



By Way of a Postscript

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Chantal Mouffe

Emotions and affects have become a very fashionable topic among philosophers and people working in social sciences and the humanities and there is a growing literature on what has been called the ‘affective turn’. It designates a very heterogeneous body of works among which it is not easy to find ‘family resemblances’ since the theorists who are sometimes put under this umbrella come from a variety of approaches which are impossible to reconcile, disagreeing on the very meaning of the terms ‘affects’ and ‘emotions’, not to speak of their relation. Some of these theorists are influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, others by the neurosciences, and others still by a variety of constructivist schools. In order to avoid misunderstandings concerning my place in this constellation, I feel that some clarifications are needed about what I understand by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics.

Let me stipulate at the outset that from the perspective that I advocate it is essential to distinguish between ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’. Indeed it is with regard to the political domain that my approach has been elaborated and one of its central tenets is that in that field we are always dealing with collective identities, something that the term ‘emotions’ does not adequately convey because emotions are usually attached to individuals. To be sure ‘passions’ can also be of an individual nature but I have chosen to use that term, with its more violent connotations, because it allows me to underline the dimension of conflict and to suggest a confrontation between collective political identities, two aspects that I take to be constitutive of politics.

To grasp what I understand by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics requires to be acquainted with the theoretical framework that informs my approach and I will start by recalling the main lines of my conception of the political. I will also take the opportunity to dissipate a possible confusion about my understanding of agonism by highlighting the significant differences existing between my approach and some other agonistic theories. This should allow me to bring to light what characterizes my position in the current discussion.

Politics and Antagonism

Let's begin with my conception of the political. I have suggested distinguishing between *the political*, which is linked to the dimension of antagonism present in human societies – an antagonism that can emerge within a large variety of social relations – and *politics*, which aims at establishing an order and organising human coexistence under conditions that are marked by *the political* and thus always conflictual. We find this distinction between *the political* and *politics* in other agonistic theories, though not always with the same signification. We can in fact distinguish two opposing ways of characterising *the political*. There are those for whom *the political* refers to a space of liberty and common action, while others see *the political* as a site of conflict and antagonism. It is in those conflicting understandings that we can find the origin of the fundamental divergence between the different agonistic theories. The thesis I defend is that it is only when the ineradicable character of division and antagonism is recognised that it is possible to think in a properly political manner and to face the challenge confronting democratic politics.

Taking account of the dimension of the political means acknowledging the existence of conflicts that cannot have a rational solution – this is exactly what is meant by 'antagonism'. To be sure, not all conflicts are of an antagonistic nature but properly political ones are, because they always involve decisions that require a choice between alternatives that are undecidable from a strictly rational point of view. Political life will never be able to dispense with antagonism for it concerns public action and the formation of collective identities. It aims at constituting a 'we' in a context of diversity and conflict. Yet, in order to constitute a 'we', one must distinguish it from a 'they' and there is always the possibility that, in certain conditions, this we/they would take the form of an antagonistic friend/enemy confrontation. This is why I have argued that the crucial question for democratic politics is not to reach a consensus without exclusion – which would amount to creating a 'we' without a corollary 'they' – but to construct the we/they discrimination in a mode which is compatible with democratic institutions. This is something that liberal theory has to elude due to the inadequate way it envisages pluralism. While recognising that we live in a world where a multiplicity of perspectives and values coexist and that it is impossible, for empirical reasons, that each of us would adopt them all, liberal theory imagines that, brought together, these perspectives and values constitute a harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble. This type of thought is therefore incapable of accounting for the necessarily conflictual nature of pluralism, which stems from the impossibility of reconciling all points of view, and this is why it is bound to negate the political in its antagonistic dimension. Liberal pluralists acknowledge that in democracy 'the people' can no longer be considered as 'one' but they see it as being 'multiple', while it should be understood as 'divided'.

According to the 'agonistic' model that I developed in several of my writings, to conceive pluralist democracy in a way that does not deny the antagonistic dimension supposes envisaging two possible modes of manifestation of the antagonistic dimension: as a friend/enemy confrontation or as a confrontation among adversaries. It is the latter that I have proposed to call 'agonistic'. The agonistic

confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour but her right to defend them will never be questioned. The category of *enemy* does not disappear, however, for it remains pertinent with regard to those who, because they reject the very basis of pluralist democracy, cannot form part of the agonistic struggle. The question of the limits of pluralism is therefore a crucial one for democracy to address and there is no way to escape it.

The distinction between *antagonism* (friend/enemy relation) and *agonism* (relation between adversaries) permits to understand why, contrary to what many liberals believe, it is not necessary to negate the ineradicability of antagonism in order to visualize the establishment of a democratic order. In fact the agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is in reality the very condition of its existence. Of course, democracy cannot survive without certain forms of consensus, relating to allegiance to the ethico-political values that constitute its principles of legitimacy, and to the institutions in which these are inscribed. But it must also enable the agonistic expression of conflict, which requires that citizens genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives.

Politics and Hegemony

To adequately apprehend the nature of the agonistic struggle, it is also necessary to introduce the category of hegemony. To understand *the political* as the ever-present possibility of antagonism supposes acknowledging the absence of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. It is precisely to this dimension that the category of hegemony refers, as it indicates that every society is the product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency. The social is constituted by sedimented hegemonic practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and that appear to proceed from a natural order. This perspective reveals that every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Social order is therefore hegemonic in nature, and its origin is political. Every order is established through the exclusion of other possibilities and it is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations, hence its political character.

What is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the very configuration of power relations that structure a social order and the type of hegemony they construct. It is a confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects that can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is therefore always present but it is enacted by means of a confrontation, whose procedures are accepted by the adversaries. Unlike the liberal models, such an agonistic perspective takes account of the fact that every social order is politically instituted and that the ground on which hegemonic interventions occur is never neutral for it is always the product of previous hegemonic practices. It sees the public sphere as the battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility of a final reconciliation.

Which Agonism?

When the crucial role of antagonism and hegemony are taken into account, one can see why, despite a similar vocabulary, important differences exist between my approach and several other theorists who also adopt an agonistic perspective. Take for instance the case of Hannah Arendt. Arendt is often considered a representative of agonism, and her references to the Greek Agon can justify such a reading. But the conception of agonism that can be derived from her work is very different from the one I defend since what we find in Arendt is what I would call an ‘agonism without antagonism’. What I mean is that, although she insists greatly on human plurality and conceives politics as dealing with the community and with reciprocity between different beings, she never recognises that this plurality is at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. According to Arendt, to think politically consists in developing the ability to see things from a multiplicity of perspectives. As revealed in her reference to Kant and his notion of ‘enlarged thought’, the pluralism she advocates rests on the horizon of intersubjective agreement. Indeed what she seeks in the Kantian critique of aesthetic judgement is a procedure to obtain intersubjective agreement in the public sphere.

My conception of agonism should also be distinguished from Bonnie Honig’s, which is clearly influenced by Arendt. In her book *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Honig criticises liberal conceptions for being too consensual and she stresses the emancipatory potential of political contestation, which enables established practices to be questioned.¹ She defends a conception of politics centred on *virtú*, and places at its heart agonistic contestation, thanks to which citizens are able to keep open a space of debate and prevent the confrontation of positions from drawing to a close. The permanent questioning of dominant identities and ideas is central to the agonistic struggle as conceived by Honig. For her the agonistic struggle is identified with the moment of contestation. What she finds important is to guarantee the expression of plurality and to prevent the closure of the questioning process. In my view however, this is only one of the dimensions of the agonistic struggle, which cannot be limited to contestation. The second moment, involving the construction of new hegemonic articulations, is fundamental in politics. It is for this reason that I regard Honig’s conception of agonism as inadequate for envisaging democratic politics.

I have a similar problem with the conception of William Connolly, another theorist of agonism. Connolly is influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche rather than Hannah Arendt, and has endeavoured to render his Nietzschean conception of the Agon compatible with democratic politics. In his book *Pluralism* he argues for a radicalisation of democracy through the development of a new democratic ethos among citizens.² He conceives this ethos as one of permanent engagement in agonistic contestation that would make all attempts to bring closure to debate impossible. The central notion of Connolly’s work is that of ‘agonistic respect’, which he presents as originating in our common existential condition, itself linked to our struggle for identity and the recognition of our finitude. Agonistic respect constitutes for him the cardinal virtue of the type of pluralism he advocates and he considers it the most important political virtue in the pluralist world we live in

today. I do agree with Connolly when he insists on the role respect must play between adversaries engaged in an agonistic struggle. But I believe that it is necessary to question the limits of this agonistic respect. Can all antagonisms be transformed into agonism? In other words, must all positions be considered legitimate and must they be granted a place inside the agonistic public sphere? Or must certain claims be excluded because they undermine the conflictual consensus that constitutes the symbolic framework in which opponents recognise themselves as legitimate adversaries? To put it another way, can one envisage pluralism without antagonism?

This is in my opinion the properly political question that is foreclosed by Connolly's approach. It is for this reason that I do not consider his conception of agonism any better placed than Honig's to serve as a framework for democratic politics. In order to think and act politically, we cannot escape the moment of decision and this requires establishing a frontier and determining a space of inclusion/exclusion. Any perspective that evades this moment renders itself incapable of transforming the structure of power relations and of instituting a new hegemony. I certainly do not intend to deny the importance of a democratic ethos but I think it would be a mistake to reduce democratic politics to the promotion of an ethics of agonistic respect. Yet this appears to be what Connolly proposes and, rather than a new conception of democratic politics, what we find in his work is a new form of pluralist ethics. It undoubtedly has its merits but it is not sufficient to envisage the nature of a hegemonic democratic politics and the limits the latter must impose on pluralism.

It should be clear by now that the fundamental difference between my conception of agonism and those that I have just examined resides in the absence in the cases of Arendt, Honig and Connolly of the two dimensions central to my approach and which I see as indispensable to think politically: antagonism and hegemony. The principal objective of these authors is to prevent the closure of debate and to give free rein to the expression of plurality. Their celebration of a politics of destabilisation ignores the phase of hegemonic struggle, which consists in the establishment of a chain of equivalence between democratic struggles in order to construct a different hegemony. However, it is not enough to disturb the dominant procedures and disrupt existing arrangements to bring about a different order. Once we accept that antagonism can never be definitively eliminated and that every order is hegemonic in nature, we cannot avoid the central question in politics: what are the limits of agonism, and which institutions and configurations of power must be transformed if our aim is to radicalise democracy? This requires the moment of decision to be confronted and it necessarily implies a form of closure. It is the price to pay for acting politically.

Radical Democracy and Agonistic Politics

At this point, and before moving to the issue of 'passions', I would like to dispel another frequent confusion and spell out the difference between radical democracy and the agonistic model of democracy. Those two terms cannot be used indistinctively as it is sometimes the case because they refer to different aspects of

my reflection. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, criticizing the class-reductionism dominant in the Marxist tradition, we argued for a new understanding of the socialist project in terms of a radicalization of democracy.³ We advocated the creation of a chain of equivalences among democratic demands in order to extend the democratic principles to a wider set of social relations. Radical democracy, as we envisaged it, is clearly a political project, to be distinguished from other political projects, like the social democratic or the neo-liberal ones. The agonistic model of democracy, however, is something different. It is an analytical approach, formulated as an alternative to the aggregative and deliberative models. It is while scrutinizing the discussion among liberal-democratic theorists and realizing the limitations of the consensual understanding of democracy that I became aware that neither the aggregative nor the deliberative models allowed us to visualize the possibility of a hegemonic politics. To give account of the ineradicability of antagonism and of the hegemonic nature of politics, a different approach was needed. How to envisage democracy within the framework of our hegemonic approach? How could a democratic order acknowledge and manage the existence of conflicts that did not have a rational solution? How to conceive democracy in a way that allows in its midst a confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects? The agonistic model of democracy is my answer to those questions and I see it as providing the analytic framework necessary to visualize the possibility of a democratic confrontation between hegemonic projects. Asserting the constitutive character of social division and the impossibility of a final reconciliation, the agonistic perspective recognizes the necessary partisan character of democratic politics. By envisaging this confrontation in terms of adversaries and not on a friend/enemy mode that might lead to civil war, it allows such a confrontation to take place within democratic institutions. Nonetheless, it does not take side in this confrontation and it is erroneous to believe that an agonistic model favours the radical democratic project. One thing is to create the conditions for a hegemonic confrontation, a completely different one to determine its outcome. This outcome will be the result of the political struggle between forces vying for hegemony and nothing guarantees the victory of one project over another.

Regarding this issue, it might be useful to say a word about my position in the current discussion about 'left ontologies'. Soon after the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* we clarified that it was a mistake to believe that there was a causal link between the ontological approach developed in the book and the political project of radical democracy advocated in the last chapter. To be sure, post-structuralist insights, by allowing us to criticize the shortcomings of the essentialist approach, played a crucial role in our reformulation of the socialist project, but those insights could also be used by theorists with very different political objectives. There is no direct route going from ontological postulates to specific political positions and these are always the result of ethico-political decisions. The existence of an agonistic model of democracy does in no way guarantee that the radical democratic project will be chosen. To put it in another way, while the critique of essentialism is a necessary condition to visualize the agonistic struggle and the possibility of success of the radical democratic project, it is however not a sufficient

condition. Indeed, starting from the same ontological premises, different hegemonic projects can be envisaged and the outcome of the agonistic struggle is never pre-determined. Everything depends on the result of the hegemonic struggle and the state of the contending forces.

Passions in Politics

After those general considerations, we are now in a position to examine the role of 'passions' in the field of politics. Remember that I am posing this question within the post-foundationalist ontological framework that I have outlined earlier. Radical negativity, the ever present possibility of antagonism, the difference between *the political* and *politics*, the division of society, the discursive nature of the social, the anti-essentialist thesis that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification, are all the theoretical premises that inform my approach. Crucial to this framework is the assertion that what is at stake in politics is the constitution of political identities on the mode of a we/they discrimination and that this always entails a libidinal investment.

As I have already indicated, by using the term 'passions', I want to distinguish my reflection from the issue of individual 'emotions'. More precisely, by 'passions' I designate a certain type of common affects, those that are mobilized in the political domain in the formation of the we/they forms of identification. My aim is to challenge the rationalist view dominant in democratic political theory by underlining both the collective and partisan character of political action, bringing to light the crucial role played by affects in the construction of political identities.

One of my key criticisms of liberal democratic theories is their incapacity to acknowledge this affective dimension, an incapacity which I take to be the consequence of their picture of the individual, presented as acting in the field of politics, as moved either by the pursuit of her interests or by moral concerns. This precludes them from recognizing the collective nature of political actors and asking one of the key questions for politics: how are collective forms of identification created and what is the part played by affects in this process. This is what my reflection on 'passions' aims at addressing.

I am of course aware that today 'passion' has a negative connotation, being perceived by many liberal individualists as referring to affects of an irrational and undesirable nature, but I object to such a view. To begin with, the study of passions was at the centre of the reflection of seventeenth-century philosophers like Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza and Pascal and it is only later, after it was displaced by Enlightenment's rationalism, that the term acquired a negative connotation. We had to wait for Freud and the development of psychoanalysis to revive and reformulate the themes that had been explored by the early-modern theorists of the passions. Among those theorists, Spinoza is probably the more relevant for our current situation and the affinities between his notion of 'conatus' and Freud's 'libido' have often been pointed out.

Why is the recognition of ‘passions’ – understood in the way that I have just specified – important for the agonistic model of democracy? Emphasizing the role of passions is no doubt open to the objection that those passions can be mobilized in ways that will undermine democratic institutions. This is clearly the fear that leads many theorists to exclude them from democratic politics. But as I have argued, this is a very perilous viewpoint because refusing to provide democratic channels for the expression of collective affects lays the terrain for antagonistic forms of their mobilization. It is therefore vital for an agonistic politics, whose objective is the construction of we/they in terms of adversaries and not of enemies, to envisage the conditions under which adversarial common affects can be brought about.

I do not think that it is possible to provide general answers to such a question and there are certainly no definite recipes. Everything depends on the specific forms of the agonistic struggle. But it is nevertheless possible to indicate some conditions to be fulfilled. For instance one should keep in mind that what is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the confrontation between hegemonic projects and that, without the availability of alternative hegemonic projects, there can be no agonistic confrontation. This is why I have often stressed the importance of the left/right distinction as a way to give an institutional form to the division of society and the need for a counter-hegemonic struggle to be able to put forward a left alternative to the neo-liberal model of globalization. Institutional conditions are indeed indispensable and they will vary according to the societies. What needs to be emphasized is that to be effective, institutions require allegiance and this is where the affective dimension of the hegemonic struggle lies.

How can affects be mobilized in a counter-hegemonic direction? To examine this question psychoanalysis provides important insights that can be made fruitful politically through their articulation with the discursive-hegemonic perspective. Freud brought to the fore the crucial role played by affective libidinal bonds in processes of collective identification. As he stated in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: ‘a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world’.⁴ Since affects are conceived as being malleable and susceptible to being oriented in different directions, the task for an agonistic politics is to foster affective libidinal attachments that would contribute to the formation of a counter-hegemonic movement. How can this be realized? We can find some insights in Spinoza’s conception of affects, namely his distinction between affection (*affectio*) and affect (*affectus*). Like Freud, Spinoza believes that it is desire that moves human beings to act and he notes that what makes them act in one direction rather than in another are the affects. Bodies have the capacity of being affected and an affection, for him, is a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body. When affected by something exterior, the ‘conatus’ (the general striving to persevere in our being) will experience affects that will move it to desire something and to act accordingly. I find this dynamic of *affectio/affectus* helpful to envisage the process of production of common affects. And I propose to employ this dynamic to examine the modes of transformation of political identities, seeing ‘affections’ as the space where the discursive and the affective are articulated in specific practices. I would like to stress that by ‘discursive’ I am not referring to a practice concerned exclusively with

speech or writing but to a signifying practice in which signification and action cannot be separated. It is through their insertion in discursive signifying practices that social agents acquire forms of subjectivity and those signifying practices can be of a variety of natures: bodily, or otherwise. We should see those discursive inscriptions as providing the affections that will bring about the affects which would spur desire and lead to specific action, combining in that way the recognition that affects and desire play a crucial role in the constitution of subjectivity with the assertion that they are the moving forces of political action.

For those who want to contribute to a radical politics of counter-hegemonic engagement with neo-liberal institutions, one important task is to cultivate a multiplicity of practices that would erode the common affects sustaining the current neo-liberal hegemony. Those practices should aim at fostering common affects of an adversarial nature because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed. A counter-hegemonic politics necessitates the creation of a different regime of desires and affects so as to bring about a collective will sustained by common affects able to challenge the existing order. This is what I understand by the mobilization of passions and I am adamant that it would be tragic for the left, and for the future of democracy in our societies, to abandon this terrain to right-wing populist movements.

Notes

- ¹ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- ² William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- ³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition (London and New York: Verso, 2001).
- ⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), vol.18, p.92.

Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster. She has taught at many universities in Europe, North America and Latin America, and has held research positions at Harvard, Cornell, the University of California, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. She is the editor of *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, and *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*; co-author (with Ernesto Laclau) of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985); and author of *The Return of the Political* (1993), *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) and *On the Political* (2005). Her latest work is *Agonistics* published by Verso in 2013. Email: mouffec@westminster.ac.uk