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INTERVIEW

Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism: an interview with Chantal Mouffe

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In this interview, Chantal Mouffe discusses her theoretical endeavour since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; the theory of politics via the combined critique of Marxism and liberalism; Carl Schmitt and the formulation of an agonistic politics; as well as the limits of pluralism and the necessity of exclusion.

Keywords: agonism; Carl Schmitt; conflictual consensus; democracy; pluralism; politics; the political

Assessing the theoretical–political endeavour

ADH & AS: What would you regard as the main task of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), and do you think this task has been successfully achieved?

CM: With *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* our aim was to make an intervention at two different levels, political and theoretical, respectively. Our original motivation was to respond to the crisis of the Left, in both its Marxist and social democratic versions, and to redefine the socialist project.

The main problem with both the social democratic and the Marxist Left was that they did not know how to deal with the new social movements, that is, the demands which were not formulated in terms of class. That, of course, was true for the Marxists but also for the Social Democrats, for whom the Left was the expression of the interests of the workers. We wanted to reformulate the socialist project so that it would be able to take up the demands of the new social movements that emerged around 1968. That was the political part.

But of course, this was also a theoretical challenge. It was necessary to theoretically grasp the nature of those demands. This is why our main criticisms of Marxism centred on class reductionism and economic determinism, which see class and the economy as a privileged ‘base’ for identity and politics, respectively. In this perspective, the new social movements were seen as merely part of the ‘superstructure’ and as such were seen as being secondary. For instance, the Left parties were saying, yes, of course, the demands of women are important, but all those forms of subordination are a consequence of the capitalist system, so join our fight, once we get rid of capitalism, things will be okay for women!

Now, of course, women’s subordination is also articulated to capitalism, but capitalism is not its original cause. So we needed to develop a separate theoretical understanding of

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such a form of subordination. We felt that post-structuralism and the critique of essentialism, where identities are never given but always constructed, were absolutely central in order to understand the specificity of those demands. In the book we insisted on the existence of different subject positions: you are a worker, but you are also white and you are also a man. Identities are much more complicated and are never given by the position in the relations of production or, for that matter, in gender. Indeed, next to class reductionism, there also exists a form of sex reductionism, where women necessarily have a certain type of consciousness and men another. This we rejected.

Instead, we argued that in order to understand the possibility of politics we needed to see how those identities were constructed and therefore how they could be transformed. We felt that post-structuralism was absolutely central to such an understanding.

The other main theoretical point of reference in the book is Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. But contrary to what some people believe, we have never argued that you could deduce a political project directly from post-structuralism. Indeed, once you understand how identities are constructed and hegemony is established, there is nothing preventing the Right from using this understanding. As a matter of fact, the Right usually understands this better than the Left!

As I indicated, our aim was to contribute to the reformulation of the Left project. This is why the book ends with the claim that the socialist project should be redefined in terms of radical democracy. The objective of radical politics was the creation of a chain of equivalence between *all* the democratic struggles, class-based or not.

ADH & AS: When you look back now, what would you say have been the most lasting effects of the book on the broader Left discourse and the political and academic debates that have occurred there?

CM: As you probably know, the reaction of the Marxists was very negative. For example, we were vilified by Norman Geras (1987), Ellen Meiskins Wood (1998), and others. Most of the things that we were saying at that moment were indeed very controversial, but this is not the case anymore. In terms of influence, I feel that some interpretations of the book were problematic. On the one hand, the book contributed to a wider acceptance of the critique of essentialism and the specificity of the new social movements and the need to rethink the Left project in terms of radical democracy. At this level the book was important and influential. But, on the other hand, there were also some interpretations of the book that ended up putting exclusive emphasis on the social movements. While the traditional Left had only been thinking in terms of workers' struggle, some people went to the other extreme, abandoning the workers' struggle and claiming that the Left should be defined only in terms of social movements. This was particularly the case in the USA. This has led to the criticism that we were not considering the demands of the working class. But this criticism is based on a misinterpretation. What we were questioning was the ontological privilege of the working class and the necessity of its vanguard role. We never said those struggles were not important. This was a wrong reading of the book. The book was very clear on this issue: the aim was to articulate the struggles of the working class with those of the new social movements. We never said that workers are not important.

ADH & AS: How would you say the book has been received more broadly, outside the Marxist constituency? Were there reactions that surprised you?

CM: I think the book was very well received and it caused a very important debate, which has not stopped.

A reaction that has surprised me is the accusation of idealism because of our insistence on discourse. We have been repeating for more than twenty years now that we do not understand discourse as pure speech. Discourse is *also* material. For instance, when Wittgenstein speaks of language games, they are of course partly linguistic, but also material. When Althusser speaks of ideology, this includes material practices. We clarified this already in our answer to Geras (Laclau and Mouffe 1987). However there are still some people who do not seem to be able to get that point.

ADH & AS: Looking back, are there points made in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* which should be changed?

CM: Yes, as mentioned, perhaps it was important to stress that the critique of reductionism does not make class issues unimportant. For example, the current distinction between redistribution and recognition is presented as a new debate which is held to arise as a result of the contemporary importance of identity politics and the demands for recognition which flow from identity politics. But, in our perspective, this is just a different vocabulary. Instead, there is a need to articulate different kinds of demands. I would like to clarify that even though the term class might be problematic in the Marxist understanding, it is symbolically very important. This is particularly true today, in order to bring to the fore the problems arising from the hegemony of financial capitalism. I think we can indeed speak, even if it is in a metaphoric way, of a form of 'class struggle'. Even Warren Buffet recognizes it.

Towards a theory of politics via the combined critique of Marxism and liberalism

ADH & AS: Can you describe the development of your work since the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and perhaps point out the most important developments which you have gone through?

CM: In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we criticized Marxism for its lack of a theory of politics, due to its economic reductionism. After that, I was interested to show that what was true of Marxism was also true of liberalism. There was a moment, particularly in France, where the Left moved towards liberalism. My claim was that by moving from Marxism to liberalism, you do not obtain a better understanding of politics because liberalism also lacks an adequate theory of politics. This is why I got involved with the work of John Rawls and liberal political theorists. For instance, *The Return of the Political* (Mouffe 1993) is definitely moving in this direction, showing the limits of liberalism. Again, this was a theoretical and a political intervention at a moment in which, suddenly, liberalism was celebrated by the Left. To intervene politically I needed to critique liberal political theory and show that there was nothing political about so-called political liberalism.

Another mistaken reading of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and of our notion of radical democracy was to envisage liberal democracy and radical democracy as two completely different regimes. In *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (Mouffe 1992) I clarified that radical democracy was a radicalization of liberal democracy. It did not need a revolution to be implemented. If we accept that the ethical political principles of liberal democracy are liberty and equality for all, it is clear that there is no need to look for more radical principles. The problem with really existing liberal democratic societies is that they are not putting those ideals into practice. The usual claim of the Left is that those principles are

a sham and that we need to struggle for something completely new. My position, on the contrary, is that the strategy should be to force those societies to really put those ideals into practice. The radicalization of democracy should be envisaged as an immanent critique, a struggle, that does not imply a radical break but that can be done through a profound transformation of the existing liberal democratic institutions. Of course, this will require some important changes, some institutions will need to be created, others will need to be radicalized, but the point is that it is possible to work through these institutions. This is what Gramsci called a *war of position*.

One of the issues that I addressed in *The Democratic Paradox* (Mouffe 2000) was how one should conceive liberal democracy in order to envisage the possibility of such a process of radicalization. I gained interest in the different models of democracy, aggregative and deliberative models, coming to the conclusion that neither is adequate. This led me to develop the agonistic model of democracy as a new way of interpreting the aim of liberal democratic institutions. Here I want to clarify a common mistake. Some people believe that agonistic democracy and radical democracy is the same thing. They are completely different and located at different levels. Radical democracy is a political project. Agonistic democracy is an analytical theory. It does not have any political content.

In fact, people who are not Leftists, for instance those on the Centre-right, can agree that a vibrant democracy needs an agonistic struggle, clear differences and clear alternatives, between which citizens can choose. The aim of democracy is not consensus. The aim of democracy is to create the conditions for a conflictual consensus. Within the agonistic struggle, people will defend different projects. One of these projects, favoured by me, is the project of radical democracy. But I take this stand not as a theorist, but as an engaged citizen. But when I am talking about agonistic democracy, it is me speaking as a political theorist. Do you see the difference? To envisage how the struggle for radical democracy can take place, it is important to envisage the democratic institutions in an agonistic way and not in an aggregative or deliberative way.

ADH & AS: But surely there would be an element of political choice involved in stating that the general frame wherein the radical democracy can take place would have to be an agonistic frame? If so, wouldn't you then agree that the notion of deliberative democracy is a political project? Or do you see it as an analytical project analogous to the agonistic project?

CM: I would not speak of an agonistic project but of an agonistic approach or model. In my view, such an approach is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for posing the question of radical democracy. An agonistic democracy should provide the possibility for a confrontation between different and conflicting interpretations of the shared ethico-political principles. The radical democratic project represents one position in this struggle. Such a project needs to be elaborated, and this is what is missing in the present situation with the almost unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism. In order to allow for the possibility of a counter-hegemonic move, you need to envisage democracy not in the mode of an inclusive rational consensus but as providing the possibility for different views to express themselves in an agonistic struggle. This is a necessary condition, but it does not automatically guarantee the existence of a radical democratic project. I would like to indicate here something that I take to be very important for an agonistic democracy. We must never arrive at a point where we say that we have reached the just society, where things cannot be changed. This is something that is difficult for many people on the Left to accept; they believe they have the truth and this should be accepted by everyone. This

conception is definitely challenged by the agonistic model. A pluralistic democracy must always have the possibility of challenging an existing order. In an agonistic democracy one should never put a stop to the agonistic struggle. Every order is a hegemonic order, and therefore it can always be challenged by a counter-hegemonic move.

Carl Schmitt and the formulation of an agonistic politics

ADH & AS: We would like to ask you about the distinction between antagonism and agonism, the enemy and the adversary. First of all, can you say something about the source of inspiration for your use of the term agonistic democracy? Is this from the classical era? How do you relate to William Connolly's use of the term?

CM: The origin of my reflection here is Carl Schmitt. This happened after *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Some people believe that Schmitt was an influence for *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but neither Ernesto Laclau nor I had read Schmitt at that point. In fact, just after the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a friend of ours from Greece asked me whether I had read Schmitt, claiming that there were many points of convergence. I then read *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 1976), and I have been interested in Schmitt ever since. In my critique of liberal theory, Schmitt was a very important point of reference and very useful in showing that liberalism cannot understand the political. This critique helped me to formulate my critique of liberal theory.

But, I have always thought 'with and against Schmitt'. Because, if I agree with Schmitt on many points – the specificity of the political, the friend/enemy distinction, that liberal theory because of its individualism is blind to the political – I also disagree with the consequence that Schmitt draws from that. Let me clarify that when I speak of liberal democracy I am not speaking of democratic capitalism but of a political regime, leaving aside which kind of economic institutions will be articulated with this. Of course, there are some who argue that you can only have a liberal democratic political system if you have a capitalist economy, but this is not the position of all liberals. For example, John Rawls has imagined a liberal democracy compatible with some form of socialism. Norberto Bobbio theorizes what he calls liberal socialism.

Now, Schmitt argues that liberal democracy is an unviable regime, because the two principles necessarily contradict one another: liberalism contradicts democracy, and democracy contradicts liberalism. Schmitt also believed that pluralism, understood as the recognition and legitimation of conflict, should not be accepted within a political society. He claimed that if you allow for a conflict to be legitimated in a political society you end up in civil war. For him, this is basically the problem with liberal democracy. Of course, his book was written in the context of the Weimar Republic, and one can understand why Schmitt did not believe in the viability of this regime. By the way, he was proven right. But he had other much more fundamental reasons for disagreeing with pluralist democracy.

My challenge was that I agreed very much with Schmitt's premises but I disagreed with his idea that pluralist democracy was an unviable regime. For him, the only kind of viable order is an authoritarian order. Schmitt could not envisage pluralism *inside* the political association. Yes, at the international level, at the level of states, but not liberal pluralism. That was for me the trouble: how to start from Schmittian premises but nevertheless defend the possibility of pluralist democracy? To put it in another way: how is it possible both to acknowledge the ineradicability of antagonism and the possibility of pluralist democracy? My solution is the following. Antagonism refers to a type of conflict where there was no possibility of rational solution. It is a form of negativity that cannot be

overcome. These are simply irreconcilable positions. Schmitt thought that the only form in which this antagonism can be expressed is through the friend/enemy form. If this indeed is the only way antagonism can express itself, it is true that it can lead to civil war.

But, there is another form in which antagonism can be expressed. This I call agonism, in which the opponents are adversaries, not enemies: they know that they disagree and that they will never find a rational solution to their disagreement, but they nevertheless accept the legitimacy of the claims of their opponents. While in the case of an antagonism there is no common symbolic space, between adversaries there is a common symbolic space where a conflictual consensus exists. Consensus, in the sense that they have in common an allegiance to a set of ethical, political principles, but they disagree about the interpretation of those principles. It is a real confrontation, but it is going to take place according to certain practices and procedural rules that are accepted. Whilst the friend/enemy relation clearly is incompatible with liberal, pluralist democracy, if you envisage the expression of antagonism in the form of agonism, then it is perfectly compatible with the persistence of political association.

Why do I use the term agonism? The term agonism appears twice in Michel Foucault but in a different way. You also find agon ('contest without enmity') in Friedrich Nietzsche, and, of course, agon is a Greek term. I have the feeling that I saw the term in Foucault and thought that that was exactly the way I wanted to put it. But, in fact, he is not a real influence because he uses agonism in a different way. My specific need was to differentiate the conflictual relation from antagonism whilst holding onto the idea of confrontation.

Many use the concept of agonism, such as Bill Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and James Tully, but we cannot speak of an agonistic school because there are big differences between these positions. For this reason, in *Agonistics* (Mouffe 2013) I have felt the need to clarify my position with respect to the other theorists of agonism. Agonists are influenced either by Hannah Arendt or by Nietzsche. Honig is influenced by Hannah Arendt; Connolly comes from Nietzsche, while I come from Schmitt. In my view, in both Honig and in Connolly and in all those agonists influenced by Arendt and Nietzsche, what you have is 'agonism without antagonism', whilst my position is 'agonism with antagonism'. My understanding of the agonistic relation is that it is a sublimated antagonism. I also have spoken about a 'tamed relation', precisely to indicate that antagonism never disappears.

In fact, what we are seeing in Western Europe at the moment is very much a consequence of the lack of an agonistic struggle: the Third Way consensus and the blurring of the line between Left and Right mean that conflict cannot find a form of expression through representative institutions and through democratic parties. For example, this was the case with the riots in the *banlieues* in France in 2008. People were saying, 'But these people have no demands, this is not politics, just destruction of public buildings!' Well, precisely. They could not forward political demands because the system does not allow them to express their demands in a political form. So, for me, the agonistic struggle concerns the manner in which different demands can find political expression. When the system is blocked, which is exactly the situation we have today in Western Europe, then those things manifest themselves in very many different ways.

The limits of pluralism and the necessity of exclusion

ADH & AS: Yet, you see the radical democratic project as a hegemonic project which itself relies upon practices of exclusion. Can you say something about the different modes of exclusion that you would endorse? For example: banning a political party, limiting

freedom of speech, starting a military intervention in the name of democracy and the defence of human rights? If we agree that there is always antagonism, and that there are always enemies of democracy, basically, which practices of exclusion can we endorse?

CM: The main question here is of course the limit of pluralism, the limit of agonistic respect: can we respect absolutely all demands or not? Are there groups who cannot be included because they cannot be part of the conflictual consensus because they do not accept it? Such a consensus must be founded on the ethical and political principle of liberty and equality of all. There will be many competing interpretations of liberty and equality and, very importantly, who is the 'all'? The criteria for drawing the line will be those demands that respect the principle of liberty and equality for all, even if we disagree with the interpretation. This is not easy.

For example, what is really problematic about Marine Le Pen and the *Front National* is not so much the liberty and equality, but the 'for all'. Who is part of the 'all'? Should this make Le Pen and the *Front National* enemies or adversaries? If enemies, it simply means they will not be allowed to organize as a legal party and to take part in elections. The crucial issue here is how to establish the frontiers between enemy and adversary. It is not always easy, and in many cases it is a political decision which should be taken on pragmatic grounds. Is it better for such a party to have to play the democratic game, even if they only pay lip service? What happens if we don't allow them? Will this be more dangerous for democracy if they organize and undermine the system? For instance, a declared Nazi party should not be allowed, or an extreme Muslim party, which wants to abolish the liberal system and establish a theocracy. This is very clear, they are enemies. But most right-wing parties are borderline cases. This is why I think, regarding the question of the limit, that the criterion, is really chosen on pragmatic grounds.

For the second part of the question, does this mean that they should not be allowed to speak? No, I think people must be allowed to defend their ideas. In this sense I am much more in agreement with the Americans and their defence of the freedom of expression. I don't think that even to deny the holocaust should be a crime. Of course, it is different if you speak with the intention of creating violence against a community, this can of course be a question of legal sanction, but simply announcing or writing that you believe that the Armenian massacre was not genocide, or even putting into question the idea of the holocaust, this is not enough. This should be seen in terms of freedom of speech.

ADH & AS: I wonder if you would be prepared to comment on the interventions in Afghanistan and Libya, which were legitimized as practices of exclusion aimed at defending democracy and human rights?

CM: I definitely was against the intervention in Libya and in Afghanistan. I am against the idea of the 'right' to intervene, *le droit d'ingérence*, defended by Bernard Kouchner. In a multi-polar world I am very much against the West defining itself with the Good and the Truth. I think this is an incredible hypocrisy. The West is not the policeman, this idea that we have the true understanding of human rights, that our economic model is the only rational and moral model to be accepted and imposed. Also, at the international level, it is very important that there is not just a single hegemony. It leads to a series of problems that I have touched upon in *On the Political* (Mouffe 2005). The most recent form of terrorism, the Al Qaeda type, can be seen as an antagonistic reaction against this. There are no legal channels to disagree with the American model, which they say everybody should accept. People who disagree are not seen as adversaries, but as enemies.

In a multi-polar world, there would be a pluralization of hegemonies. If every order is a hegemonic order and having a single hegemony is a problem, what is the solution? It can't be the cosmopolitan world, because this would suppose the possibility of a world beyond hegemony. What I propose in my conception of the multi-polar world is a pluralization of hegemonies, with a plurality of regional poles that organize their political and economic affairs in different ways. In this sense the relationship between different poles is an agonistic one, in which there will be disagreement, but there will be acceptance of this disagreement, where other values are legitimate.

Notes on contributors

Chantal Mouffé is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Westminster (UK), where she is the director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy. She has taught and been visiting researcher at many universities in Europe, North America, and Latin America, among these, Harvard, Cornell, the University of California, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (all in the US), and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, France. She has co-authored *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985, with Ernesto Laclau and has edited and written numerous books, among these, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, 1992 (ed.); *The Return of the Political*, 1993; *Deconstruction and Pragmatism: Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Richard Rorty*, 1996 (ed.); *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, 1999 (ed.); *The Democratic Paradox*, 2000; *On the Political*, 2005; *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, 2013.

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