

Call for Abstracts

Capitalism – Democracy – Emancipation

Encounters Between Critical Theory and Radical Democratic Theory

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Department of Political Science, University of Vienna I ViDSS International Workshop

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According to Karl Marx (1981), democracy is the “resolved riddle of all constitutions”. However, it poses countless further riddles. Today, democracy is often framed as being synonymous with liberal democracy in Western capitalist societies. Although liberal-democratic constitutions declare that power emanates from the people, key political decisions are made based on the principles of profit maximization. How does the principle of popular sovereignty relate to the economic constitution of Western liberal societies? Can political equality and freedom exist in an order characterized by social and economic inequality? Is democracy merely a facade of bourgeois rule, or does it offer the possibility of liberation from it?

These questions point to a tension between democracy and capitalism. In contemporary debates within Critical Theory, capitalism and the associated questions of labor and social justice are central to the analysis. For instance, Nancy Fraser understands capitalism as inherently crisis-prone, as it constantly undermines its natural, social, and political conditions. She also proposes interpreting the struggles of social movements (anti-racist, ecological, feminist) as “labor struggles” (Fraser, 2022). Axel Honneth speaks of the “working sovereign”, attempting to rethink the connection between democratic self-determination and the organization of labor (Honneth, 2023). Rahel Jaeggi interprets the current democratic regression as society's inability to solve its contradictions (Jaeggi, 2023). Critical Theory highlights the dimension of domination within liberal democracy and shifts the focus to labor, exploitation, and alienation. While this perspective has a strong critical dimension, its view of the emancipatory potential of the principle of popular sovereignty and democratic agency is less pronounced. This raises questions: What understanding of democracy underpins Critical Theory? What perspectives on democratic emancipation are enabled or hindered?

Radical Democratic Theory, on the other hand, is dedicated to reviving and radicalizing the democratic principles of freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty in response to their liberal limitations and neoliberal erosion (e.g., Brown, 2015; Butler 2015; Laclau/Mouffe, 2000; Mouffe, 2007). These approaches understand democracy as a radically open, contingent and conflictual process. While Chantal Mouffe proposes the idea of a “left populism” (Mouffe, 2018) as a means of radical democratization, Jacques Rancière rejects any conception of democracy as a form of “regime” (Rancière, 2019). Unlike Critical Theory, Radical Democratic Theory explicitly distances itself from a Marxist perspective on democracy as an ideology of bourgeois rule. Rather, its strategy reclaims concepts and subversively reinterprets their meanings to reveal the contingency of political structures and challenge their assumed necessity. From the perspective of Critical Theory, however, this emphatic understanding of democracy and emancipation risks ignoring the

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entrenched inequalities within liberal democracy. This gives rise to the following questions: What is the relationship between liberal democracy (theory) and radical democracy (theory)? Can Radical Democratic Theory critically interrogate capitalist relations of exploitation and subjugation without falling into “normativity justification traps” (Flügel-Martinsen, 2016)? On the contrary, what might be neglected when placing too much emphasis on “the political” and less on “the economic”?

Despite the differences, both schools of thought share a stance of critique towards society and a desire to change the status quo. The conference seeks to explore connections between these discourses. We welcome contributions that engage with the following questions or further develop them:

- What role do capitalist labor relations play in shaping the principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, and popular sovereignty? To what extent do economic structures and the concentration of power undermine the political equality that democracy presupposes? What is the relationship between economy and politics?
- How are liberal democracy and capitalism historically and ideologically intertwined? What is the connection between primitive accumulation, the emergence of liberal democracy, and contemporary social inequality? How can the production of inequality be analyzed from feminist, anti-racist, and ecological perspectives, and what role does the category of labor play in this context?
- What strategies are necessary to overcome the fragmentation of social movements and build collective counter-hegemonic power? What role do prefigurative practices play in mobilizing against capitalist power structures? What role does the significant “capitalism” play in these struggles? How can democracy be lived, defended, and transformed in a capitalist society, and what role do social movements, protests, and populist strategies play in reproducing or transforming existing conditions? What are counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist institutions, and how can they be built?
- What differences and commonalities can be identified between Radical Democratic Theory and Critical Theory regarding the relationship between capitalism and democracy? To what extent can Critical Theory enrich and further develop Radical Democratic Theory, and vice versa? How should we conceive the relationship between theory and praxis? Should political theory define and represent “the oppressed” and “the oppressing structures” – or avoid doing so? How can theory remain critical despite its integration into capitalist labor relations?

Please submit your abstract (maximum 250 words) for a 15-20 minute presentation and a short biography **by January 20, 2026**, either via our [homepage](https://www.univie.ac.at/homepage) or via email to valerie.scheibenpflug@univie.ac.at and julia.werthmann@univie.ac.at.

In solidarity,

Julia Werthmann & Valerie Scheibenpflug

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