Enacting the Unrealized: Political Theory and the Role of "Radical Democratic Activism"

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The notion of Democracy Unrealized is open to a double interpretation. Most obviously it refers to empirical shortcomings in our political reality. From a historical understanding, democracy does not empirically live up to the glorious ways in which it is presented as "realized" (or on its way to final realization) by liberal Western "actually existing" democracies – we only have to think, as recent examples show, of the ongoing infringement of human rights, the economic deprivation of large sectors of the population, the effective denial of citizens' participation in the actual processes of decision making, etc. As Okwui Enwezor put it in the outline for this symposium, Western democracies perceive themselves "at best as 'incomplete implementations' of equality and justice on which modern democracy is based, rather than limits, flaws, dead-ends, and problematics inscribed in the principles themselves". In reaction to this presumption, though, one should start "bringing to light what liberal democracy promises but fails to deliver". Yet in contradistinction to *empirically* "unrealized democracies", there is something which exceeds even this form of political failure: and this excess is what I would call – thus sticking to the conference title – *Democracy Unrealized*. In doing so, I will propose to differentiate between empirically or factually "unrealized democracies" and "democracy unrealized", whereby a more philosophical interpretation can be given to the latter notion.

During the last few years, a figure of thought has evolved within political theory from which the notion of "Democracy Unrealized" is given a more radical twist (compared to the idea of an empirically unrealized democracy). The basic idea behind that twist is that there is something to democracy which *necessarily* remains *unrealizable* – to which we aspire but which does not necessarily have to be attained or achieved – that it is the *promise* of democracy rather than the latter's realization which gives all its force to it. Within the poststructuralist trajectory, we can think of Derrida's quasi-concept of a *democracy-to-come*, of Laclau and Mouffe's idea of a radical democracy which must remain unachievable if it is to be effective, or of different Lacanian versions of an ethics of democracy where the latter is defined as an "impossible good". Yet this figure of thought is not to be found in the poststructuralist trajectory alone; there are postfoundationalist versions of civic republicanism and neopragmatism – Arendt, Skinner, Barber, and others – in which the common good remains necessarily empty and, thus, open to an endless process of contestation. In those cases, the *res publica* of the republic is defined, again, as a necessarily impossible, rather than substantive, good – and, thus, as *unrealizable*. So the idea of the necessarily unrealizable or the radically *unrealizable* can be found in postfoundationalist political thought at large – even where it is not manifested or formulated in an explicit way.

Based on these considerations, my presentation sets itself a double task. First, and after some considerations as to the role of democracy as political slogan, I shall seek to establish the theoretical framework in which figures of "democracy unrealized" have been conceptualized in recent political thought and philosophy. But while such critique or deconstruction of actually existing democracies is obviously located at a theoretical level, there is another level on which a similar critique is *launched in practice*. This is the field of what I would call Radical Democratic Activism and whose logic I will analyze in a second step. Again, it is at the moment of the factual shortcomings of actually existing democracies where most current forms of social and political activism set in. They set in, this will be the main thesis, with the experience of unrealized democracy, but what they encounter is the promise of democracy unrealized.

Let me start with the most basic or the most trivial form in which we encounter "democracy" on an everyday level. Where do we encounter democracy? First and foremost, of course, in political discourse, and there democracy is nothing else but a signifier. As a political signifier, it is closer to the nature of a slogan than it is to the nature of a highly sophisticated concept of political philosophy or constitutional thought. So I am well aware of the fact that we should not make the mistake of approaching the political signifier in the same way as we would approach a philosophical concept. It would be ludicrous to judge the political slogan "democracy" along scientific or philosophical standards of, for instance, internal coherence or descriptive adequacy. It is not the role of a political signifier to figure in a nicely or coherently structured theoretical argument. A political signifier, rather, is a weapon. It can kill, at least potentially, as we all know from propaganda discourse. And it can do so because it is related to a field of forces and hegemonic struggle in which relations of power, domination, subordination, and suppression are constantly negotiated, but also, on the other hand, attitudes of agreement, allegiance, or silent consent and consensus, of blind as well as ironic or cynical belief are constantly produced. This is the field of what Antonio Gramsci called hegemony.

Before moving to political thought proper, it is necessary to analyze the political role of democracy as a signifier and then think about how to articulate — that is, to *link* — whatever concept of democracy we would like to propose on a theoretical level with the political signifier. If we now analyze the latter's function in political discourse, we will immediately be confronted with the phenomenon of its very ubiquity. Democracy is everywhere and apparently means everything. It has become what Stuart Hall, with reference to Ernesto Laclau, very cogently called a "horizon". Let us therefore come back to Laclau's original definition of horizon: "We call *horizon* that which establishes, at one and the same time, the limits and the terrain of constitution of any possible object — and that, as a result, makes impossible any 'beyond'. Reason for the Enlightenment, progress for positivism, communist society for Marxism — these are not the names of objects within a certain horizon but of the horizon itself".[1]

Nowadays, democracy seems to have assumed the status of such a horizon. Put simply: in the politico-discursive struggle I have described, democracy seems to be the winner, at least for the time being. But what does it mean to win a hegemonic struggle? Even as it is certain that no hegemonic struggle is won once and for all, that there will always be moments of crisis or counterattacks, counter-projects which might weaken the attained hegemony at some point, what *can* be said is that a certain particular project, a certain signifier (like democracy) can reach a point of hegemonic expansion at which it turns into a horizon. This horizon then establishes what Laclau calls both the limits and the terrain of construction of political objects. That is to say, firstly, it defines the very limits of what is thinkable politically at a certain point in time: it defines what might still be thought as an alternative *within* that horizon and it relegates into the unthinkable any alternative to the horizon as such. And secondly, this implies that any alternative — as soon as *the horizon* is established — must be formulated on the very terrain of the horizon. That is to say, it must take over the terms imposed on it by the latter's regime of what is thinkable or imaginable politically at a certain point in time.

If we take these general characteristics of a horizon and apply them to the question of democracy, assuming that the signifier of democracy indeed plays the role of the political horizon of our times, then it follows that the constitution of political objects – objects in the sense of both political objectives (demands) and political identities (actors) — is governed to a large extent by the horizon or the imaginary of democracy. This means that democracy constitutes both the terrain on which political demands and projects have to be constituted *and* sets certain limits to that constitution.

This is not to claim that it could not happen that some people still formulate their political goals in nondemocratic terms, let's say, the dictatorship of the proletariat or on the basis of supremacy. Such nondemocratic political goals indeed happen everyday, and on both the left and the right (an example would be American survivalists). My point, however, is that those objects, demands, or identities constituted *beyond* democracy can link up neither with the hegemonic horizon of political discourse, nor with the basic regime of what is imaginable politically in our times. Thus they are segregationist or sectarian by nature – and therefore relatively ineffective as far the realization of their literal demands is concerned. Even though there might be some long-term trickle-down effect of their ideology into mainstream discourse, this would only be possible if their ideology is accepted by mainstream "democratic" discourse itself. It is important to note at this point that a horizon is not only an "intellectual" or cognitive construct; it is a *real* thing with real effects (I have already mentioned that signifiers can indeed kill). This is the reason why, I assume, for Laclau it is possible to speak about the constitution of *objects*, not only the constitution of mere „ideas", namely, because they are intrinsically connected with real material practices and contexts – so intrinsically that it is impossible to separate them, that is, to separate the material from the semantic, even for analytic purposes.[2]

Let us now switch from the level of the signifier to the level of the signified. Or to put it somewhat reductively: Where does the specific *meaning* of that horizon of democracy come from? From the mere ubiquity of the signifier of democracy it does not follow that democracy is bare of a certain specific meaning, a particular inflection. There are dominant ideas about the meaning of democracy and there are marginal ideas about the meaning of democracy. And since we obviously cannot refer to an eternal Platonic idea of what democracy substantially is, because the meaning of the latter cannot be based on any ground or foundation of knowledge as to the substantial qualities of such "really real democracy": since this is not feasible anymore, the question becomes *which* hegemonic project or attempt succeeds in defining and arresting the meaning of democracy. Which project succeeds in filling up the empty signifier or the horizon of democracy with its own content, its own demands, its own goals? The main struggle going on today, I would hold, is the struggle over the answer to this question. It is not a struggle between democracy and its other (that is, whatever lies beyond that horizon), but a struggle within that horizon and on the terrain of that horizon over the particular meaning and inflection of that very horizon. In other words: everybody is playing with the same signifier — the question is: which signified will be temporarily attached to it.

The answer to the question of who seems to have managed to hegemonize that empty horizon by now is blatantly clear and has been given time and again in the course of this symposium – it is that particular Western liberal model of democracy which presents itself as the only game in town. This Western liberal model is happy to provide a minimal formal framework of democratic institutions which, nevertheless, are very closely articulated with the promotion of a free market and the forms of subjectivation of free-market individuals. A model which is promoted – with a little help from the World Bank and the IMF – on a global scale. Where it is not yet realized it surely is "on the right track". In the case of the former socialist countries, it can be observed most clearly which particular version of democracy is or was at the end of the horizon: after the breakup of the former model of a so-called People's Democracy, the empty signifier of democracy has been filled up again with the idea of a free market so that the horizon of democracy, at some point, became by and large synonymous with capitalism (something which, by the way, attests to the fact that a horizon does have a phantasmatic dimension, a motivating force, so that it can turn into an object of desire).

Now, one can and must of course critique the fact that the Western liberal model of democracy has become such an all-encompassing horizon. This was one of the points repeatedly made by Slavoj Žižek: that it has become impossible to think of any alternative to the current ideology of democracy, the reason being that democracy has attained worldwide hegemony and has cancelled out any

possible or imaginable alternative. But the problem Žižek encounters by trying to step out of the horizon — and I take his recent attempt at reviving Leninism as part of that project of transgressing the horizon of democracy as such — is that he cannot provide any answer as to what he wants to find behind the horizon. So, when critiquing the latter, he himself seems to conflate democracy too much with the particular Western liberal-capitalist version of it, and then seeks to step outside that horizon. But the fact that there is no wholesale alternative available to the democratic horizon does not, at any rate, imply that it is impossible to *redefine* the horizon from within. It is possible to redefine the horizon because its currently hegemonic meaning — the Western liberal one — is the contingent outcome of a whole set of struggles which by definition is open-ended even as it seems to have „won" for the time being. So there is no reason why it should be impossible to fight for a, let's say, more radical, egalitarian, and participatory version of democracy. A fight which definitely would take place within the horizon of democracy but against that particular impostor — Western liberal democracy — which presents itself as the latter's final and total incarnation.

Perhaps it might be feasible to fight for an even more fundamental or radical version like „democracy unrealized", to which I will now turn. The more fundamental or philosophical topos of a „democracy unrealized" — something which stands in contradistinction to the many ways in which „unrealized democracy" presents itself today with all its empirical shortcomings — is not so much about and in favor of a *specific* content than it is about the *structure and very nature of the horizon itself*. The question then is not so much: How is the empty signifier of democracy going to be filled with what content and who is going to succeed with what version of democracy? but rather: How should the horizon itself be structured in order to function democratically?[3]

In order to answer this question, it is advisable to have recourse to those philosophical attempts at thinking the nature of a horizon which functions democratically. As I mentioned before, what those deconstructivist, Lacanian, or, generally speaking, poststructuralist versions of „democracy unrealized" (a democracy which is unrealized not because of some factual shortcomings or problems which could be solved in the future, but because it must remain necessarily unrealizable, it must remain an impossible good) share with certain versions of civic republicanism (with Arendt, Skinner, or Barber) is the fact that they are postfoundationalist. This means that they do not anymore assume the existence of a solid ground, a fixed foundation or an Archimedean point from which one could revolutionize society as a whole. So, for instance, they do not live in the actually existing socialist illusion that — given that economy is the base or the foundation which determines the political superstructure — we only have to socialize the means of production and then everything will follow and the way is free for a socialist and eventually communist society. For postfoundationalist theories, the economy (or any other social instance for that matter) is not the ground of the social, not because they are anti-Marxist but because from their point of view there can be no such a thing as a ground in the first place. And — this is one of the conclusions to be drawn by political theory — if there is no firm and eternal ground of community, there can be no substantial or traditionally pregiven *common good* either. Yet this absence of a *substantial single* communitarian common good must not necessarily lead into the liberal myth that there is no common good at all.

Rather, what follows from the postfoundationalist premise of the groundlessness of the social is that the common good has to be defined again and again in a conflictual way, and each good has to be enforced as a particular one against competing goods, that is, it has to universalize itself without, though, ever attaining the position of a complete or final universal good. As is the case with the dimension of ground, the dimension of the common good does not simply disappear either, but remains there as an empty horizon of public action which has to be defined again and again. It is present in its very absence, it is, as it were, present only „virtually", but still present. As Chantal Mouffe puts it: „The common good can never be actualized, it has to remain a *foyer virtuel* to which

we must constantly refer but which cannot have a real existence. It is the very characteristic of modern democracy to impede such a final fixation of the social order and to preclude the possibility of a discourse establishing a definite suture".[4]

Not only the common good but also the res publica itself— understood both as republic and as the public thing or matters of the public interest — becomes an impossible object. In its most prominent form, an idea similar to this has been advocated with respect to democracy by Jacques Derrida with his concept of a *démocratie à venir.* According to Derrida, democracy is nothing which is already realized but it is a good which would disappear as soon as it is realized. Thus, democracy for Derrida has the structure of a promise. This is not a democracy which will be present and can be attained in reality at some point in the future, nor is it the *utopian* dream of a beautiful soul which would not have to be realized at all. It is neither a future reality nor is it a Utopia without any reality. And this is because, paradoxically, that future has to take place here and now, which means we cannot simply delegate the realization of democracy, its „coming", to a more distant point in linear time or to future generations.

It is the insistence on the actualization of the „to come" in the „now" which characterizes democratic struggle. In subaltern struggles, that „now", as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, was countered, opposed, and put off with a „not yet" by the colonizers (the latter claiming, for instance, that the democratic consciousness of the population is *not* sufficiently developed *yet*). Against their oppressive discourse of the „not yet" — which inscribes the postponed event into the historicist narrative of linear time — it is the „global insistence on the ‚now' that marks all popular movements toward democracy".[5] Chakrabarty gives the example of India opting for universal suffrage for a still predominantly illiterate people. There, in the Constituent Assembly, the idea was defeated that „Indians as a people were not yet ready to rule themselves". What else was this position, Chakrabarty asks, „if not a national gesture of abolishing the imaginary waiting room in which Indians had been placed by European historicist thought"? And while in the day-to-day practice of governing the Indian state, historicist thought might still be prevalent, „every time there is a populist/political mobilization of the people on the streets of the country and a version of ‚mass democracy' becomes visible in India, historicist time is put in temporary suspension".[6] So the promise of a democracy „to come" must by no means be confused with the „not yet" of the colonizers and oppressors as the latter is constructed in terms of linear historicist time, as a historical event which is just to be postponed because of circumstantial reasons.

Contrariwise, the promise of democracy — and this is the main point which is interesting for us — does not have a concrete positive or ideal content. The promise which is inherent in that futural structure of a democracy-to-come shows itself only in the suspension of historicist time, in the moment of the *failure* of democracy to realize itself. It is shown only in what we have called „unrealized democracies", that is to say, in the actual democracy's „failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being ‚out of joint".[7] So it is not only in seemingly atavistic rollbacks into military dictatorships, or nationalist or so-called fundamentalist uprisings, that a gap is revealed between the *ideal* of democracy (or at least what liberal democracy presents as an ideal of democracy which cannot be improved upon anymore) and factual political reality. No, it would be easy to show, Derrida holds, „that, measured by the failure to establish liberal democracy, the gap between fact and ideal essence does not show up only in these so-called primitive forms of government, theocracy, and military dictatorship. ... But this failure and this gap also characterized, *a priori* and by definition, *all democracies*, including the oldest and most stable of so-called Western democracies".[8] All democracies, then, are and always have been *unrealized* democracies by definition. This is not only a historical account. Derrida's claim is much more radical. For him, the promise of democracy only arises in that very gap between the supposedly realized and the unrealized, between fact and ideal, between, as we have

put it, unrealized democracy and democracy unrealized. Derrida: „That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a future democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia — at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a *future present*, of a future modality of the *living present*".[9] But, as we have shown, while Derrida is talking about a future which cannot be presented in the *present*, it still has to be actualized always in the here and now. It is at this point that we encounter the necessity, and I will return to it later, of „radical democratic activism", defined as the performative putting into effect that which nevertheless remains unrealizable.

So why does this postfoundational argument play itself out on the level of the nature of the horizon rather than on the level of its content? The point here simply is that democracy, envisaged as „democracy unrealized", does have practical political consequences in that one has to accept that a horizon by nature is something very different from a ground. A horizon is shifting, by definition it can never be arrested, it does not constitute a fixed reference point or substantial ideal. And these „negative" qualities have to be accepted so that Laclau can define a truly democratic society in the following way: „A society is democratic, not insofar as it postulates the validity of a certain type of social organization and of certain values vis-à-vis others, but insofar as it refuses to give its own organization and its own values the status of a *fundamentum inconcussum*. There is democracy as long as there exists the possibility of an unlimited questioning; but this amounts to saying that democracy is not a system of values and a system of social organization, but a certain inflection, a certain ‚weakening' of the type of validity attributed to any organization and any value".[10]

It is in the sense of the above quote that Michael Cholewa-Madsen has recapitulated what can be said about the figure of „democracy unrealized" in all its different postfoundational philosophical topoi or figures: „Radical democracy is something *tensional* (Laclau and Mouffe); it is something to be *attempted*; something which has a *futural* (Derrida) or *différantial* (Critchley) character — it is always democracy *to come*, it is a *vanishing point* (Žižek), i.e. something to which we must constantly *refer*, but which can *never be reached* (Mouffe); its value is *indeterminate* (Laclau); and it does not have any particular objectives (Laclau), in short an ‚*impossible' task which makes radical democratic relations possible*".[11]

Before eventually returning to the question of radical democratic activism, I would like to briefly touch upon some historical and institutional conditions under which the impossible task of „democracy unrealized" could in fact be „integrated" into our framework of „unrealized democracies". To do this, I would like to turn to another political philosopher: Claude Lefort. Like the other theorists mentioned, Lefort is a *post*foundationalist rather than a radical *anti*foundationalist, that is to say, even as there is no single or fixed particular foundation of society which could take up that role, *the dimension* of a „ground" (in the form of a horizon) cannot completely disappear if society is still to have *some* identity. Lefort makes it very clear that a point of reference is still required, though democratically it has to be established in a different, purely nonsubstantive way. What characterizes the democratic dispositive then is that it keeps the place of power empty and refrains from positing any particular positive ground. Yet the multiple forms of *ideology* have taught us that the groundlessness of the social and the emptiness of power *can* be denied and occluded. Hence, something more is required for the democratic dispositive to be „realized" to some extent: the emptiness of the place of power has to be *institutionally* recognized (as much as the groundlessness of society is theoretically accepted by postfoundational political thought) and *discursively actualized*. What has to occur is the institutional recognition that the place of power has always been — and will always be — empty. The democratic dispositive, hence, provides an *institutional framework* which guarantees the *acceptance* of the groundlessness of the social.

The paradoxical goal of the institutionalization of groundlessness is achieved within the democratic dispositive by the following set of „arrangements" — which of course should not be understood as mere mechanical applications. The first has been mentioned already: the disincorporation of the place of power. This is accompanied by the „disentangling" in democracy of the sphere of power, the sphere of law, and the sphere of knowledge. Power is in constant search for its own base of legitimation because the principles of justice and of knowledge are no longer incorporated in the person of the ruler.[12]

The fact that such a single ground disappears, though, does not imply the disappearance of the *questions* of social institution. Since they cannot rely on any external source of „founding", they turn into questions of autonomous self-institution of society. And it is now *within* society where all questions of autonomous self-institution are negotiated. This is made possible by the separation of civil society from the state. Furthermore, a *public space*[13] is carved out of civil society in which no monarch, no majority, and no supreme judge can decide which particular debate is legitimate and which one is not. Democracy is „founded upon the *legitimacy of a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate* — a debate which is necessarily without any guarantor and without any end".[14]

That never-ending debate (the ongoing process of questioning, as Laclau would have it) —which forms public space — was historically secured by the Declaration of Human Rights. The notion of human rights points to a territory which — as a consequence of the disentanglement of power, law, and knowledge — is located *beyond* the reach of power. Human rights are declared within and by civil society itself and are part of the auto-institution of the latter. It goes without saying that nothing could be more alien to Lefort than grounding human rights within the *nature* of man. This would again posit a further positive ground behind society's *absent* ground. Lefort prefers inquiring into the paradoxes of the declaration of rights. Once declared, however, human rights produce an ultimate frame wherein positive law can be questioned: „From the moment when the rights of man are posited as the ultimate reference [as a horizon, 0.M.], established right is open to question".[15] Human rights do *not* constitute a new positive ground, they do *not* consist of certain sets of preestablished eternal principles: they are characteristically open with respect to their content. Although human rights, *in principle*, expose all particular established rights to questioning, they guarantee however that one right cannot be questioned: *the right to have rights*, as Lefort formulates with reference to Hannah Arendt. Once acknowledged, human rights enable more and more social groups to claim their right to have rights (historically: workers, slaves, women, immigrants, gays and lesbians, etc.). Lefort's point — and this is where what I call radical democratic activism comes in again — is that the *extension* of human rights to more and more groups — and, since they have to openly *struggle* for their inclusion, the extension of public space — is not an arbitrary addition to the democratic dispositive but is *absolutely necessary* for democracy. The constant call for inclusion of more and more groups (today, for instance, for the rights of homosexuals, jobless people, or immigrants) — the call for their inclusion in the category of those who have the right to have rights — is what generates democracy again and again. This is the meaning of Lefort's notion of human rights as the *generative principle* of democracy.[16]

It should be clear by now how this relates to the question of democratic activism: a generative principle (a principle generating a *democracy in process*) does not only exist in the heaven of ideas, rather, it has to be actualized by way of inclusion of the previously excluded, and this always has to happen in practice, it has to happen here and now, and it has to happen against very powerful forces which resist their inclusion. Therefore, that principle of human rights — and democracy for that reason — cannot be denounced in good old leftist fashion as a bourgeois plot, as an insidious deception on the level of the ideological superstructure which seeks to hide what „really" happens on the level of the economy. It is from this traditional position of leftist ideology critique that one could be tempted to

renounce the very notion of human rights. But that is not the only alternative. There are basically two paths open: either we denounce democracy or human rights, etc., as bourgeois, that is, as intrinsically illusionary and deceptive, or we can recognize that they function as a horizon which indeed is open to redefinition and can be enlarged. And this is the tradition not of those revolutionary movements which tried to transgress the horizon of allegedly „formal bourgeois democracy" but of the civil rights movements which instead sought to expand that very horizon.

That is why all the classic left defamations of democracy as a bourgeois plot are really missing the point. To give but one example: There is, on the radical left, a widespread apprehension of the Zapatista movement that it constitutes a revolutionary movement in the traditional sense — albeit with (post)modern means and rhetorics. A closer look, however, will reveal that the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) is not seeking the overthrow of the political system as a whole, thereby instituting something of a people's republic. Rather, their fight — which is centered around a notion of indigenous rights — is about the democratization of Mexico as a whole. For this reason, the EZLN is best portrayed as a democratization movement — and not as a revolutionary one. I am giving this example in order to make the difference more concrete and graspable between the classical revolutionary form of activism (for example, Maoist Third World liberation movements that tried to overturn democracy as such and to institute some sort of people's republic) on the one hand and current forms of radical democratic activism on the other. Radical democratic activism does start with the experience of unrealized democracy (and it is quite obvious that the Mexican democracy is utterly unrealized in many respects), a democracy which does not deliver what it promises. But that point or experience is precisely the point of emergence of democracy unrealized, of, to put it in the words of Derrida, a promise which arises in the very gaps and fissures and failures and shortcomings of actually existing democracies.

And if we now think about the relation between factually unrealized democracy and the promise of democracy unrealized, between the empirical „ontic" democracies and the „ontological" dimension of democracy as a promise, then it seems to be the case that nowadays it is democratic activism which performs the intertwining or *chiasm* — to use a term from rhetorics which became important in philosophy — of these two levels. In other words: it is democratic activism which stands at the point of this crossing between unrealized democracies and democracy unrealized — simply because what presents itself as promise at the horizon has to be enacted here and now even if its complete fulfillment is impossible.

One of the many names of such enactment is „radical democracy": the radicalization of demands for equality and the pluralization of the areas in which such demands are being articulated. While „radical democracy" is the name advocated by Laclau and Mouffe in particular, this project which the title of this platform „democracy unrealized" refers to — the project of a participatory, nondogmatic, and open-ended process of democratization — can and does have many names („strong democracy" is what Benjamin Barber would call it, for instance). There is no need for a single name, since it is instantiated through a multiplicity of democratic practices which nevertheless share one thing: they locate themselves within the horizon of democracy while simultaneously fighting against the liberal ideology of a supposedly realized democracy so that they insist on the unrealized nature of democracy. And this precisely is the crossing point where these activist *practices* tie in with the theoretical notion or structure of democracy unrealized (unrealizable) or a democracy-to-come. Since from a philosophical point of view it is not „democracy" which is realized by those forms of radical democratic activism but, paradoxically, „democracy unrealized": it is the contingent and always only temporary enactment of something which, as such, must remain unrealizable. This paradoxical task of realizing

something which in principle must remain unrealizable is taken up by radical democratic activists (not literally but structurally) who are no longer seeking to achieve some sort of ideological closure of the whole of society in the way traditional ideologists did (they do not, in other words, present a fully fledged picture of a perfectly democratic society).

Therefore, these new activist practices — for instance, the antiglobalization movement — cannot be reduced anymore to a single ideological core or homogeneous worldview. Rather, they are structured as a contingent linking of a plurality of demands. What unites them, then, is not so much a positive content — and definitely not a substantial ideology of the „good society" — than the conviction and insistence with respect to actually existing democracy that *this is not it*. They are radically democratic in the sense that they are driven by the conviction that democracy is far from being realized under conditions of corporate power and the worldwide hegemony of some sections of the West. Therefore, the main antagonism today is not the one between democracy and its totalitarian other but it runs right through the core of democracy: it is the antagonism between actually existing liberal capitalist regimes which claim to have realized democracy, on the one hand, and ongoing processes of and demands for radical democratization, on the other. This antagonism — an antagonism *internal* to democracy — is what is enacted by forms of democratic activism that carry the demands for equality into more and more social spheres.

Hence, their aim (or practice) is not to „realize" democracy and, thus, turn it into one more ideology of closure. Rather, it is through their concrete actions that — *ex negativo* — they demonstrate the ideological nature of *all* claims supposing the actual realization of democracy. What they expose through their practice is the fact that a particular regime — liberal Western democracies — has captured and hegemonized the notion of democracy and now presents itself as the latter's unrivaled and unsurpassable realization. Therefore, to sum up, radical democratic activism is structured as the *practical proof* of the fact that democracy is not and cannot be fully realized but nevertheless has to be actualized here and now as a promise whose eventual fulfillment would not be the „realization" of democracy but its final dissolution.

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References

1 Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s) (London: Verso, 1994), p. 102.

2 In other words, it makes no sense to look for a "real material base" behind the horizon, for instance, in terms of a determining relation between base and superstructure.

3 Even as I am very well aware of the fact that if we find an answer to the latter question we will again have to make a content out of that answer — that is, we have to formulate it as a political demand and fight for it politically — so that the question of the nature of the horizon is of course linked to the question of political contents proposed. And yet, to look at it from this angle still is a completely different way of approaching the problem. I am not saying the philosophical figure of

thought is a solution, or the solution: but it keeps open the problem as problem (without prematurely claiming to have found the final real or ideal meaning of emocracy), and this is its advantage. But of course, all the following philosophical solutions run into the problem of dirty hands, which, you cannot escape if you want to put a program or an idea or even a promise (like in Derrida) into effect politically. For the problematic logic of a merely "fiitural" democracy without any realism, see Oliver Marchart, "Gibt es eine Politik des Politischen. Démocratie à venir betrachtet von Clausewitz aus dem Kopfstand," in Das Undarstellbare der Politik. Zur Hegemonietheorie Ernesto Laclaus, ed. Oliver Marchart (Vienna: Tuna + Kant, 1998), pp. 90-119.

4   Chantal Mouffe, The Return of the Political (London: Verso, 1993), p. 114.

5   Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

6   Ibid., p. 10.

7   Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 64.

8   Ibid.

9   Ibid., pp. 64-65.

10 Ernesto Laclau, New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, trans. Jon Barnes (London: Verso, 1990), p. 187.

11 Michael Cholewa-Madsen, "Enacting the Political," Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities 1, no. 3 (1994), p. 40.

12 For a more extensive summary of Lefort's position, see Oliver Marchart, "Division and Democracy: On Claude Lefort's Post-foundational Political Philosophy," Filozofiki Vestnik /Acta Phi losophica 221, no. 2 (2000), pp. 51-82; and "Zivilgesellschaftlicher Republikanismus: Lefort und Gauchet," in Politische Theorien der Gegenwart.Eine Einführung, ed. Andre Brodocz and Gary S. Schaal (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1999), pp. 119-142.

13 In more concrete terms defined by Lefort in an Arendtian way as "a space which is so constituted that everyone is encouraged to speak and to listen without being subject to the authority of another, that everyone is urged to will the power he has been given. This space, which is always indeterminate, has the virtue of belonging to no one, of being large enough to accommodate only those who recognize one another within it and who give it a meaning, and of allowing the questioning of right to spread." Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 41.

14 Ibid., p. 39.

15 Claude Lefort, The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), p. 258.

16 It should be mentioned that, for Lefort, the "institutionalization" of rights is an ambiguous enterprise since it is both a necessary condition for an awareness of rights to evolve and constant threat to rights in as far as it tends toward bureaucratization and concealment: "On the one hand, the institutionalization involves, with the development of a body of law and a caste of specialists, the possibility of concealment of the mechanisms indispensable to the effective exercise of rights by the interested parties; on the other hand, it provides the necessary support for an awareness of rights" (The Political Forms of Modern Society, p. 260). This shows that Lefort is conscious of the paradoxical nature of any ontic institutionalization of ontological conditions.