

REVIEW

Debate rather than Dialogue

Chantal Mouffe 2005. *On the Political*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

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Instead of trying to design the institutions which, through supposedly 'impartial' procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted. (3)

The case for agonistic pluralism, put forward in the introduction of Chantal Mouffe's new book *On the Political*, is the conclusion she draws from her analysis of the "post-political" world. She is concerned about a *zeitgeist*, which rejects acknowledging the conflictuality constitutive of "the political". It promises to transcend the antagonism of left and right and understands politics as a set of technical moves and neutral procedures. It celebrates the globalization of capitalist economy and the universalization of liberal democracy as bringing progress for all people worldwide. For Mouffe, this longing for a universal democratic consensus and a cosmopolitan world order ignores power relations and leads to violent or moralistic answers to social conflicts, which are no longer understood or tackled as political.

The rise of right wing populism, of terrorism, and any kind of

fundamentalist politics has to be understood as an effect of this development. If there are no democratic channels to express political antagonism, if the political struggle between “right and left” is transformed into a moralistic struggle between “right and wrong”, this invites violent and anti-democratic practices. In order to counter this Mouffe suggests three measures: strengthening political antagonisms, translating them into agonistic struggles, and creating political institutions for working on these conflicts.

In the little book with the “big” title, Mouffe develops her central argument from various perspectives: After some theoretical considerations on “the political” she outlines her critique of consensual or dialogic liberal politics, of limited reactions towards right-wing populism, and of the absolutistic moments of cosmopolitan universalism. The book is an intervention into a theoretical debate on liberalism or liberal pluralism, but at the same time makes a political argument of practical importance for political agency. It is written in a mode that is accessible to people not familiar with her work or with academic political theory, but it also gives a good idea of the development of her thinking after *The Return of the Political* (1993) and *The Democratic Paradox* (2000).

The transformation of antagonism into agonism

In the beginning Mouffe lays out the basics of her argument: She works on the premise that the political is a field of power and antagonisms, a field, where decisions between conflicting alternatives have to be taken, and neither truth nor necessity will legitimate them: “Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives” (10). Hegemony is the sedimentation of power relations, which results from these decisions. Since it has to be understood as provisional and contingent, there is always a possibility of counter-hegemonic contestation, an “ever present possibility of antagonism” (17), which characterizes the political.

For Mouffe, antagonism always takes the form of a we/they discrimination, it requires identification and leads to the formation of collective identities. The democratic challenge is to transform an antagonistic relation into an agonistic one, which respects the political opponent as an adversary rather than trying to eliminate him as an enemy: “agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties,

although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are ‘adversaries’ not enemies.” (20).

Mouffe highlights the necessity to provide democratic channels for the expression of political conflicts; particularly, since, as Mouffe insists, there is passion in politics. While her liberal colleagues, who believe in deliberation or universal rational consensus, try to understand conflicts by looking at interests and values, Mouffe emphasizes the affective moment in politics. It is people’s desires and fantasies, which fuel identification and the formation of collective identities. How can they be directed into democratic practices, rather than left to the mobilization by the populist right?

The traps of a consensual model

Mouffe contours her argument by contrasting it with the approaches of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, both advocates of the “Third Way”: beyond left and right, respectively social-democratic politics which would agree on the assumption that there is no alternative to market capitalism – with its resulting option for “choice” rather than “equality” (62). Mouffe shows a certain fascination with their analysis of reflexive modernity, which dismisses collective political identities as not appropriate to the processes of individualization, and poses the question whether we need new forms of politics affirming the individual as a political agent. But in the end she draws a clear cut frontier between her “radical” and their “dialogical” democracy: “The fundamental difference between the ‘dialogical’ and the ‘agonistic’ perspectives is that the aim of the latter is a profound transformation of the existing power relations and the establishment of a new hegemony.” (52).

Her main points of critique are that Beck and Giddens foreclose political contestation by pretending to eliminate the agonistic dimension of the political (48), and that they ignore power relations and distributional conflicts (50). By accepting the view that there is no alternative to market capitalism, both authors simply avoid thematizing systematic problems of inequality and power. Moreover, their model of dialogical dissent in fact still relies on an “opponent”, in this case figured as “the traditionalist” or “the fundamentalist” (49). Triumphantly, Mouffe points to the return of an antagonism and underlines that these figures are not seen as adversaries to be fought

against, but as enemies to be excluded from democratic discourse. This kind of unrecognized antagonism, which for Mouffe is typical of the post-political era, runs the risk of provoking moralistic or violent answers. If we want to act politically, Mouffe concludes, we need a vibrant agonistic debate rather than a pacified dialogue (56).

Otherwise one would not be able to deal with “the explosion of a multiplicity of new antagonisms” (64) and the attraction of right wing populism, which successfully appeals to collective identities. Mouffe criticizes the incapability of the main political parties and their consensual strivings to answer the nationalist and racist discourses and practices of right-wing populism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. Particularly, the turn towards moralistic discourses provides a poor alternative to political contestation. The moral condemnations issued by “the good democrats” are reactions to racism, which are more concerned with stabilizing one’s own identity than with convincing the racists that they would like to act as adversaries rather than enemies. The question is, if one could convince them to accept a limit to their practices, namely that one “does not destroy the political association” (20). In fact, Mouffe’s model takes the risk of arguing about different interpretations of the notions of “political association” and “destruction” (121).

A multipolar world of conflicting hegemonies

Mouffe extends this critique of consensual universalism and moralistic discourses to the international sphere and explains her scepticism towards cosmopolitan visions.

To believe in the possibility of a cosmopolitan democracy with cosmopolitan citizens with the same rights and obligations, a constituency that would coincide with ‘humanity’ is a dangerous illusion. If such a project was ever realized, it could only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that would have been able to impose its conception of the world on the entire planet and which, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its ‘rational’ leadership. (106f.)

Mouffe can show, that even Negri/Hart’s concept of “Empire” in the end follows a cosmopolitan logic and supports an anti-political stance of an absolute democracy of the multitude (107f.). Rather than

striving for a unipolar world Mouffe proposes fostering a multipolar world, consisting of competing and possibly contradictory hegemones. This is most interesting, because in doing this she therefore acknowledges a heterogeneity of conflicting alternatives at a global level, but at a smaller political scale she always conceptualizes the agonism in the binary; preferably understood as an opposition of left and right.

Either/or, we/they - the unnecessary limitation of Mouffe's adversarial project

I find Mouffe's insistence on the conflictuality of the political and the necessity to develop democratic forms of contestation most intriguing. It is a model that takes power relations and the unequal conditions of political struggles seriously, while at the same time keeping the future open for unforeseeable challenges of provisional hegemonic fixations. What is unconvincing to me is her adherence to binary constructions of identity (we/they) and political conflicts (either/or) - and even less, why this duality has to be termed as left versus right.

Even concerning the question of redistribution it does not make sense to formulate the political antagonism in terms of left and right, since there are right-wing positions that fight for "downward" redistributions (serving the many) as well as some left positions that support the neoliberal strive for "upward" redistribution (serving a few). With the question of freedom and individual liberties it becomes more difficult: What would be a "left" and what would be a "right" position, if by now the individual is a highly valued entity throughout the political spectrum and all sides celebrate its rights, its choices and its self-reliance? Or, what would be a "left" and what would be a "right" position in the field of queer politics, with its struggle against the heteronormative structuring of social institutions such as family, medical system and asylum politics?

Indeed, in *On the Political* it is not clear what makes a conflict a political conflict, what these conflicts are about, and following this, what kind of institutions and procedures would allow for conflictual practices, contestations and agonistic pluralism. Here it might be helpful to return to Mouffe's earlier book *The Democratic Paradox*, which explains that political conflicts belong to two different fields: conflicts about distribution, following the logic of equality, and con-

flicts about individual right, following the logic of liberty. The democratic paradox consists in the fact that democratic societies strive for a form that satisfies both logics, equality and liberty, even while these principles are always necessarily in tension: Equality needs to restrict freedom, while freedom subverts equality. It seems as if in *On the Political* Mouffe does not consider the possibility that political actors might – consciously or unconsciously – act from within this tension, accepting the fact that they will not be able to escape it and that there will not be a stable political identity.

Multiple Identifications and a variety of political alternatives

The question is, whether “politics always consists in creation of a ‘we’ versus a ‘they’ and ... requires the creation of collective identities” (70). Or, can we imagine other kinds of conflictual confrontations and agonistic politics, e.g., organized around an aim, a position, a personal rather than a collective identity, or no identity at all, but a set of practices and variable identifications? Even if we accept the political relevance of people’s wishes and fantasies, which I would support, identification does not always mean identification with a collective identity. Apart from that, Mouffe’s account suggests a too clear-cut differentiation between a political identity and other kinds of identities: “The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values. ...one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification.” (30). While I find her scepticism towards moralistic discourses convincing, her concept of identities, at least in *On the Political*, seems to overlook the complexity of late modern identities, constituted by intersecting and often contradictory power relations. Thinking about the political, one should consider that by now many people understand their social identities of being a woman, a lesbian, a Black person as constructed identities: provisional, strategic and fragmented.

To me, this refers to a conceptual problem, namely a simplified understanding of the “constitutive outside”. The “constitutive outside” does not, as Mouffe suggests, name the other term of an opposition: “they” the outside of “we” and vice versa (15f.), but is the unspoken “rest” that constitutes the binary opposition as such: that, which cannot be named if we paint the political field in an opposition

of we/they. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau/Mouffe 1985) or *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), we find a more complicated version of the constitutive outside: “the possibility/impossibility of positivity as such” (2000, 12). The process of identification, which constitutes a collective identity, is seen as a phantasmatic process, which relies on the “empty signifier” that in the end subverts any reference to positive attributes. If one takes this as a process also complicating any supposed opposition, a new question comes up: How can the unnameable be recognized as a political force, without being reified or subsumed to the binary? This, I would like to argue, would be the more radical challenge than the embrace of “the basic liberal democratic framework” (122), which Mouffe enacts in her conclusion, where she sees the need to justify the exclusion of “illegitimate” demands without considering who may claim the power to define and impose these dividing lines.

Instead of mellowing her approach I would have appreciated its radicalization: Why not strengthen the idea of a conflictual political and of agonistic contestations by acknowledging a variety of political alternatives in conflict: contingent decision not between two, but maybe three or four or five alternatives? Multiple identifications of one person – as a woman, as a lesbian, as a migrant, as a worker – might propel different and maybe contradictory preferences concerning political decisions. “As long as a single hegemonic power exists, it will always be the one that decides if it will take into consideration the opinion of other nations or act alone. A real multilateralism requires the existence of a plurality of centers of decision and some sort of equilibrium – even if it is only a relative one – among various power.” (116). “A plurality of centers” and “various powers” – why not take this vision of the heterogeneity of hegemonies (here meant for the global world order) as applying also to smaller political entities, nation states for example, or educational institutions, or even kinship relations? This would then foster agonistic pluralism while at the same time challenging the logic of either/or in favour of the complexity of political contradictions.