



Us and them

Some critical remarks on the introduction *Citizenship, Democracy and Pluralism* by Chantal Mouffe in Felix Meritis in Amsterdam on 1 October 2010.

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In the *Democratic Paradox*² from 2000, predecessor of *On the Political*³ from 2005, Mouffe takes as the point of departure of her reasoning the ideas of the German scientist of Public Law Carl Schmitt, and more particularly his Essay, published in 1932, *Der Begriff des Politischen*⁴. DPB was a fierce attack on the principles of the liberal constitutional State, represented by the Republic of Weimar. Roughly speaking the principles of political liberalism state that the political democratic process should enroll within the neutral framework of the constitutional state, conferring equal rights to all the participants in the process of democratic debate and decision making. Schmitt replaces this scheme by a friend/enemy scheme, in the wording of Mouffe by 'a frontier between us and them, those who belong to the "demos" and those who are outside them'. This scheme founds the primacy of the political sovereignty over individual rights of citizens. She further states that the tension between political equality and political freedom cannot be reconciled, but that this fact has been neglected and led to a miscasting of the political process. I quote (page 5): 'This is of course what happened with the present Zeitgeist, the so-called 'third way', which is no more than the justification by the social democrats of their capitulation to a neo-liberal hegemony whose power relations they will not challenge, limiting themselves to making some little adjustments...'

When we look at the present surge of populist movements all over Europe, it is no overstatement to say that Chantal Mouffe understood the 'Zeitgeist' already correctly ten years ago. These movements frame their contributions to the democratic process in terms of the primacy of political freedom over equality and have very prominent feelings who is part and friend of the demos and who is outside and enemy of it. The struggle over political power after the elections in June in our country between the classical political parties and the new populist party of Wilders, by now the biggest political movement, may serve as a perfect example. And she is damned right on the other point: the social democrats, adherents of the neo liberal model, have no response to the new situation.

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² Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London/New York: Verso 2000 (TDP).

³ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London/New York: Routledge 2005 (OTP).

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2000 (reprint of the text of 1932) (DBP).

But..

Let's turn to Carl Schmitt first. Mouffe states in the further analysis of his thoughts in chapter two of TDP that Schmitt talks about the political freedom of a political community. I quote (p.43): 'By stressing that the identity of a democratic political community hinges on the possibility of drawing a frontier between 'us' and 'them', Schmitt highlights the fact that democracy always has known relations of inclusion-exclusion. This is a vital insight.' She further states (p. 53) that Schmitt's concept of 'the people' as a political unity (rather than the abstract concept 'humanity' which liberalism takes as the core of the system) should be the essential element in any political theory about democracy. Where she departs from Schmitt is the fact that 'the people' in her view should be a pluralistic concept, rather than a homogeneous as Schmitt sees it.

I may have simplified her analysis of Schmitt, but in my view she misreads him by supposing that 'the political' is a quality of the people. In my view Schmitt is not interested in 'the people' at all. Like a Hegelian or may be the ardent follower of the totalitarian State of Hitler he would later become, for him the State is the higher entity that should be identified with 'the political'. Read the already ominous first sentence of DBP: 'Der Begriff des Staates setzt den Begriff des Politischen voraus.' The State then divides humanity in friends of the state and enemies of the state and wages war against the enemy *within* the State or *outside* the State. The Political in the sense of Schmitt's identification of the political with the State excludes any pluralistic political organization within the State. Hear, how he formulates this in German (p. 45): 'Aus dem Begriff des Politischen ergeben sich allerdings, ...,pluralistische Konsequenzen, aber nicht in dem Sinne, das *innerhalb* ein und derselben politische Einheit an die Stelle der massgebenden Freund- und Feindgruppierung Pluralismus treten könnte, ohne dass mit der Einheit auch das Politische selbst zerstört wäre.' Pluralism is for him the battle between enemies within the State or between different enemy-States. And he wants a real battle and not the sort of public debate the liberals have made out of it. Another quote may clarify this point (p. 70-71): 'So wird der politischen Begriff des *Kampfes* in liberalen Denken auf der wirtschaftlichen Seite zur *Konkurrenz*, auf der andern, "geistige" Seite zur *Diskussion*; an der Stelle einer klaren Unterscheidung der beiden verschiedenen Status "Krieg" und "Frieden" tritt die Dynamik ewiger Konkurrenz und ewiger Diskussion.' And, oh horror, the constructs of liberalism deprive us from the real thing. The sentence 'Der Staat wird *Gesellschaft*,' starts a long peroration in his book against the 'technical' liberal state, to conclude (p. 76): 'Mit Hilfe Definitionen und Konstruktionen die schliesslich alle nur Polarität von Ethik und Ökonomie umkreisen, kan man Staat und Politik nicht ausrotten und wird man die Welt nicht entpolitisieren.' Life is about struggle, 'Kampf', which includes war, 'Krieg'.

Question: Why is it that Carl Schmitt offers us an insight in the workings of 'real' democracy? Is not his work the expression of the intellectual mentality which was one of the causes of the

down fall of the Republic of Weimar and the subsequent transformation of the neutral state into the totalitarian political State, to which the whole world outside Germany was the enemy to be conquered and to which the political opponent, the enemy from within, was to be prosecuted and exterminated?

In both TDP and OTP Chantal Mouffe tries to create out of Schmitt's model of friend/enemy which model she calls 'antagonism', a different model of adversaries which she calls 'agonistic'. 'Agonistic' comes from the ancient Greek word 'αγων' which means 'play'. She defines (TDP, p. 13) 'agonistic enemies' as 'friendly enemies' : 'Persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this symbolic space in a different way.' . By doing so she wants to counter Schmitt's argument that the State and 'pluralism' are incompatible, but also to challenge the strong concept of 'political liberalism' of Rawls (and also Habermas) that democracy is a form of 'deliberative public discourse or public reason', which she identifies with compromise. Her concept of pluralism in her own wording (TDP, p. 19) 'gives a positive status to differences and questions the objective of unanimity and homogeneity, which (as she adds) is always revealed as fictitious and based on acts of exclusion.' Later on she speaks of 'competing identities'. She continues: 'Liberal democracy is precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications. Hence the importance of leaving the space of contestation entirely open, instead of trying to fill it through the establishment of supposedly "rational" consensus (TDP, p. 56).' Referring to Wittgenstein (TDP, chapter 3) she opposes 'universalists' (Dworkin, Rawls and Habermas) to 'contextualists' (Wittgenstein, Waltzer, Derrida). In order to remedy the serious deficiencies of the deliberative model the agonistic model should develop a model which places 'power and antagonism in the very centre.., because social objectivity in fact is a social hegemony based on power' (DTP, p. 99).

In the end she accepts what she calls 'ethico-political principles' that should give some guidance to the agonistic struggle for political life. 'But', she says (TDP, p. 103) since those ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations such a consensus is bound to be a "conflictual consensus". ' In OTP (p. 30) she is less ambiguous: 'A pluralist liberal democratic society does not deny the existence of conflicts but provides the institutions allowing them to be expressed in adversarial form.' And on p. 52 she says: 'Adversaries do fight, even fiercely, according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately being irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives.' But the defense of those rules and institutions should be understood in terms of politics, not on the basis of moral equality of the 'friendly enemies'(OTP, p. 120).

To understand what rules and institutions she allows in the agonistic model I would like confront you with the film 'Us and Them' by the Polish video artist Zmijevski, I have seen a couple of years ago. The artist conducts a sort of social experiments which he records on

film. This experiment went as follows. Members of different political minority groups from the right to the left of the political spectrum in Poland were invited in a large room to paint on large papers on the wall the visual symbols of their political/religious creed. They were allowed to show the contesting symbols to each other and to take action against each other's symbols, one by one. They started in a peaceful way by painting their own symbols over the symbols of the other party, which painted its own symbols back again or made a painterly raid on the symbols of the other and so on. After a while they started to damage physically the symbols of the other. This part went on for a considerable time, although the degree of violence of the attacks escalated. The peaceful exchange of their own principled views was replaced by shouting fighting words at each other. In the end they set fire on what had remained of the symbols of the counter party and they had to be removed from the building by force.

Now imagine what would have happened if in stead of several minorities the confrontation would have taken place between one dominant party and one small deviant party. The experiment would have escalated very soon and the police would have to be called in urgently in order to protect the minority party against physical violence on it carried out by members of the dominant party.

What sort of rules do we have to introduce in the experiment to turn this antagonistic model into an adversarial model? It is my guess that they are of a objective nature such as they derive from the universalistic model of Rawls and Dworkin. They are taken from principles of rationality rather than ambiguous conflicting social hegemonies. I mention: the rule that we should allow the participants of the debate on equal footing, the rule that we should protect public expressions of opinion or religion against physical and verbal violence, the rule that we should protect minorities against majorities, the rule that we should have objective umpires who apply the rules strictly and objectively on all the parties involved. Etcetera.

Question: How do the rules and institutions of the adversarial model differ from the 'rational' rules and institutions of the political liberalism of Rawls and others? And more particularly: How does an adversarial model based on rules derived from social hegemony of the ruling parties protect minorities against exclusion from the symbolic political space and attacks on their human dignity?

My last point. In both the TDP and OTP Chantal Mouffe launches an attack on the compromise and consensus building of the deliberative theories of Rawls and Habermas. Consensus is a cover up of what really matters in democracy: adversarial pluralism which never ends and never reaches agreement.

In my view this does not take into account that in a democracy you need to reach decisions. Democratic decision making goes by consensus building and compromise reached in negotiations. Consensus building and compromise on the one hand and adversarial pluralism

on the other hand exist side by side. A democratic society that knows only contestation and no consensus or compromise collapses or is ruled by bureaucracies which are uncontrolled and un-transparent political powers. In OTP (p. 67-69) Chantal Mouffe hails the adversarial model of the Austrian right wing party of Hayder, but deplors at the same time that it lost its adversarial character as soon as it became a member of the ruling government.

Considering her regret that right populism became encapsulated in consensus, the Netherlands of today are an interesting case in point. Because of the spectacular growth of the populist party of Wilders, the political centre falls apart, with no majority left on either side of the political spectrum. This makes it nearly impossible to create a decision making majority without the support of the populist party. The Christian Democrats and the Liberals hope to reach with the populist party a compromise on what can be called a consensus/contestation model, a merger of the deliberative and adversarial model. They reached an agreement on where they agree and where they disagree. Because they disagree on fundamental points of principles derived from the constitutional model (Rawls) they both accept that the populist party supports the government without being part of the government. This is the so called Danish model because the Danish democracy works already several years according to this system. People who believe in this model make a distinction between the political and the constitutional and say that democracy will be protected by the constitutional framework overseen by judges, those who do not believe in it hold that such distinction is impossible and that in the end it will contaminate the whole constitutional model. Or to put the latter position (which is mine, by the way) in other words: the ruling government has to represent and defend the values of the constitutional framework but is supported by a political party who gives priority to freedom above equality; such a government in the end is bound to speak with two tongues.

Question: Where does the decision making fits in the adversarial model and how does it work? More particularly: what are your views on the new deliberative/adversarial model of populist and classical parties working together on a majority basis but not sharing government responsibility (the so-called Danish model)?