A Question of Infrademocracy:
A Conceptual Approach to the 'Radicality' of Democracy

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In Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *A Woman's Liberation* from 1995 the woman Rakam tells about her life beginning with being born a slave on a planet called Werel. At age sixteen Rakam's life drastically changes when the new owner of the farm, Erod, decides to free them all at once and fight politically for abolitionism. However, what she soon discovers as a supposedly free woman traveling to the capital and thereby also life in a big city is that inequality and different kinds of 'unfreedoms' for particularly women still persist. Because of the dangerous situation and lack of rights for former slaves on Werel, Rakam decides to leave for Yeowe, a neighboring planet in which a rebellion against the slave owners from Werel had actually succeeded and led to a wholly new government and power elite. But once again, Rakam realizes that women and different minorities are also being oppressed on Yeowe and that the fight for equal rights which she becomes actively involved with is striking similar to her previous experiences. In this sense, the core thematic of Le Guin's short story is the tension between the struggle against slavery in its most official form and, then, the resistance against a more informal 'slavery' that women have to endure in these societies whether they are slaves or not - two types of oppression that are both similar and yet radically different from each other. What I will argue in this essay is that such a tension is one of many examples to be found in both fiction and elsewhere of the internal dynamic of democratic practices. Democracy does not

http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/12243

simply mean that, for instance, people are treated as equal and free citizens instead of being submitted to different kinds of slavery. If democracy designates a real process it must also contain a dialectical tension between the aspirational space for values such as freedom and equality and, then, a set of social relations that both realizes and limits these aspirations. A dialectical tension that deserves a proper name - *infrademocracy.*

It is not exactly a new thing to posit tension and democracy next to each other. At least since Claude Lefort's characterization of democracy as a "dissolution of the markers of certainty" and Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe's notion of 'radical democracy' as a hegemonic project that recognizes the role of social antagonism in politics, a sense of constitutive instability seems to be inseparable from newer conceptions of democracy.[1] In this sense, the idea of radical democracy functions as a paradoxical notion since the etymological root to 'radical' is the Latin word *radix*, meaning 'root', which is often used to claim that radical democracy is a return to the root or origin of democratic practices - but, simultaneously, the notion implies that what lies at the basis of democracy is that it has no basis at all; that democracy is, as Jane Mummery puts it, "constitutively self-grounded and self-legitimated".[2] At least, it is clear that there is a remarkable dynamic between tradition and novelty in democratic politics, as Aletta Norval has emphasized, which can turn the question of what exactly is 'democratic' and what is not into a dizzying vertigo.[3] But for many theorists today this is also the key to what democracy entails; that democracy *is* its own self-critique, an 'autopoietic' process of internal difference that cannot be translated into a determinate program or ideal. As Jacques Derrida provocatively claims: Democracy *is* deconstruction seen from a political perspective.[4]

In this essay, I will show that this is not the only way to posit a constitutive instability in democratic practices and that the one that I will associate with the neologism 'infrademocracy' is more meaningful. Particularly, I will argue that radical democracy does not need to imply a post-foundationalist interpretation that democracy incessantly 'grounds itself' but that its radicality rather pertains to a dialectical interplay between *two distinct roots*; the system and the ideology of democracy. In this regard, I operate with a stipulation that allows us to posit an irreducible difference between these two concepts; that an ideology is not just a system of ideas and a system is not only an ideology of an ordered society. Instead, I will later characterize these as different logics or tendencies within democracy. What is 'radical' about democracy is the coincidence of both inseparability and irreducible difference between its two roots. The metaphor of two different roots is not meant as a way of fixating what democracy can be and develop into. The point is rather that what is democratic evolves in an unstable manner not because of the instability of

social life in general but due to democracy's own historical constitution. Infrademocracy is the particular tension at the core of democratic practices even though we do not necessarily perceive this from a 'superdemocratic' perspective, from the point of view of an overall framing that posits the system and ideology of democracy together as two inseparable categories. Opposite to this, the infrademocratic perspective can make us see the constant bifurcation of democratic theory into two parts–or two opposing interpretations of democracy itself such as the instrumental contra the intrinsic value of democratic practices or democracy as a political regime contra a way of life–as a symptom of the incessant 'trauma', the convulsion that democracy brings into social life.

Today, countless definitions of democracy exist alongside each other and the purpose of this essay is not to provide yet another one.[5] It is rather to give an account of why each and every definition does not seem to completely suffice in the sense that democracy cannot simply be equated with a particular political regime or a normative ideal of how politics should be organized. In this sense, my starting point is a basic agreement with those democratic theorists who posit democracy as a 'groundless' concept since what we mean by democracy cannot be fixed outside of time and place. My thesis is therefore that infrademocracy is the closest that we get to something that, nonetheless, seems to be return again and again throughout all the historical changes in what democracy is and can be. It might seem as a paradox to talk about democracy having roots and being groundless at the same time. But what if democracy' only constant is this radical and continually returning gap which is the main reason why it continues to be unstable and theoretically ungraspable? Of course, democracy cannot be dissociated from the fluent ensemble of different ideas and practices that become conceptually connected each time that we use this peculiar concept. However, it cannot either provide an ideational whole without any holes between its different elements. Infrademocracy is a conceptual proposition that democracy is a whole filled with holes; that language in this context is the symptom of a divided reality in itself.

But why 'infrademocracy'? First of all, democracy is both a severely contested and normative loaded concept which is why the use of a neologism, a tiny prefix, provides in itself a certain releasement from more fixed connotations, an openness towards new connections between descriptive and normative elements. Additionally, 'infra-' connotes two topological positions that are both relevant for this conceptual endeavor. The prefix primarily designates a thing to be 'below' something else as in the opposition between infrastructure and superstructure. In this sense, infrademocracy is both the fragile foundation and the groundlessness underneath the superdemocratic coupling between the ideology and system of democracy into

a whole. But simultaneously, 'infra-' can also denote that something is 'within', demarcating a distinction between inner and outer such as in the term infraspecifc that refers to a subdivision or a variety *within* a biological species. Even though it has become an obsolete term, the notion *infrahuman* could also be used in this manner to specify a type of life–for instance, an undeveloped foetus or a member of the extinct species Homo erectus or Homo neanderthalesis–that is below being fully human but, at least to some, not 'subhuman' since it still belongs within the family of beings that we recognize as humanity. The second topological configuration is important since I do not argue that we ought to abandon the idea of democracy altogether by splitting the concept into supposedly unconnected parts. Quite the opposite, infrademocracy must be thought of as an *internal* tension.

Infrademocracy as a concept is, thereby, not meant to directly solve any of the problems that pertain to democratic practices. It is meant to be a meaningful tool for theoretically encircling and characterizing the connections between such problems in so far as this relates to what democracy entails in the first place. Of course, democratic practices usually deal with a lot of different problems in society such as poverty, discrimination or climate change. However, infrademocracy is not about every problem that arises *within democracy* but, more specifically, *problems that relate to democracy itself.* The aim of this essay is not to show empirically how such infrademocratic problems appear in different forms and sizes but to elucidate from a theoretical perspective how this neologism provides an interpretation key to democracy and its troubles. For this purpose, I will firstly reflect upon what kind of ideology and what kind of system it is exactly that democracy entails. In this regard, it is important to note that there is probably a tension between an ideology and a system in relation to many societal practices and traditions such as capitalism, nationalism or liberalism. Regardless of this, the question in focus is what such a difference entails in a democratic setting. Thereafter, I will dive into some examples of infrademocracy by focusing upon what I call 'sticky practices' of democracy which is another way of stating that some specific points of tension seem to 'stick' or persist in the development of democracy. Finally, I will discuss whether it is possible to conceptualize democracy without any infrademocratic element which I will argue against by criticizing two different ideas - namely, that democracy can be thought as either a system without ideology or vice versa.

I. Political Paradox or Mystical Unity?

A standard definition of democracy, at least today, can be formulated in the way that, for instance, Sungmoon Kim does by characterizing it as the "collective self-government by free and equal citizens".[6] In this basic form, democracy as a

normative ideal seems to be constituted by a triad of modern values - self-government, freedom and equality. However, it is also clear that each part of this triad contains an institutional or 'systemic' dimension as well. Representation as a typical modern practice of democracy provides an example of this. The idea of so-called virtual representation advocated by Edmund Burke and others in which a societal elite represent people's supposed interests without the latter possessing any actual power does not count as a government of and by 'the self' because of a lack of this dimension[7]. In this sense, the hyphen in the word self-government points to an institutionalized connection between a subject and governing practices, an actual representation, instead of the elusive idea that subjects or 'selves' can govern virtually through others and their power. Similarly, it is clear that democracy entails a certain institutionalization of freedom and equality or, in other words, that there does not exist any substantial equality without a formal realization of, for instance, regulations on how to treat each other as equals - and exactly the same with freedom and its institutionalization.

Such a triad is, however, not set in stone since democracy is also used around the world as a signifier for governmental practices that misses or neglects one of these three components. Perhaps most famous is the idea of illiberal democracy that seems to designate a populist notion of the direct expression of the people's will through elections but without the concomitant rights that guarantee the different parts of society–and also those deemed outside of society or 'the people'–a certain freedom and equality. From a more critical perspective, one can say that illiberal democrats fetichize the idea of people's sovereignty to such a degree that all other principles can be sacrificed along the way.[8] But there also exists the opposite type of practices that in lack of better words one may designate as *democracy without self-government*. This is epitomized in the government that grants extensive rights to the population but does not, at least temporarily, give decision power to the citizens who are thereby granted an odd type of citizenship without sovereignty.[9] The Monti cabinet that was entirely composed of unelected professionals and which ruled Italy for eighteen months from 2011 till 2013 is a clear example in this regard. However, it can also be discussed whether democratic institutions of elected representatives in different countries actually realize self-government if the societal elite that has the resources to run for office is markedly different from the rest of the population. Representation necessarily entails a *split self that governs*, a people divided into voters and representatives, but democracy without self-government implies that such a split has turned into a clear-cut separation.

In other words, what counts as a so-called *real democracy* and what are rather false examples, 'imposters', of the former is a point of both contention and

confusion today. But how does all of this relate to my proposed notion of infrademocracy as a dialectical tension between the system and the ideology of democracy? An easy interpretation consists in reading the difference between democracy's ideology and system as one between a transcendent sphere of ideals and, then, an incomplete historical realization of these democratic ideals as expressed in the before-mentioned triad. In this sense, such a difference comes to resemble what Paul Ricoeur calls a *political paradox* between a normative set of ideals and the historical reality of particularly power and violence throughout human societies. In Ricoeur's terms, the persistent distance between the so-called 'form' of democracy and its 'force' through power relations entails that democracy can only ever be idealized, not realized.[10] Such an idea also resonates with common claims that the ideals of democracy are fine but that their realization in practice always goes 'too far' leading to an *excess of democracy* as the 1975 report for the Trilateral Commission in the US famously proclaimed with regard to the political crises and protests in Western countries throughout the 1960's and 70's. However, such an approach would lead to a grave misinterpretation of the tension that I propose between the system and ideology of democracy since it is not a question of whether the ideals of democracy can find a proper realization or must, at least to some degree, remain 'regulative' and unfulfilled. The system of democracy is not the realization of certain ideals but the enactment of what I will tentatively designate as a *practical idealism* that inevitably affects the more 'theoretical idealism' of democracy. In other words, idealism and normativity is distributed equally amongst both the systemic and ideological dimensions of the democratic complex.

In this sense, infrademocracy is closer related to another conceptual couple that is particularly used in Marxist discussions – namely, the one between a 'formal' and a 'substantive' kind of democracy. A crucial idea in this context is the notion of a "true democracy" that Karl Marx writes extensively about in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843). A true or substantive democracy is characterized here as the concrete content of that political constitution and particular manner of organizing society which has finally 'shedded' the abstract state-form of the republic as a political system.[11] However, even though one might think of ideology as the substantive content and democratic systems as 'abstract forms' the point about infrademocracy is that neither of these two can be posited as the inherent truth of the other. If form and substance share a certain similarity with system and ideology it is more as two far-reaching tendencies throughout social life and politics - as Hanna Pitkin writes, form and substance can be thought of as "two great moods" that makes us focus on different aspects of the same issues.[12] But contra Pitkin's claim that a focus on substance is more 'idealistic' while an emphasis on form is more 'realistic',

both ideology and system entail an orientation toward what we perceive as social reality itself but with different focal points. It is almost a philosophical myth that ideas transcend the existing world. Opposite to such a narrative, one of the reasons why democracy is filled with tension is exactly that an idea also constitutes a condensed form of reality.

Unfulfilled promises and expectations are thereby also present on both sides of the 'political paradox' that infrademocracy is. In this regard, representation as one of the hegemonic practices of the system of democracy today provide a clear example. As previously mentioned, representation enacts a split between the representatives and those being represented but it also entails an urge for systematicity in the sense of attempting to bridge the gap that has been opened through this split. Elections, accountability and publicity are all tools for maintaining the *re-presence* or fragile bond that ideally constitutes the closed system of a harmonious representation. Representation contains its own idealism of merging its two split parts into a unified presence which becomes even more powerful when representative practices are simultaneously in crisis. This is arguably one of the main reasons for the type of populism that in these days fuels the tendencies towards illiberal democracy; the urge to articulate an immediate and unifying relation between a leader or a party and the population, which bypasses the perceived gap between a societal elite of representatives and the 'common folks'. As Slavoj Žižek notes, what particularly characterizes totalitarian versions of such an immediate relation is that representation begins to work both ways in a vicious cycle: The people is now also meant to 'represent' the party or leader even in their everyday life and if someone resists this unified presence they are automatically excluded from the people as such, as being outside of the double-sided representation that constitutes the basic fabric of society.[13] In this sense, it is probably not by accident that representation has been interpreted by some theorists as a *complexio oppositorum*, a coincidence of opposites or mystical unity that can heal every division.[14] But the infrademocratic aspect of representation is not about any kind of unity but the tension between a systematic desire for harmony or 'full presence' and, then, the more separate ideas of there being a representant and someone who should be represented. And as we will see in the next section, this entails a specific understanding of ideology that is exactly more fragmented than systematic.

II. An Outstanding Ideality 'Put into System'
The claim in this article is that the system of democracy can be conceived as always slightly different than its ideology if we interpret these categories in a certain way. Returning to the triad of self-government, equality and freedom from before, one can

even say that such a triad of values displays by itself the infrademocratic tension between their systematic 'triangulation' and, then, their ideological status as more independent entities. In this sense, ideology is that which resists the full realization of democracy as a wholly coherent and enclosed system. Democracy entails that certain political ideas *stand out* in their singular presence independently of a larger whole. Ideology as a concept often refers to the very opposite of this as when we talk about ideologies as systems of political thought or as all-encompassing frameworks of both conscious and unconscious practices that, at least to some extent, determine our lives. But for our purposes, ideology can be understood through its link to the *idea as a singular entity*; ideology entails that our ideas about the world can also be characterized as disconnected, fragmented, dispersed. For an idea to stand out *as an idea* there needs to be a certain separation from the rest of the system to which it otherwise belongs. In other words, there is a minimally psychotic aspect to every ideology since no so-called 'quilting point' can knot together an ensemble of ideas into a whole.[15] On this understanding, a system is oppositely that which is knit together in the sense of being both multiple and interconnected.

So, the relation between system and ideology is definitely not one between historical practices and a transhistorical ideal. But how can we then theorize such a relation in a more meaningful manner? In Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005) two features of what Laclau calls "democratic demands" are presented which are relevant to this question. On one hand, he claims that democratic demands contain an egalitarian dimension because they are formulated to the powers that be from an 'underdog' who demands to be seen, accepted and treated as an equal party to others. But on the other hand, a democratic demand can also be characterized as a pleonasm in the sense that the adjective, to Laclau, describes what is already included in the notion of a demand; a lack of fulfilment, a "deficient being" that strives toward a state of rest in which one can say 'it is done'.[16] In this sense, democracy in Laclau's terms entails both an egalitarian content and an urge or striving towards fulfilment as a more formal structure that, in principle, can even include demands for political actions that we usually designate as inegalitarian. At the same time, Laclau also attempts to distinguish between democratic demands and *popular demands* by claiming that democratic demands remain isolated while popular demands are those that through an equivalential articulation are linked together and comes to constitute a "broader social subjectivity" (2005, 74).[17] Democratic demands imply thereby a striving towards fulfilment that is in fact characteristic of all demands, even the 'popular' ones, as well as a resistance towards any association or unification within a larger set of demands. If equality in this particular conception of democracy is the normative starting point, then a

democratic demand is one that both requires equality to be 'put into system' and thereby realized in a certain institutional setting–or, in Laclau's words, "these demands are formulated *to* the system *by* an underdog of sorts"[18]–and yet insists upon the *outstanding ideality* of equality; that equality is an independently standing idea that cannot be 'sublated' into a whole. In this sense, Laclau's theorization of democratic demands combines a systemic and ideological dimension without ignoring their difference to each other.

But what is not theorized by Laclau is the very tension that I term infrademocracy. Instead, we get an inherently split notion of democracy that *both is and is not* the same as what 'demanding' something means. That is, if democracy is an inherent element of what it entails to make demands in a social setting then the popular demands–that, according to Laclau, constitute populism since they create 'the people' as a potential historical actor–are democratic as well. In other words, there cannot be any clear separation between democratic and popular demands. But democracy also resists the 'equivalential' pull of populism, the gravitational pull of the one signifier 'the people' for all demands encircling it, by an insistence upon difference and a gap between those posing the demand and those being demanded something. A democratic demand is one that also demands to remain different from other similar demands. In Laclau's framework, democracy thereby becomes an *antipopulist 'entity' within populism itself.* To borrow a famous notion by Jacques Lacan, the democratic demand seems to display an 'extimate' quality as both being inherent to the elementary unit of populism, the demand, and yet remaining utterly foreign to the distinct process that Laclau terms as populist. However, what it exactly is that causes such a symptom of populism, what contradictory tension that destabilizes it from within, is not examined any closer by Laclau.

III. Sticky Practices of Democracy

A more promising way to approach the question of infrademocracy is to hypothesize that a thorough-going tension internal to democracy does not just present itself to us as a black hole of negativity but is 'embodied' in certain processes and objects. To the extent that particular points reoccur and persist as tension-filled lumps or knots of democratic practices it makes sense to focus upon these as what we might call *sticky practices of democracy.*[19] In the following, I will argue that common symbols of democracy such as the popular vote understood as an expression of the people's will can be interpreted as examples of these sticky practices. For instance, the idea of 'one person, one vote' functions today as a powerful symbol of democratic equality expressed through an arithmetic count that is, however, not easily compatible with the more systemic notion that democracies do not simply consist in counting

isolated individuals' wishes equally but also entails deliberation, negotiation and cooperation between different parts of society. 'One person, one vote' does not even explain *how* each vote is to be counted since decisions can be made according to several counting principles such as consensus, simply majority or partial consideration to minorities.

This does not entail that the sense of an arithmetic equality is purely ideological while the opposite idea of a geometric equality, as already Plato referred to,[20] that takes the inevitable differences between people into account is the realistic form of democratic equality; one that is, to use the same phrase again, 'put into system'. Arithmetic equality is exactly put into system every time that individual citizens' votes are weighed equally in modern elections while the notion of geometric equality is, oppositely, always built upon a certain ideology of how to equalize differences; how to treat that which is unequal in an equal manner. In this sense, the symbol of 'one person, one vote' contains rather its own contradiction between an inspiring idea and an *unavoidable systematization* of not only how to count each vote equally but also who 'counts' before the count as a person in the first place. If the established framework is the modern nation-state, the obvious problematic is the case of immigrants and voting rights. That is, when is a 'newcomer' to society a person who is also worthy of counting for having one vote? But one can also question whether this principle should apply to other groups such as children which is already suggested by proposals of so-called "demeny voting" which means that parents are allowed to cast a proxy vote on behalf of children under the minimum voting age.[21]

Another example of a sticky practice of democracy is the assembly; the dense gathering of people in one place to protest, deliberative or make decisions as part of a larger democratic practice. The most famous assembly in the history of democracy is probably the *ekklesia* in ancient Athens where approximately 6.000 citizens met on the hill Pnyx 40 times a year and made decisions by show of hands. In modern times it seems to be only the so-called *Landsgemeinde* at the subnational level in Switzerland, which has been progressively abandoned throughout the 19th and 20th century, that function in a similar way as citizen assemblies with democratic decision power. However, assemblies are still everywhere in different guises such as demonstrations, public hearings and town hall meetings. And every assembly wields some form of power simply by people assembling together and noticing each other's presence. In this sense, Judith Butler is quite right to assert that any assembly already 'speaks' as an enactment of coming together before it utters any words:

http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/12243

> The "we" voiced in language is already enacted by the gathering of bodies, their gestures and movements, their vocalizations, and their ways of acting in concert. To act in concert does not mean to act in conformity; it may be that people are moving or speaking in several different directions at once, even at cross-purposes.[22]

On this view, the unwieldy movements of moving and speaking in 'different directions at once' within the assembly can co-exist with the emergence of an acting in concert that gives rise to the sense of a commonality, *a sense of 'we'.* We can perhaps even state that the idea of a popular will that the assembly not only expresses but constitutes as such arises within the interstices between the disorder of the crowd and the organization or, again, 'systematization' of the mass. However, the reason why the assembly clearly represents a sticky practice of an infrademocratic character is that there seems to be a constant tension between, on one hand, the play between disorder and organization within the assembly and on the other hand the very ideas that the assembly is meant to both realize and express. For instance, the basic right of freedom of assembly as it described in article 20 of UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be thought as an essential precondition for a well-functioning democracy - and a right that is asserted again and again, at least to some degree, at every single assembly in modern times. However, even if a given government does all in its power to guarantee this right it also has to be protected through the assemblies themselves and their internal dynamics. As is painfully obvious in many cases, a freedom of assembly can also be threatened through the organization of the assembly itself by particularly discrimination and violence. Freedom of assembly must therefore also be *freedom in assembly*, a difficult practice of freedom through the different ways of organizing assemblies.

One historical example where assemblies have clearly had an importance is the abolitionist movement in different countries around the world. As Angela Davis emphasizes in her seminal work *Women, Race & Class* (1981), there were many intersections as well as tensions between the nascent abolitionist movement and the movement for women's suffrage in the US. In other words, there could be both cooperation and conflict at one and the same time within the assemblies organized by for instance the Equal Rights Association and Women's National Loyal League.[23] One recurring problem was that women, both white and black, found it hard getting a voice and a right to speak in those assemblies where men were the leading organizers. Only four women were invited to the 1833 founding convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society and they were all required to sit in so-called 'listener

and spectator' seats in the back. But already at this meeting and subsequent assemblies female activists such as Lucretia Mott questioned such a system of denying certain people the right to speak in different ways - often simply by audaciously addressing the male participants from these seats. In this sense, an infrademocratic dialectics were developing between shifting norms about seating orders, rights to speak and the just as much evolving ideas about what equality and political participation mean. We tend to think that the system of, for instance, rights to speak in an assembly and our idea of equality follow each other closely - but this shows that they are often slightly dyssynchronous and in an unbalanced relation to each other. For some activists in these cases, they might have had at first a clear idea of equality to which the system then 'lagged behind' but for others it was rather the system itself that changed first and only gradually began to influence their idea of equality as well.

At times it might seem that there is an almost religious quality to the idea of the democratic assembly; a unity of system and ideology as it is expressed in demonstration slogans such as 'we are the people'. In this sense, religious and political assemblies share strikingly similar features. But at the same time certain aspects of the assembly can also be designated as the opposite of unity and associated with the disorder that we prescribe to crowds and 'mobs'. Metaphorically, the assembly is *both divine and beastly.* However, it is not only because of an (un)systematic oscillation between order and disorder that the assembly can also be interpreted as a tension-filled knot of democratic practices. As with representation, another sticky practice previously mentioned, infrademocracy persists within the practices of both *assembling* and *representing* because a certain ideology is formed and renegotiated continuously through their development and (dis)order. Ideals such as freedom and equality are persistently in tension with, for instance, the way that we organize assemblies. It is probably not possible to elaborate a definite list of such sticky practices that seem to reappear in different guises but examples such as voting, assembling and representing can, nonetheless, provide easily recognizable ways of perceiving the infrademocratic tension at stake.

IV. An Elenchus -- 'Proof' of Infrademocracy

But how can we be sure that democracy necessarily implies an infrademocratic tension? In this last part of the essay, I will argue that even if we cannot perceive it directly it is possible to show the persistence of infrademocracy through a double negation; a so-called doubled 'elenchus' refuting both an idea of democracy as a *system without ideology* and, oppositely, as an *ideology without system.* In this regard, I am inspired by Étienne Balibar's similar refutation of the idea that equality

and liberty can exist separately through the double negation that there can be no liberty without equality and vice versa.[24] The point is, namely, not that equality and liberty are thereby 'two sides of the same coin', that they offer us two perspectives on the same ideal, but that they can be conceptualized as inseparable despite their irreducible difference and tension. In other words, it is possible to elucidate the existence of an infrademocratic tension internal to democracy by showing that practices which tend to suppress or even obliterate this dimension lose their very democratic character and instead become a system without ideology or vice versa.

So, let us begin with the notion of democracy as a system without ideology. In Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (1960), Canetti draws a famous comparison between warring parties and the opposing parts of a parliamentary assembly. The core idea is that just as wars are decided by a measurement of strength of the respective armies in battle, a political struggle in parliament is decided by a measurement of *strength in numbers*; instead of killing each other one settles the accounts by referring to the shifting but yet constant difference between majority and minority.[25] In this sense, such an interpretation of parliamentary politics as a war with other means seems to frame democracy as nothing more than a numerically based system used for many purposes. If democracy is only based upon majoritarianism it cannot surprise anyone that democratic majorities abolish such a system at times if another autocratic system seems more suitable. As Wendy Brown starkly puts it, "to have one's way in democracy, which is the very meaning of majority rule, is thus to risk killing democracy".[26] In other words, there must be an idea of why majority rule can be justified in order for any parliamentary practice to *acquire a sense of purpose* and thereby become a proper democracy. In both Canetti's thought and similar notions of agonistic democracy such an idea is to be found in the pacifist thought that the structural role of an established mode of recognizing one's political opponents as adversaries and not deadly enemies provides a more peaceful and better way of dealing with human conflicts. However, my claim is that there is no democracy at all without this very recognition; that we can in principle participate in majority rule without being democratic at all which is why it does make sense to characterize certain individuals, groups or parties as *antidemocratic within democracy itself* - or, oppositely, that there can be democratic resistance within a parliamentary practice that is otherwise undemocratic by, for instance, being a rubber stamp for decisions taken elsewhere.

Perhaps the most influential proponent of agonistic democracy today is Chantal Mouffe. To her, it is crucial to the very survival of democracy as a political space that we recognize "the potential antagonism inherent in social relations" so that we can

'transform' antagonism into agonism - into a set of democratic institutions that, so to speak, tame social conflicts without denying their existence.[27] In this sense, democracy is also not simply a 'neutral' system but is infused with a *pacifist impulse*. The underlying reason why Mouffe is so adamant in her criticism of 'post-politics' and what she perceives as a replacement of democracy itself by morality and law is not so much that such a suppression of conflict through an all-embracing consensus is undesirable but that it is unrealistic. It ignores "the primary reality of strife in social life" and therefore functions as a lid on a situation that will inevitably explode due to the lack of release.[28] But even though Mouffe's radical democratic thought at least operates with this idea about handling antagonism in social life as peacefully as possible the ideological part of such a conception of democracy seems very sparse. In both *The Democratic Paradox* (2005) and *Agonistics* (2013) Mouffe mentions that democracy privileges equality and popular sovereignty so she does not reduce democracy to a mere system put in place to tame social conflicts. However, the rich tradition of both theory and practice that engages with the before-mentioned triad of equality, freedom and self-government is not clearly connected to Mouffe's notion of agonism. In an article by Mouffe from 2005 with the correct title *For an agonistic public sphere*, the title within the anthology it appears in is at several places misspelled as "For an agnostic public sphere". Even though it was probably not Mouffe herself who misspelled her own title, such a 'Freudian slip' seems nevertheless appropriate with regard to the connection between agonism and democracy in her thought. Because is it not as if Mouffe insists on remaining 'agnostic' on core issues such as whether an agonistic politics necessarily implies a certain egalitarianism? At least, conceptions of agonistic democracy such as the one Mouffe presents tend towards a more systemic approach. If there is a core idea in agonistic thought it is simply the *taming of conflict* with institutional means.

In this regard, it is also possible to interpret democracy as a set of procedures or institutions to which many different ideologies can be attached. In this sense, there is not only liberal and illiberal democracies but also capitalist and socialist or nationalist and cosmopolitan democracies. But this thought still presupposes that any indefinite set of ideologies constitute a number of *contingent attachments* to the core of democracy that is its distinct way of structuring or 'systematizing' society. However, if a certain ideology is also seen as an independent root of democracy it has to be granted that some democracies are more democratic than others even if we cannot settle the question of an hierarchization of more and less democratic systems in advance. Such a perspective does not entail that every democratic practice is connected to an eternal 'Idea' of democracy with a capital I. But it is, nonetheless, possible to practice a certain stringency and responsibility with regard

to democratic ideas, which differ from political systems that are entangled within a more diffuse set of ideologies. To stay within the tension of infrademocracy demands responsibility.

The other extreme way of conceptualizing democracy is as an ideology without system. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote famously in *The Social Contract* that in the strict sense there cannot be a democracy amongst men; that it would constitute a coincidence between sovereign and government in one people that cannot be established due to the limitations of mankind. Government and sovereignty can only be one in *a city of gods*, as Rousseau puts it.[29] In this sense, the systematic split between sovereignty and government, between making laws and implementing laws, in Rousseau's thought seems to be in an unavoidable opposition to the idea of societal unity, the people governing itself, that democracy is thought to define. As a transcendent ideal democracy can by definition not exist on the very earth that we inhabit. In this regard, Rousseau's conception of democracy as a unity between sovereignty and government is a peculiar one that has confused quite a few readers. But what is easily recognizable is the way that Rousseau 'transcendalizes' democracy into a normative ideal that does not exist, at least fully, in any real political system. But in this way the sense that democracy also develops through a set of concrete practices such as elections or public spheres seems to vanish altogether.

However, it is also possible to posit democracy as a certain idea or principle without thereby claiming that it does not belong to this world. For instance, Jacques Rancière has also claimed that we do not live in democracies but hierarchic oligarchies since the functioning of societal institutions is, at least today, organized by a thoroughgoing inequality. But at the same time, Rancière designates democracy as a persistent 'supplement' to politics that provides the only ground for the existence of any political community - "the democratic supplement is that which makes politics as such".[30] Democracy is the anarchical principle of equality that provides a sense of the rights of the 'demos' as that large group which has no particular and socially differentiated qualification to rule; that there is, ultimately, no reason why some persons should rule over others from the perspective of the demos. In this sense, the democratic supplement both legitimizes and delegitimizes the existing political system since it not only questions its hierarchies but also provides an articulated principle that one can refer to. Even if politicians unavoidably exercise power on the basis of inequality they can, at least, legitimize themselves by claiming to rule on behalf of the demos or to be responsive towards the political power of the people itself.

So, in this sense democracy as a principle or 'ideology' of equality does not need to be fully separated from the workings of power and government. With regard to infrademocracy, Rancière posits a clear tension between the democratic supplement and state institutions or the practice of power in general. But democracy resides on this account wholly on one side of such a tension and not within the problematic difference between ideology and system itself. To state that democracy provides, according to Rancière, the 'ground' or condition of politics in even its most oligarchic and thereby undemocratic manifestations does not resolve the problem of how to understand and handle this crucial tension. Additionally, as with the case of conceptualizing democracy as a system without ideology the range of different political systems that exist can, to Rancière, only play the role of being contingent attachments - dangerous outgrowths on the plant of equality. But what if democracy is both an anarchical principle as an idea of equality *and* a system that relates to such a principle in manner that is not 'nonanarchic' but, to some extent, ordered and socially differentiated? Why should we dispense with the notion that, for instance, certain institutions are more democratic than others for a pure idea of democracy that only consists in the inner disruption of societal orders?

V. Conclusion

I cannot go into a longer discussion of Jacques Rancière's work that contains many different characterizations and analyses of democracy in its different forms. The underlying point is only that we can refer to theorists such as Rancière for a critical discussion of the widespread notion that democracy is not a particular system. In the space of this article, I also cannot fully develop the elenchus-'proof' that in democracy there is no system without ideology and vice versa. However, the concept of infrademocracy does not depend entirely on such a proof since its relevance can also be shown through its role as an interpretation key to sticky practices such as representation and voting. Infrademocracy is not a specific 'thing' in democracy but a certain perspective on the tension within democratic practices. The concept of infrademocracy is therefore also relevant because it bypasses the false choice between a 'realist' and an 'idealist' interpretation of democracy - an interpretation of democracy as either a practical system or an unrealizable ideal. Most democratic theorists today do not either ascribe to such a choice but, yet, it seems as if democratic thought is often haunted by the dichotomy that this forces upon us. In this regard, infrademocracy is a conceptual solution that reinterprets democracy as not being a ready-made package to be picked on a shelf of either different political systems or ideologies. Infrademocracy entails instead an

interpretation of democracy as a social problematic that keeps returning to us and continuously needs to be confronted, handled and questioned once again.

One might respond that the world seems to be full of tensions, big and small ones; that a claim about democracy being tension-full does not say much more than vague but wide-spread proclamations about social life being inherently contingent, open or changeable. In this sense, there is a clear risk that democratic theory becomes what Lois McNay has called a *socially weightless thinking* - one that does not address the specific characteristics and problems of its supposed field of study.[31] However, this is exactly what the concept of infrademocracy is meant to address so that the idea of democracy's constitutive instability cannot simply be reduced to a more general claim in social or political ontology. If democracy is to be designated as 'radical' it must be so in its own way. It follows definitely from an inspiring ambition about what democracy can do when a political theorist such as Oliver Marchart characterizes democracy as a "political regime in which the ultimately ungroundable nature of every political claim is ethically accepted and socially instituted".[32] But the notion of democracy being politics' confrontation with its own 'groundlessness' belies the fact that democracy is so much more; and sometimes *too much at once* in the sense that, for instance, its values do not fit neatly together with its institutions. Infrademocracy can be related to broader tension-filled issues and practices in social life such as the persistent division, or perhaps dialectic, between theory (ideals, symbols, identities etc.) and practice (institutions, bodies, material processes etc.) - but it is still a distinct gap between an ideological 'tradition' of principles such as freedom, equality and self-determination and, then, a systemic 'tradition' of institutionalized practices such as representation, voting and popular assemblies. In this regard, the important question is not how to get rid of infrademocracy so that a harmonious type of democracy can emerge but rather how we can become more aware of and handle such an internal tension whether the starting point for doing so is a local resident's board or politics on a global scale.

In line with for instance postcolonial and feminist literature on the shortcomings of modern democracy, Étienne Balibar has advocated what he calls to *democratize democracy* such as to reinvent citizenship as a crucial part of any democratic practice.[33] At first glance, the expression seems to indicate that democracy today is a 'frozen' system that needs to be reinfused with the ideals that any real democracy should ascribe to and realize. In this sense, democracy has become a *postpolitical automaton* that requires an injection of idealism to come alive again. However, Balibar emphasizes that democratizing democracy is also about revitalizing democratic thought itself and thereby also questioning once again the very ideals that we might at times take for granted. Seen in this light, to

'democratize democracy' is a self-reflective process of both a systemic and ideological character – and one that must entail a question of infrademocracy.

Notes

1 Lefort 1988, p. 19; Laclau and Mouffe 2013

2 Mummery 2016, p. 3

3 Norval 2007, p. 12

4 Derrida 1997, p. 105

5 Dahrendorf 2003; Storm 2008

6 Kim 2008, p. 4

7 Pitkin 1967, p. 173

8 Thorup 2020, p. 26

9 Additionally, a democracy can also become embedded within such a powerful and hegemonic ideology that it must be designated as what Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala has called a *framed democracy.* According to Vattimo and Zabala, in such a democracy every debate is framed 'metaphysically' through am imposed "politics of descriptions" that ensures the continued existence of a certain domination and a divided society (2011, p. 12). In this sense, 'being framed' means in such a context that you are derived of substantive self-government.

10 Ricoeur 1991, p. 324

11 Marx 1970

12 Pitkin 1967, p. 228

13 Žižek 2008, p. 164

14 Pitkin 1967, p. 9

15 As already mentioned, this might seem as a counter-intuitive notion directly opposite to the common interpretation that ideology is a 'logical' arrangement or organization of different ideas. However, it does not entail that ideology becomes 'alogical' by it being internally disconnected. One can rather say that the logic in this case follows a more analytical than synthetical reason, separating ideas from each other and fixating upon each idea in its singularity rather than uniting them into a larger whole – a logic of 'ensembles' or loose constellations.

16 Laclau 2005, pp. 125-128

17 Laclau 2005, p. 74

18 Laclau 2005, p. 125

19 The term is partly inspired by Sara Ahmed's notion of *sticky objects* that stick to us because they are saturated with ambiguous emotions and are "sites of personal and social tension" (2014, p. 11). However, the point about these sticky practices is not so much that they stick to us emotionally (even though they may also do so) but that they 'insist' on being connected to what we associate with democracy even when we can imagine different forms of democracy without them. Being sticky is exactly an in-between state, neither inseparability nor its opposite.

20 Plato 2012, p. 335

21 Szczepański 2017

22 Bulter 2015, p. 156

23 Davis 1983

24 Balibar 1994, p. 47

[25] Canetti 1978, p. 189

[26] Brown 2009

[27] Mouffe 2005, p. 126

[28] Mouffe 2005, p. 125

[29] Rousseau 2007, p. 67

[30] Rancière 2009, p. 278

[31] McNay 2014

[32] Paipais, Mihai and Thaler 2017, p. 513

[33] Balibar 2015

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