenous struggles. A socialist alliance that actually seeks to implement democratic socialism (and thus not social democracy) can never contain groups of people who are hostile to socialist ideas.

A second important lesson that can be learned from Mouffe's work is that it is impossible to eradicate the antagonistic nature of the political. Even if a democratic socialist society manages to destroy the conflictual relation between the bourgeoisie and the working class, other antagonisms will appear. Therefore, the presence of representative bodies is still necessary in a democratic socialist system. As Mouffe (2005) points out, parliaments can give the free struggle of opinion an institutional stage. It can help to give a clear overview of what kind of antagonisms still exist in society and gives a democratic and peaceful outlet to these conflictual relations. Although George Kokkinidis (2011) stresses that institutions of participatory democracy like workers' councils can become 'conflictive spaces', where the focus lies on diversity and the potential antagonistic conflict that stems from it instead of on unity, these institutions cannot take up this task on their own. As for instance Rosa Luxemburg (1961) points out in her critique on the Leninist soviet model of democratic socialism, councils of direct democracy cannot be the only true representation of the working class, because "without general elections, [...] without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element" (Luxemburg, 1961, p. 71). By basing everything on direct, rank-and-file democracy, there is a high risk that this will result in statist despotism or the dictatorship of those with the most knowledge. What first was a radical democratic mode of government, then becomes a technocratic

model wherein the effective power lies in the hands of a few experts (Poulantzas, 1978). It is thus no coincidence that the soviet model proved to be a viable breeding ground for authoritarian, statist socialism in the form of Stalinism.

So, although we should understand democratic socialism as something more than the mere integration of socialist ideals in a (liberal) representative democratic system, Mouffe reminds socialists that representative democracy is not the antithesis to democratic socialism. If we understand democratic socialism as a system that allows for political and ideological pluralism (which is necessary because of the antagonistic nature of the political) and the deepening of all political freedoms including for political opponents, representative democracy even becomes a requirement for any socialism that can rightly be called democratic.

#### **4.2 An alternative democratic socialist strategy**

Chapter 3 discussed apparatuses of the state that enjoy relative independence from the democratic elected government and are therefore ‘unreachable’ by electoral means. This allows the bourgeoisie to shift the effective power of the state to these unreachable apparatuses, meaning that a strategy that solely focusses on the creation of a left-wing government through participating in legislative elections will likely fail to bring about socialism. Mouffe seems to be willing to admit this, since she states that “the objective is not the *seizure* of state power but, as Gramsci puts it, one of *becoming* the state” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 47). What does this ‘becoming the state’ entail? According to Mouffe, the socialist struggle should expand to civil society, so that a new common sense can be created. She however fails to mention how socialist movements should deal with these independent apparatuses of the state, which are also not part of civil society. A successful strategy must thus go beyond Mouffe, in the sense that it needs to create new institutions that hold real decision-making power and are exterior to the state, enabling them to confront these non-democratic apparatuses.

This reminds of Lenin’s (1964) dual power strategy. As stated before, Lenin believes that a socialist revolution can only succeed if the bourgeois state is destroyed by an exterior power. The task of the working class and the peasantry therefore is to set up a revolutionary government alongside the provisional government, with the following fundamental characteristics:

- (1) “The source of power is not a law [...] enacted by parliament, but the direct initiative of the people from below, in their local areas”.
- (2) “The replacement of the police and the army, which are institutions divorced from the the people and set against the people, by direct arming of the whole people; order in the state Is maintained by the armed workers and peasants themselves”.

(3) officialdom, the bureaucracy, are either similarly replaced by the direct rule of the people themselves or at least placed under special control” (Lenin, 1964, p. 39).

But where Lenin envisioned the replacement of all institutions of the state by this new government, a democratic socialism only seeks the destruction and replacement of those apparatuses that are undemocratic, as to not fall in the same authoritarian statist trap Lenin fell in. It must somehow find a way to break with the false dichotomy of internal (meaning within the apparatuses of the state) and external struggle and combine these two strategies.

What democratic socialism aims for is a radical transformation of the state, which is possible through the election of a socialist parliamentary group who then form a socialist government, accompanied by the development of new forms of direct democracy and self-management networks and centres outside of the state. These networks are not only crucial for the self-determination of the masses but can also help to confront non-electoral apparatuses. This strategy somewhat resembles Murray Bookchin (2015) and his theory of ‘communalism’, who also argues for the spontaneous creation of self-management forms of democracy while simultaneously making use of existing liberal democratic institutions. But where Bookchin aims for the destruction of these institutions from the inside, the democratic socialist strategy laid out in this thesis seeks an equilibrium between representative and direct forms of democracy.

As Poulantzas (1978) points out, this is most certainly no easy task, since there is always a risk that either parliament or the new direct forms of democracy will eventually dominate the other. To prevent this, there should be a clear balance of power that gives equal importance to both forms of democracy and establishes clear rules over when representative assemblies should precede over centre of self-management or vice versa. To discuss in length how such a balance should look like would go beyond the scope of this thesis. The point of this thesis is to show that despite the limitations of Mouffe’s theory of democratic socialism, there is a possibility of a truly democratic socialism that would not devolve into social democracy or authoritarian statism. To conclude with the words of Poulantzas (1978, p. 265): “*socialism will be democratic or it will not be at all*”.

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