

English, Department of
Faculty Publications-English

Texas State University

Year 2007

The Agony of the Political. A review of
Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*
(London: Routledge, 2005)

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THE AGONY OF THE POLITICAL

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Review of:

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1. In *On the Political*, Chantal Mouffe argues that all politics, properly conceived, must be agonistic. The “political” for Mouffe names a field of struggle where contesting groups with opposing interests vie for hegemony. Rather than being the rational conversation of modern liberalism, politics involves a battle where a recognizable “we” fight against a likewise identifiable “they.” Mouffe agonizes over the fact that so many political theorists today would deny the antagonistic character of the political. She wishes to combat the pervasive sense among social theorists that, since the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization, we are living in a “post-political” world, a world in which the problems of societies are resolved by recourse to universal human values, liberal consensus, and human rights.
2. Mouffe argues that by denying the existence of partisan and adversarial interests based on collective identities, modern liberalism has foreclosed the symbolic space for such conflicts to occur. Mouffe enlists the aid of a strategic ally, the conservative theorist Carl Schmitt, to help make her case. This is a dangerous move, because Schmitt is opposed to the sort of pluralist democracy Mouffe wants to champion. Schmitt’s anti-liberalism provides a tincture against the platitudinous banalities of that philosophy. For Schmitt, politics always involves collective identities of we/they. This characterization of self and other is also a friend/enemy distinction, which can then lead to violent disavowals of the other’s right to exist at all. There can be no rational consensus because identity is always based on exclusion. There is no alternative to the we/they binary, so the goal cannot be to overcome this antagonism. According to Mouffe, Schmitt concludes that pluralism has no place in democratic society; only a homogenous society can work. For Mouffe, who insists on democratic pluralism, the goal is to maintain Schmitt’s *agonism* and to prevent it from becoming *antagonism*. In other words, she wants to maintain a we/they relationship while keeping it from devolving into a friend/enemy relationship. “The fundamental question for democratic theory is to envisage how the antagonistic dimension—which is constitutive of the political—can be given a form of expression that will not destroy the political association” (52).
3. Mouffe insists that, contrary to appearances, the agonistic model actually makes for a more harmonious, and safer, society in the long run. This is in part because partisans

have an arena in which to fight. She cites the rise of right-wing populist movements in Europe. As political parties and theorists deny traditional categories of collective identity, fringe parties championing just such traditional ideas (e.g., “the people”) have shown themselves able to garner strong support from those disaffected by society. By appearing to offer a real difference, clearly identifying a friendly “we” (the people) and an enemy “they” (foreigners, for instance), right-wing groups have filled a void left by post-political liberalism. Many liberal democrats might view these people as un- or anti-modern, residues of a passing era, epigones who will inevitably fade away before the inexorably open, rational, cosmopolitan world that is unfolding. But Mouffe shows that the return of such movements is a timely reaction to the current situation of global politics.

4. The successes of these movements have also enabled a dangerous overlapping between morality and politics. If the “they” is our enemy, then they are not only wrong, but evil. This is not morality substituted for politics, but, as Mouffe says, politics “played out in the moral register” (75). Once this occurs, the opportunity for a truly agonistic politics is lost, because an evil enemy cannot be permitted to be part of the contest. Nor would a party that is considered “evil” want to play the game. Turning a “they” into an evil enemy can lead to nonparticipation in the political arena, which can lead to anti-democratic forms of protest (at the extreme, terrorism). Rather than acknowledging the merits of one’s opponents and striving to overcome the opponents in a contest, the moralists call their enemies immoral and have done with it.
5. In the post-Cold War era, Mouffe says, we find ourselves in a unipolar world, one in which the hegemony of the United States seems unquestioned. The response of the “cosmopolitans” has been largely to celebrate this condition, viewing the globalization of capitalism and the triumph of liberal democracy as the “end of history” that Francis Fukayama once trumpeted. Against this theory, Mouffe calls for a multipolar world system, in which semiautonomous blocs—say, the countries of ASEAN or of Mercosur or the European Union—can vie with the U.S. for hegemony. Ultimately, this is the only way a globally democratic politics could work. In a unipolar world, after all, the reigning hegemon would not have to listen to others; indeed, it might cast the conversation in a language that makes the other’s inaudible or unintelligible. Mouffe does not address this aspect of power, which Gramsci and Foucault understood well.
6. Perhaps as an after-effect of her earlier post-Marxist stance, Mouffe does not look at the economic conditions that affect the political. The reason the world looks the way it does has much less to do with how politics is “envisaged,” and a great deal to do with globalization, which arises from the real facts of imperialism and late capitalism. Works like David Harvey’s *Spaces of Capital* or *The New Imperialism* provide analyses of the political crises occasioned by, if not caused by, globalization. Although she takes some time to excoriate Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s

Empire, she does so only to dispute the theoretical image of the political. She does not address the underlying arguments about the actual effects of power in an era of globalization. Nor does she examine the cultural aspects that clearly factor in to any political practices (see, for instance, Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*).

7. What would Mouffe's adversarial, agonistic politics actually look like? Apparently, it would look quite familiar. The most damning critique of *On the Political* may be that it winds up reinforcing the status quo. To be sure, Mouffe's language—involving antagonism, hegemony, and the we/they rubric—sounds less harmonious than liberal, “post-political” theory, but is her practice any different? When Mouffe cites with approval Elias Canetti's claim that parliamentary systems defuse partisan tensions, she seems to be arguing in favor of a system already present in the U.S. and in Europe. Canetti notes that consensus is not what happens in a vote; each side fights for its respective interests and opposes the other's. But the vote is then decisive. Nobody believes that, just because “our” side lost the vote, “their” side's position was better, more moral, or more correct. As Canetti puts it, “the member of an outvoted party accepts the majority decision, not because he has ceased to believe in his own case, but simply because he admits defeat” (qtd. 23). Mouffe adds that without an arena for such contests (i.e., a parliamentary institution), anti-democratic forces will prevail. But how is this any different from the American or European political systems already in place?
8. Indeed, Mouffe's agonistic politics does not seem very radical at all. Whenever Mouffe addresses practical matters, she uses the *language* of adversarial or agonistic politics, but evokes tame and familiar scenes. Mouffe argues for a pluralism that recognizes real differences, but that also ensures that everyone plays by the same rules. “Partisans” who *really* want to change the political landscape may not be allowed to participate. As Mouffe puts it, this pluralism “requires discriminating between demands which are to be accepted as part of the agonistic debate and those which are to be excluded. A democratic society cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries” (120). Fair enough, but who decides? If it is the current hegemonic power, then isn't the deck stacked against the opposition in the war of position? If the United States is allowed to decide which political demands are worthy and which cannot be allowed to gain legitimacy, then one can easily imagine a Bush-administration official agreeing with every word of this book, right down to the sorts of agonistic strategies needed to win elections. And speaking of a multipolar world order, will those regional blocs that do not maintain such basic institutions be eager to establish them?
9. Mouffe's image of a we/they politics in which collective identities vie with one another for hegemony looks a bit like organized sports. Consider the football game: rival sides squared off in a unambiguously agonistic struggle for dominance, with a clear winner and loser, yet agreeing to play by certain shared rules, and above all unwilling to destroy the sport itself (i.e., the political association) in order to achieve

the side's particular goals. Football teams have no interest in dialogue, and the goal is not consensus, but victory. The winner is triumphant, and the loser must regroup, practice, and try again later. A clearly defined "we" will fight against the "they," but the aim is to win, not to destroy "them" or the sport itself. But, noteworthy in the extended metaphor, some organizing body (rarely democratic) has established the rules and standards by which the sport is played. The players have no say in how the game is structured.

10. If the sports analogy seems too facile, consider Mouffe's own characterization. Responding to the "fundamental question for democratic theory" (i.e., how to maintain antagonism in politics without destroying political association), Mouffe answers that it requires

distinguishing between the categories of "antagonism" (relations between enemies) and "agonism" (relations between adversaries) and envisaging a sort of "conflictual consensus" providing a common symbolic space among opponents who are considered "legitimate enemies." Contrary to the dialogic approach, the democratic debate is conceived as a real confrontation. Adversaries do fight—even fiercely—but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, and accepted as legitimate perspectives. (52)

Play ball! Of course this means that, if the opposition party—oh, let's go ahead and call them the Reds—wishes to change the relations of power, it must do so within the political framework (e.g., legislative body or rules of the game). To be outside of the framework is to not be playing the game at all.

11. A better model might be that of games on the playground. On the playground, children both organize and play games, often coming up with and changing the rules as they go along. Their power relations are constantly adjusted, modified so as to make the game more fair ("you get a head start"), more safe ("no hitting"), more interesting ("three points if you can make it from behind that line"), and so on. The overall structure of the game does not necessarily change, but the specifics of how the game is played can vary. This is not a utopian vision, obviously. The power relations on display at most playgrounds are not the most salutary. But this model at least provides an image of what a radical version of Mouffe's agonistic, democratic politics might look like. How this would work outside the playground, in a global political context, is a different question. Can we get the world's diverse "teams" together on the same playground? Would a multipolar world system enable multiple grounds for playing? Who would or would not be allowed to play? Who would decide?
12. These practical questions are exceedingly tough to answer. The agonistic model of politics requires an arena where contestants can hold competitions. It requires rules

that may be altered but that also must be in place in order to know what game is being played. And it requires a system that allows the sport to continue when particular games end. (That is, the winner cannot cancel further contests, a problem that has plagued nascent democracies.) A radical democracy founded on adversarial politics cannot simply replicate existing structures of liberal, parliamentary democracy. It must change the game.