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Politics and passions: introduction

At a time when most democratic political theorists are busy celebrating the end of the antagonistic mode of politics and praising the qualities of the new paradigm of 'deliberative democracy', it might seem untimely to bring back the old-fashioned theme of 'passions'. Does it not belong to a bygone age when reason in its various guises – instrumental or communicative – had not yet imposed its order? What could still be the relevance of such 'archaic' forces in a world of 'post-conventional' identities and 'reflexive' modernity? Why not share the hope of all those who believe the disappearance of old antagonisms and the growing universalization of the discourse – if not yet the practice – of human rights have created the conditions for a new form of consensual politics and beyond the friend/enemy framework?

To be sure, those are the topics that fill the pages of political theory journals and the sessions of academic conferences. And yet, it is enough to look around us in the real world to realize that, far from having disappeared, the supposedly 'archaic' passions and antagonisms are more active than ever. From the explosion of various forms of old and new nationalism, to the increasing manifestations of racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance, we are witnessing the powerful role of passions in the crystallization of a variety of collective political identities which could put our democratic institutions at risk. This should reveal the shallowness of the consensual dream. For such a situation, far from being the sign of 'lagging behind' in the process of modernization, soon to be overcome by the generalization of a world democratic order, is in most cases the very consequence of the advances of globalization. It is therefore crucial for democratic theory to grasp the dynamics of constitution of those antagonisms instead of wishing them away with pious declarations. This requires relinquishing the rationalist perspective

which predominates in this discipline and which impedes acknowledging the complex and ambivalent nature of human sociability and the ineradicability of social division. By remaining blind to the place of passions in the construction of collective political identities, modern political theory has been unable to understand that the main challenge confronting democratic politics is not how to eliminate passions in order to create a rational consensus, but how to mobilize them toward democratic designs. This is at the roots of its political irrelevance because it has failed to provide theoretical tools to grasp the emergence of political antagonisms and the workings of democratic institutions. Whatever theorists might dream, conflicts and antagonisms will always be with us and instead of producing theories about the world as it should be, democratic theorists would be more helpful if they would dedicate their attention to the different ways in which this dimension of conflictuality could be played out in ways compatible with a democratic order. Indeed, modern democracy's legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it through the imposition of an authoritarian order is why we are required to acknowledge social division and to come to terms with the different passions that are at stake in its many forms of expression.

This issue of *Philosophy & Social Criticism* aims at initiating a discussion in this area. From a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplinary approaches, the different contributors address a number of issues in which the question of passions and the limits of the rationalist framework are brought to the fore. The diversity of themes is intended to testify to the multiplicity of fields where highlighting the role of passions would enrich our comprehension of the nature of democratic politics, thereby allowing us better to defend and deepen its institutions.