

A Radical Democratic Lens to Rejuvenating European Union Democracy Support

Thinking about the Political with a Capital P

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► **Abstract:** This article intervenes in the debates on reforming EU democracy support by offering a “radical reformist” approach. It departs from the observation that literature lacks a sustained theorization of reform which more effectively considers contestation as the very condition of democracy. As such, in contrast to withdrawing democracy from its contested nature, this article presents a theoretical argument, as informed by Chantal Mouffe’s take on radical democracy, through which the EU more democratically can engage with and support the plurality of different contestations of democracy. In particular, a closer engagement with the radical democratic embrace of the political will allow for better reflection on how EU democracy support already is or can become democratic, empowering and receptive to the way democracy is understood locally.

► **Keywords:** contestation, European Union, external democracy support, radical democracy, reform

In 2019, the European Union implemented democracy aid projects in 37 countries, totaling €147 million. This is an increase of about 28 percent compared to the year prior (EU 2019) and therefore could be seen as indicative of an increasing international engagement in terms of supporting democracy globally.¹ Indeed, ever since the 1980s, international democracy aid has seen an impressive growth that “translates into thousands of projects that directly engage hundreds of thousands of people in the developing and postcommunist worlds” (Carothers 2015: 60). However, a global decline of democracy has nevertheless been reported: observations point to a “15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom” and to increased restrictions on civil society around the world (Repucci and



Slipowitz 2021). Then, regardless of democracy support efforts, a third wave of autocratization is here (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Such discrepancy between democracy support and democratic decline has led to questions about the effectiveness of international democracy support – and EU democracy support in particular – and to questions on how it can or should be reformed. One particular debate that has re-emerged concerns what form of democracy should constitute the substance of democracy support, and whether multiple forms of democracy are in fact equally valid or legitimate. Indeed, while debate over “democracy with adjectives” is not new (e.g., Collier and Levitsky 1997), it has more recently been revived due to – among others – the realization that the concept of “democracy” is in fact used in many different ways (e.g., Gagnon 2018) and that “democracy” and “democracy support” have become increasingly contested (Kurki 2013).

In policy discourse, the EU so far has declined to come up with an authoritative definition of what constitutes democracy, thereby instead emphasizing principles of “ownership,” “local adaptation,” and the fact that democracy must be developed “bottom up.” For example, the EU has asserted “democracy cannot be imposed from the outside” but that EU external democracy support can only play an assisting role in relation to national and local actors who retain ownership of the genuine change processes required to build and enhance democracy (Council of the EU 2009). However, in practice, such “ownership” of the change process is often hard to find. Often, the EU is noted not to engage in a dialogue on the meaning of democracy with countries that challenge (Western) conceptions of democracy (Gratius 2011; Stewart 2011), or that the principle in fact makes way to an increasing prevalence of pragmatism and self-interest (Keijzer and Black 2020), among others. Yet, as also noted by Annika Poppe and Jonas Wolff (2013: 381), if we take seriously the principle of ownership in democracy support, and if we take seriously that democracy is contested, should we then not put our own normative premises of what democracy should be up for discussion with those that are at the receiving end? Hence, this article seeks to ask, “How can EU democracy support take into account the contested nature of what is democracy”?

Within academic literature, such a question hinges on the importance and legitimacy of *liberal* democracy as a framework for reforming EU democracy support. On the one hand, much of the mainstream² democracy support scholarship understands liberal democracy to be *the* universal value, and therefore to need being strengthened globally (Carothers 2015, 2020; Youngs 2015). Such “strengthening” generally mirrors Thomas Carothers’s categorization of “political aid,” in that mainstream

scholarship advocates for the EU to – in more effective and smart ways – emphasize the “importance of genuine, competitive elections and sufficient respect for political and civil rights to ensure that citizens can participate meaningfully in democratic political processes” (Carothers 2009: 7; Carothers and de Gramont 2013). Crucially, however, according to this strand of thought, making democracy support more “political” does not entail “politicizing” the value of liberal democracy as such. Indeed, the argument goes that “liberal democracy must be strengthened, not ostracized” (Youngs 2015). Yet, such politicization, critical scholars argue, is in fact fundamental to even begin to understand how EU democracy support can become political within a plurality of conceptions of what democracy is. Hence, on the other hand, more critical scholarship has noted there are many alternatives to liberal democracy, and that in fact liberal democracy and its underlying principles rooted in individual liberty are alien and detrimental to many non-Western contexts (e.g., Ake 1993). In terms of improving EU democracy support, these scholars then first ask whether in fact such support should be abolished, and if not, whether such support itself must or could be democratized through including – rather than excluding – more plural perspectives of democracy (Koelble and Lipuma 2008; Kurki 2013; Rutazibwa 2014).

Since much of current analysis on EU democracy support often remains *light* and implicit in terms of “theory” (Lazarus 2014; Wolff and Zimmermann 2016) and borrowing from the claim that “another theory is possible when theorizing Europe” (Manners and Whitman 2016), this article seeks to bridge current analysis of (EU) democracy support with the theoretical debates on organizing pluralism within the literature of democratic theory. Since these theories – most notably deliberative democracy and radical democracy – long have reflected on the concepts of “pluralism,” “contestation,” and “the political,” such bridging arguably holds potential to theoretically improve the question on how EU democracy support could consider democratic contestation.

In what follows, I intend to scrutinize assumptions within current literature on EU democracy support, thereby offering a stronger theoretical approach for assessing the substance of EU democracy support in its relation to its recipients. I will come to note that while deliberative democratic, anti-deliberative, and radical democratic theoretical arguments can be observed – although somewhat implicitly – within debates on reforming EU democracy support, the radical democratic lens remains underdeveloped. Yet, since such latter approach most explicitly seeks to pluralize pluralism, I argue it is better positioned to allow us (i.e., the democracy support community at large, including the EU) to critically reflect on how to democratically engage with contestation and pluralism,

and how to take seriously the principle of “ownership.” Indeed, closer engagement with radical democracy would allow for better reflection on how the contestation over “liberal democracy” can be democratically dealt with, and how this could be incorporated in the design and practice of democracy support. It will allow for the reclamation of “the political” in terms of rejuvenating democracy support. It will allow for a thorough reflection on what it is to be “political with a capital P.”

The Ticklish Debate Regarding the Universality of Liberal Democracy

In light of increasing contestation of liberal democracy, there has been some debate on how “difference” can be dealt with, namely whether deliberation between different forms of democracy is possible or in fact desirable. Such debate hinges on whether there are varieties of liberal democracy, or whether it in fact is fundamentally contested.

A Deliberative Approach to Reforming EU Democracy Support

A major concern within the mainstream democracy support community has been that liberal democracy has come under attack and, moreover, that the world is left with a leaderless struggle to protect it. Indeed, the spread of liberal democracy has increasingly been challenged by illiberal powers who have grown more active in promoting their brand of authoritarianism (Fong 2021), by Western countries themselves who have grown complacent to creeping authoritarian tendencies (Diamond 2019), or by Western countries who have in fact proved willing to continue to provide economic and military aid to many of these authoritarian countries (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016). Yet, more subtly, liberal democracy is also noted to be endangered by “nonliberal” alternatives to democracy. Indeed, these nonliberal – sometimes even referred to as “non-Western” – notions of democracy are often seen as a threat since they risk being a “cloak” to cover for antidemocratic ideas and practices (Youngs 2015).

Yet, the threat of illiberalism or nonliberal forms of democracy does not entail that “liberal democracy” should be singular. In fact, liberal democracy is generally understood to be a broad concept that includes some conceptual flexibility. For example, it has been noted that there are “local variations in political dynamics” and that the EU often struggles to adapt to these variations (Godfrey and Youngs 2019). As such, policy recommendations often point to including local knowledge, improving

ownership, and adapting democracy support to the local context (e.g., EPD 2019; International IDEA 2009: 61). The question, however, is how to distinguish legitimate forms of “variation” from illegitimate forms. In that regard, Richard Youngs has advocated for the adoption of a “liberalism plus framework” that proffers “a set of principles to guide the deliberation about legitimate forms of democratic variation.” Specifically, it offers five axes for exploring variations of legitimate democracy, or, in other words, five ways of “framing the right kinds of debate about democratic alternatives” (2015: 127). While I don’t seek to delve into these axes here, it suffices to say that such variation rests within the confines accountability, transparency, participation, and inclusion – essential democratic principles that more generally are believed to have become “universal” and “post-ideological” (see also Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014).

The aim for EU democracy support, then, is to better defend these universal values while at the same time being open to variation. Specifically, while EU democracy support has remained largely liberal yet “fuzzy” and vague in nature (Kurki 2015; Wetzels and Orbie 2015), it has been rather hesitant to support these universal values – thereby primarily emphasizing socioeconomic objectives, good governance, and an overall tendency not to be confrontational (Carothers 2009; Saltner 2017) – and the EU must now absolve its democracy support from all doubt. In line with Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont’s (2013) framework, it is generally believed the EU must rejuvenate its democracy support through pursuing more “political objectives” – or the “core aspects of democracy” being political and civic rights, and the guaranteeing free elections (Lexmann 2015) – yet doing so through “politically smart methods” that allow to accommodate variation, in essence improved political-economic analysis or improved cooperation with the grassroots (Menocal 2014).

Undergirding such “deliberative” way of engaging variation – and as alluded to by Youngs (2015) – lies a deliberative democratic rationale of improving democracy. According to deliberative theorists, other than the mere representation of different voices, redemocratization should emphasize the improvement and refinement of the right conditions for these voices to interact (Glover 2012; Hayward 2011). Specifically, such refinement of the democratic process rests on two guiding principles.

First, it rests on the assumption of “communicative rationality” between free and equal citizens seeking to achieve a rational consensus by means of free discussion (Habermas 1992). Indeed, rational consensus must be achieved through inclusive, impartial, coercion-free, open, and symmetrical discussions in which people learn from each other and make

decisions based on the force of a better argument. This way, it is argued, democratic decisions are right because they are supported by substantive rational arguments, not by the status of the one making the argument (Glover 2012; Kapoor 2002). In the same vein, Youngs (2015) attempts to steer the political discussion on what constitutes democracy based on the better argument. After all, in discussing non-Western conceptions of democracy, he finds either that there is no “well-defined and wholesale dichotomy” between these and Western conceptions, or that they do not provide for any legitimate or morally justifiable alternative. Also, to have a “more productive debate,” Youngs attempts to reestablish some rules of the game, which enables us to innovate and add to the core template of liberal democracy, rather than subtract from it.

Second, there must also be the assumption that despite the deep fault lines that are a permanent feature in the public culture of democracy, there is nevertheless a latent yet “homogenous general norm and value system” that is accessible to all and on which all participants should and can agree (Gutmann and Thompson 2004: 4). Indeed, deliberative democrats maintain there is always the “possibility of a grounding authority and legitimacy on some forms of public reasoning.” As such, rationality has a normative dimension, meaning that it is embedded within an “independent source and has a universal reach” (Mouffe 2000: 85–89). The same insistence on “universalism” is again rather evident in the works of Youngs (2015), as with the mainstream literature at large. Namely, as has been convincingly argued by others (Kurki 2013; Marks 2000), liberal democracy is often understood within literature to present such “homogenous norm” or “social good,” and to form the boundary of any rational debate. Indeed, even long after the “end of history” hypothesis, literature still predominantly supports a Fukuyaman argument that understands progress to develop teleologically, and of which the endpoint is liberal democracy (see also Linz and Stepan 1996; Merkel 2004).

Finally, these two rules then also set the limit of inclusion: since “mutual respect” is a cornerstone, anyone that does not adhere to such principle may be excluded. Participants in democratic debate must address each other as equals and acknowledge this status by offering reasonable, morally justifiable arguments to each other (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Moreover, since “endless conflict of competing transcendent visions of the good” must be avoided for pluralism to be reasonable (Bohman 1996: 72), any divisive issue or serious contention that undermines the basis of social cooperation must also be removed. While these divisive issues may be part of a “private” or an “ethics” sphere, they should not be part of the “public” or “normative” sphere where consensus must be established based on universal principles (Finlayson and Freyenhagen 2010).

An Anti-deliberative Approach To Revolutionizing Democracy Support

In contrast to seeing liberal democracy under threat, liberal democracy and Western intervention has itself also been seen as a threat to the global state of democracy. Indeed, while several researchers have claimed that foreign aid is in fact bad for democracy since it may contribute to empowering dictators and weakening local accountability (Moyo 2010), others have argued that liberal democracy support itself may stifle local struggles against authoritarianism. As such, in contrast to the deliberative rationale, democracy aid is seen as counterproductive and even authoritarian in nature (Koelble and Lipuma 2008; Rutazibwa 2014). International liberal democracy support (and development cooperation more generally), then, is itself part of the problem, and as such, calls have been raised for it to be abolished (Orbie and Delputte 2019; Ziai 2013).

Contrary to mainstream literature, liberal democracy is not understood to have become “post-ideological” or “post-political,” nor is it seen in terms of variation. Rather, liberal democracy is understood to be fundamentally contested. For example, due to a unique (precolonial) historical experience, the African ontological framework of democracy has been argued to be fundamentally alien to the Western framework, to the point that it may be even incompatible (Ake 1993; Bradley 2005; Osabu-Kle 2000). Indeed, in their understanding of democracy, Africans in general have been observed to hold a different assumption of “power,” “individuality,” and “the self.” Their construct of “democracy” is coextensive with “communal solidarity” rather than “individual liberty” or “choice.” Consequently, common democratic principles – such as freedom of speech, justice and equality, civility, and hierarchy – have a fundamentally different meaning (Karlström 1996; Schaffer 2000; Schatzberg 2001). These alternatives are neither expressions of “non-democracy” nor simply variations of liberal democracy. They are expressions of democracy in their own right.

Then, confronted with the fact that democracy is essentially contested, this strand of literature takes issue with the deliberative insistence on “communicative rationality,” with its exclusion of “nonrational” alternatives and with the deliberative insistence on liberal democracy as a latent yet homogenous general norm and value system more generally (Kapoor 2002: 476; Koelble and Lipuma 2008: 19). Indeed, such revolutionary or anti-deliberative account claims that universality is impossible and that reasons cannot be exchanged rationally in spaces free of power, without privileging certain positions and without hegemonic premises of what good reasons should and could be. Rather than squeezing alternate

forms of democracy into some rational straitjacket, and in line with Arturo Escobar's (1995: 215) critique on theorizing development reform, the revolutionary account understands that any theorization about non-Western or nonliberal democracy should be based on local and indigenous knowledge alone. Moreover, since these alternatives should be seen as an offensive against the dominant "system" (Koelble and Lipuma 2008; Ziai 2017), any dialogue with Western claims of democracy is then also seen as undesirable, not least because of the West's continuing history of imperialism and colonization. In other words, these scholars reject the notion that there should be deliberation between Western and non-Western conceptions in order to find some common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good.

Toward a Middle Way

Faced with the realization that the meaning of democracy has become increasingly contested, we can then observe a ticklish debate within scholarship regarding to what extent "the reform of democracy support" could be based on dialogue and deliberation in a context of pluralism. Such debate hinges on two contentious factors: (1) the legitimacy of international intervention in terms of democracy support; and (2) the universality of liberal democracy. Whereas the revolutionary account most likely deems international intervention illegitimate, and whereas it finds liberal democracy to be fundamentally contested in light of alternatives, the mainstream account takes international intervention in the defense of liberal democracy for granted, albeit opening the door to different variations of liberal democracy. In this section, I ask whether there is a middle option possible: one that more fundamentally reflects on the contested nature of democracy but also on the possibility of international solidarity.³

The Need for Deeper Reflection

While the previous accounts disagree on the insistence on defining "rationality" according to universal and liberal principles, they are nevertheless rather similar in that they both prescribe normative, predetermined, and essentialist criteria for what constitutes "the common good." Moreover, both attempt to protect such prescription of the common good by withdrawing it from the contested terrain in which it finds itself. In other words, both seek to disengage democracy from its contested nature. Yet, the result of such withdrawal and predetermined meaning is in fact depoliticizing and eliminates the possibility of legitimate dissent. After all,

Table 1: Spectrum of Reforming International Democracy Support

		Democratic pluralism?	
		contestation	variation
Western intervention?	Legitimate	???	Reform
	Illegitimate	Revolution	--

any insistence on a specific model of democracy constrains the ability to imagine alternate models that may be equally legitimate, if not more so. Indeed, it restrains and constrains the “ability to counterpromote democracy with democracy” (Gagnon 2018: 94). This becomes especially evident since such normative predefinition of what constitutes the common good does not always align with how democracy in fact is given meaning on the ground. Returning to the example of democratization in Africa, it has been noted that a local conception of democracy can never be captured by either a “Western” or a “traditional” register, but that it is always contested. Indeed, local understandings in Africa neither fully align with the universal understanding of democracy nor can be characterized as a self-conscious effort to formulate a non-Western, indigenously grounded alternative. Since “the local” is never homogenous, “democracy” is always up for debate (Karlström 2004; Vorhölter 2014).

Overcoming the Choice between Either Reform or Revolution

While much of academic literature can be put into one of the two categories above, there has, however, been a third strand of literature that has sought to break free from predetermined structures of knowledge production while also seeking to maintain the legitimacy of the international community. Most relevantly, other than calls to “decenter” EU foreign policy (Lecocq and Keukeleire 2018), there have also been attempts to theorize how the international community can embrace the contested nature of democracy rather than to steer clear of it (Bridoux 2019; Kurki 2013). For example, Milja Kurki (2013: 257) has criticized democracy support actors for not considering alternative conceptions of democracy, thereby calling on these actors to embrace “clashing sets of values and

contestation over democracy and democracy support.” In that regard, she also calls on academic scholarship to explore the (un)limits to democratic contestation in order to include “democratic alternatives in the fullest possible sense.” Indeed, a starting point, she argues, should be the “recognition of a pluralism of perspectives: that there is no one point of view from which improved policy practice can be judged” (244–263).

Yet, while this is markedly different from the two other approaches, Kurki nevertheless remains in line with the more conventional and mainstream “problem-solving” approaches, as pointed out by Jonas Wolff and Lisbeth Zimmermann (2016). Indeed, despite references to critical (political) theories (e.g., poststructuralism, postcolonial critique, or agonist democratic theory), Kurki too ascribes to the general idea that the emergence of contestation results from a legitimacy problem that can be overcome by genuine dialogue and participation. She too falls into the trap of seeing the inclusion of contestation as a normative “corrective mechanism” and a way to legitimize the existing order without, however, fundamentally considering whether this order itself is legitimate. Additionally, Kurki remains rather implicit about what she understands as good or bad contestation and what she understands to be the limits of genuine alternatives. Indeed, she seems to limit her exploration of democratic alternatives to those that she herself deems legitimate (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016).

The question, then, of “how the international democracy support can effectively and democratically deal with democratic pluralism” remains unanswered. So far, scholarship has struggled with the question of whether any claim to some kind of democracy is equally valid or legitimate, and if so, how for international democracy support to adapt. Whereas deliberative and anti-deliberative accounts each forward their normative ideal of democracy—thereby disengaging democracy from contestation—the more intermediate position embraces contestation, albeit insufficiently. As such, building on Wolff and Zimmermann (2016) and on Kurki’s (2013: 21) attempts to “radicalize” the role alternative forms of democracy within democracy support paradigm, I here advocate for literature on international democracy support to more closely engage with “radical democracy” as a theoretical framework for dealing with contestation.

Radical Democracy: The Embrace of “the Political”

Radical democracy—or agonistic pluralism—is an amalgam of different theorists who seek to take an explicitly open approach to contestation,

while at the same time providing some ideas on how contestation can be dealt with. While differences exist,⁴ agonistic democrats more generally are concerned with seeking to develop and extend democratic practices that facilitate the expression of citizens' disagreements, rather than urging citizens to set aside their moral, religious, and cultural perspectives. Indeed, rather than imposing a collective unity on a plurality of differences, it is believed democracy must situate itself around an ethic of contestability that is receptive to the claims of new actors and identities while also recognizing that there must be some, albeit minimal, restrictions placed on the form that such democratic engagement takes. Crucially, however, there is never the guarantee or even desire for final reconciliation (Glover 2012: 82).

In what follows, I will limit myself to discussing Chantal Mouffe's take on radical democracy and outline key concepts and principles that will be important for further reflection on how to improve democracy support. In doing so, I do not wish to take part in the discussion on which radical democratic lens is *better*; I do not wish to comment on which approach has more theoretical value. Rather, the selection of Mouffe is guided by the observation that Kurki has referred to her work and, more importantly, that Mouffe (2013) herself has laid out an argument against a strategy of "withdrawal from" in favor of strategy of "engagement with" contestation. Additionally, Mouffe (2018: 45–46) has explicitly sought to reflect on the distinction between what she calls a false dilemma between theorists of either "sterile reform" or "revolution." In contrast to this distinction, rather than accepting the current status quo in terms of legitimacy and hegemony or seeking a total rupture with the existing sociopolitical order (cf. *supra*), Mouffe (2013: 71) her conception of "radical reform" seeks to engage with existing institutions with the aim of bringing about a different hegemony.

Chantal Mouffe and Taming Antagonism

Central to Mouffe's theorization of a new form of politics is the necessity to break with any kind of essentialism – whether rationalism, individualism, or universalism (2005: 7; 2000: 104). Nothing ever "is" and everything could always have been different. "Everything" is always open to contestation. The question becomes how for democratic politics to embrace such contestation, rather than to steer clear from it.

According to Mouffe, all social relations will always and inescapably be conditioned by the existence of "the political," which is an ever-present distinction between an "us" versus a "them." Such contentious relationship can take the form of either agonism or antagonism: whereas

antagonism entails a friend/enemy relationship that is ineradicable and constitutive of every human identity, agonism refers to an us/them relationship where the conflicting parties see each other not as enemies but as adversaries. Adversaries acknowledge that there is no rational solution to conflict, however, without denying the legitimacy of their opponents (2005: 20). Then, within such contentious reality, the central task of “democratic politics” becomes to defuse and tame the potential antagonisms that exists in human relations through the provision of institutions that will permit conflicts to take an agonistic form (2000: 103; 2005: 19).

Yet, the problem is that the battle between the “us” and the “them” is not an equal one due to the hegemonizing tendencies inherent to such battle. Moreover, to have agonistic dispute, to even speak of democratic politics, there must first be a clear distinction between an “us” and a “them,” which may require the mobilization of collective forms of identification around democratic objectives (Mouffe 2000: 103; 2013: 9). Indeed, what is at stake, Mouffe argues, is “the construction of ‘a people’ around a project which addresses the diverse forms of subordination around issues concerning exploitation, domination or discrimination” (2018: 61). Put differently, what is required is the creation of an “us” that is bound by counter-hegemonic and emancipatory objectives. This is what makes democratic politics possible.

Specifically, Mouffe (2000, 2005) argues for such creation to be established through the operationalization of a “chain of equivalence,” which is a deliberate articulation of the demands of certain actors within “the universe” in order to construct a “common will” aimed at the creation of a new hegemony that will permit the radicalization of democracy. Crucial to such creation of an “us” is that it should be bound by what truly “affects” the people. Indeed, the act of creation needs to “resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives, it needs to start from where they are and how they feel, offering them a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation” (2018: 76). Additionally, the crucial issue is to establish such frontiers in a way that is of course compatible with pluralist democracy, meaning that the “them” should be seen not as an enemy to be destroyed but as an “adversary,” that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question (2000: 101–104).

Taking this point further, despite seeking to pluralize pluralism through expanding the register by which claims on behalf of difference can be voiced (Glover 2012: 88), radical democracy and its creation of “a people” then nevertheless requires some form of closure, or the establishment of a somewhat “oxymoronic consensus” in which adversaries agree on certain practices, discourses, and institutions. Indeed, Mouffe

acknowledges that some form of consensus is needed on the institutions that are constitutive of liberal democracy and on the ethicopolitical values – specifically liberty and equality for all – that are the basis of political association (2013: 8; 2000: 31). In turn, such closure does result in some form of exclusion. Yet, since those ethicopolitical principles can exist only through many different and contradicting interpretations, there will always be disagreement on the meaning of those values and how they should be implemented. In other words, in contrast to the deliberative democratic insistence on “a homogenous general norm and value system,” such a consensus itself is always bound to be conflictual and ever contingent (2000: 104). Additionally, in contrast to deliberative democratic insistence on “rationality,” the exclusion resulting from such consensus is always bound to be political. Indeed, contrary to disguising exclusion under the veil of rationality or morality, Mouffe argues that a radical democratic approach should acknowledge the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion that these entail (2000: 105). In other words, crucial is to be explicit about the frontiers we choose to set, and to acknowledge the political nature of such acts.

The Promise of “Radical Reformism”

Since summarizing Mouffe’s extensive theorization and years of thought into a few paragraphs obviously falls short, it is important to iterate that Mouffe’s aim has always been to reform what she calls the neoliberal or “post-political” hegemonic formation within society at large through the emancipation and invigoration of the “left.” This includes socialist and social-democratic parties, but also more broadly a series of movements that correspond to resistances against a variety of forms of domination that cannot be formulated in class terms (e.g., feminism, anti-racism, environment, etc.). In do so, she has explicitly sought to distinguish her form of democratic politics (or what she also calls “radical reformism”) from other politics, specifically “pure reformism” and “revolutionary politics.” Whereas pure reformism accepts both the principles of legitimacy and hegemonic social formation, revolutionary politics seeks a total rupture with the existing sociopolitical order. In contrast, her politics of radical reformism distinguishes between the validity of ethical political principles equality and liberty for all, and the different hegemonic ways these can be inscribed based on these principles. Namely, it accepts the principles of legitimacy but attempts a different hegemonic formation. As such, Mouffe argues, working toward crucial democratic advances does not require tabula rasa but can be carried out through a critical engagement with the existing institutions (2018: 39–57).

Radicalizing the Reform of EU Democracy Support

Whereas Mouffe primarily has envisioned her theory on a “local” scale, thereby attempting to save the project of Western social democracy in its struggle against neoliberal hegemony; whereas she has neither engaged with nor reflected on the history of Western imperialism and colonialism; and whereas her theory remains decidedly Western-focused, in that she relies on Western philosophic traditions and modernity (Conway and Singh 2011; Kapoor 2002), I here contend that her theory nevertheless helps us challenge how to think about reforming EU democracy support in important ways, different from both deliberative and anti-deliberative perspectives. First, it challenges us to realize that other than improving politics abroad, democracy support itself is part of politics, and as such, it must abide by the rules of the democratic game. Second, it challenges us to understand that the “substance” of democracy support can never be fixed but is dependent on “the conflictual consensus.” Finally, this then also challenges us to shift the emphasis on “democracy” to “support” in democracy support.

Democracy Support as Conditioned by Being an “Adversary”

A radical democratic lens challenges us to realize that EU democracy support itself is always part of a “democratic constellation,” and thus that it itself should answer to the terms of being an adversary in a given context. After all, the category of an “adversary” is what distinguishes agonism from antagonism, and thus what provides the grounds for democratic politics. Specifically, if EU democracy support is to be legitimate, it must first take an agonistic form. It must be “hospitable” toward a diversity of ideas of what constitutes democracy without taking a position of superiority (Mouffe 2013: 29–41). Also, it must refrain from further antagonizing the friend/enemy relationships with other conceptions of democracy. If not – if, for example, democratization is understood based on a superior homogenous norm or value system that is far removed from the other frames of reference – it would only cause escalation of conflict, and as such, it would place the EU outside the rules of the democratic game.

To put it differently, the condition of the adversary challenges us to first determine how the us/them relationships are configured in a recipient or target of democracy support, hence to map the contested terrain of what the ideal of democracy is perceived to be. In a second step, it challenges us to determine how the EU’s conception of democracy positions itself vis-à-vis such constellation, and specifically vis-à-vis an emerging “conflictual consensus.”

Democracy Support as Conditioned by the Conflictual Consensus

The conflictual consensus is what should provide the grounds for the substance of EU democracy support. In essence, this entails that the substance of EU democracy support should not be predetermined by what is perceived to be the “common good,” which is usually defined in normative terms. Rather, a radical democratic lens asks us to determine the substance of democracy support based on an identification of a “common public concern,” whereby “the people” themselves are agents of defining such concern. Indeed, rather than empowering “the people” in terms of acquainting them with a common or universal good (e.g., through civic education) radical democracy is empowering in that it unites and encourages “the people” to be the penholders in defining what is of concern.

This, then, allows us to potentially appreciate democracy support in a much broader sense. Other than seeing democracy support solely in terms of “political objectives,” we can start to appreciate that democracy also entails socioeconomic translations, or that it encompasses broader questions of “good life” and “justice” (Poppe and Wolff 2013). In turn, this challenges us to reassess existing evaluations of EU democracy support and reasons for it to be “rejuvenated.” Whereas EU democracy support is observed to be “developmental” (Carothers 2009; Wetzel and Orbie 2015), thereby often prioritizing socioeconomic development rather than civic and/or political rights, such an approach might in effect hold potential to “resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives.”

Democracy Support as Conditioned by an Emphasis on “Support” Rather Than “Democracy”

Finally, by allowing the people to be penholders in defining democracy, a radical democratic approach to rejuvenating democracy also challenges us to shift the emphasis in democracy support from “democracy” to “support.” Indeed, rather than losing ourselves in predefining the essential and unquestionable elements of democracy, we should look for ways the EU can help the people express what democracy ought to be. After all, if democracy is “government by the people, for the people, and of the people,” shouldn’t “the people” be the constituting factor in determining what democracy should be? Again, such emphasis on support does not entail “introducing” something new (e.g., through civic education); rather, the aim is to work with what is there and to unite these differences around common “affects.”

Yet, since “the people” is always multiple, whom should we then support? Whom to constitute the “us,” which then also influences the creation of the common concern? A radical democratic approach to democracy support challenges us to embrace the political nature of such choice. It challenges us to make explicit the underlying rationale of whom we seek to include and why, as long as such choice is also determined by an emancipatory and anti-hegemonic orientation. Such selection of the disenfranchised, then, also differs from the more mainstream account of pursuing political aid. According to Carothers (2009: 7), the central task of “political democracy aid” is to help the democrats in a country in their struggle against the nondemocrats, whereby a “democrat” is an actor perceived as such by external democracy supporters. In contrast, a radical democratic approach challenges us to support the disenfranchised in their struggle with the powerful, irrespective of universal principles of democracy, as long as they abide by the principles of equality and liberty. A “democrat” is an actor defined as such by the local reality.

Conclusion

Faced with the realization that democracy increasingly has become contested, and that democracy support struggles to engage such contestation, this article has sought to intervene in the debates on reforming EU democracy support by offering a “radical reformist” approach, as theorized by Chantal Mouffe. I have laid out the argument that this theoretical approach is more capable of embracing the plurality of contested understandings of what constitutes “democracy,” while at the same time preserving the continued relevance of existing institutions of democracy support.

In their attempts to reform EU democracy support, current literature is prevented from adequately envisioning change. After all, whereas it has dealt with the question of “contestation” and to some extent has invoked “the political” as an element of study, it has denied the political in its antagonistic dimension, and as such, it does not sufficiently succeed in capturing the “political with a capital P.” Namely, by shielding the substance of democracy from any difference, both the mainstream deliberative and the revolutionary anti-deliberative accounts have negated the existence of the political. In defining democracy based on normative and essentialist ideals, both fail to distinguish the political between “antagonism” and “agonism.” Finally, also the more intermediary approaches fail to sufficiently acknowledge the political, since they were rather implicit about what they understood to be the boundaries of contestation

(Wolff and Zimmermann 2016). Therefore, borrowing from a Mouffean understanding of radical democracy, this article has argued that what is needed in terms of rejuvenating EU democracy support is a “return of the political.” What is needed is the understanding that “difference” is omnipresent and cannot be eradicated. However, it can be democratically dealt with, as long as agonistic adversaries are able to reach a “conflictual consensus” and the boundaries to such consensus are made explicit.

In effect, such insight calls for a change in the way we think EU democracy support can be improved. Indeed, a radical democratic approach to thinking politically with a capital P challenges us to shift our emphasis: from seeing democracy support as a way to improve politics in a given context, to seeing it as being part of politics itself; and from accentuating what should be the substance of “democracy” in democracy support, to more fundamentally reflecting on the structures of “support” itself. Put differently, closer engagement with Mouffe’s radical reformism would be illuminating to the study of EU democracy support since it would lead to a more “healthy field of study,” a field that is more diverse, productive, inclusive, robust, and engaged (cf. Manners and Whitman 2016: 11). After all, the radical democratic lens contributes to subverting the temptation within current literature to either naturalize its frontiers (cf. deliberative approach) or to essentialize its identities (cf. anti-deliberative approach) (Mouffe 2000: 105). It enables us to think politically. It enables us to open up “democracy” to alternatives, thereby incorporating pluralism and contingency into its very structure, foundation, and practice. It enables us to more effectively reflect on how the international community, and thus the EU, could work toward new kinds of post-democracy support practice, whereby its substance is not an identification of higher normative value but results from of a common public concern whereby “the people” are agents of defining such concern. Finally, the radical lens also provides a new way to recognize and value the positive potential of international democracy support. It challenges us to reevaluate the claim that the EU is a depoliticized, developmental, ineffective, and technocratic actor. It challenges us to reevaluate the claim that EU democracy support should be politicized or rejuvenated. After all, since liberal democracy is no longer the point of reference – and pending on the establishment of a new “conflictual consensus” – there remains the possibility that the EU in fact already is very “political.”

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► NOTES

1. “Democracy support” is also sometimes referred to as democracy promotion, democracy assistance, or democracy aid. This article understands democracy support in its broad sense, in that it subsumes all activities engaged in by external actors that ultimately seek to encourage the development of democracy within a given country – however, without the guarantee that the outcome of a given activity actually promotes democracy (Wetzel and Orbie 2015).
2. With “mainstream academic literature,” I suggest literature that centers on arguments and approaches that are predominant within the literature. Also, it includes those voices that have been most relevant and influential to policy making.
3. For reasons of scope of argument, here I do not seek to explore an approach that understands liberal democracy to be universal yet deems international intervention illegitimate.
4. Notably, a broad distinction can be made between associative agonistic democrats (with theorists such William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, or James Tully) and dissociative agonistic democrats (including theorists such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe). For a more elaborate overview, see Glover (2012).

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