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Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?

BY CHANTAL MOUFFE

As testified by the increasing success of the extreme right in several countries, western societies are witnessing a growing disaffection with democratic institutions. Such a disaffection may have serious consequences for the future of democracy. Unfortunately, liberal democratic societies are ill-prepared to confront the present challenge, since they are unable to grasp its nature. One of the main reasons for this inability lies in the type of political theory currently in vogue, dominated as it is by an individualistic, universalistic, and rationalistic framework. Such a framework erases the dimension of the political and impedes envisaging in an adequate manner the nature of a pluralistic democratic public sphere.

This paper examines the most recent paradigm of liberal democratic theory: "deliberative democracy," in order to bring to the fore its shortcomings. Then, I put forward some elements for the elaboration of an alternative model that I propose to call "agonistic pluralism."

To be sure, the aim of the theorists who advocate the different versions of "deliberative democracy" is commendable. Against the interest-based conception of democracy, inspired by economics and skeptical about the virtues of political participation, they want to introduce questions of morality and justice into politics, They are looking for new meanings of traditional democratic notions like autonomy, popular sovereignty, and equality. Their aim is to reformulate the classical idea of the public sphere, giving it a central place in the democratic project. However, by proposing to

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view reason and rational argumentation, instead of interest and aggregation of preferences as the central issue of politics, they simply move from an economic model to a moral one. Their move consists in replacing the market-inspired view of the public sphere by another conception that conceives political questions as being of a moral nature and therefore susceptible of being decided rationally. This means that they identify the democratic public sphere with the discursive redemption of normative validity claims. It is clear that what is missing, albeit in different ways, in both approaches is the dimension of the political. This is why I consider that the deliberative model is unable to offer a better understanding of the nature of democratic politics and that it cannot provide a real alternative to the aggregative view.

Deliberative Democracy

There are many different versions of "deliberative democracy," but the most theoretically sophisticated one is the Habermasian and it is that model that I will examine here. Moreover it is also the model where the concept of "public sphere" is more fully elaborated and it is therefore particularly relevant for our concerns.

In the approach elaborated by Habermas and his followers, the main purpose of deliberative democracy is to propose a reformulation in communicative terms of the classical notions of democratic theory, especially the concept of popular sovereignty. According to Seyla Benhabib for instance, one of the central issues to be addressed is how the articulation of the common good can be made compatible with the sovereignty of the people. In her view, the main challenge confronting democracy today lies in reconciling rationality with legitimacy. She puts it in the following way:

> According to the deliberative model of democracy, it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decisions making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from

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> processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals (1996, p. 69).

The basis of legitimacy in democratic institutions derives in this view from the fact that the instances that claim obligatory power do so on the presumption that their decisions represent an impartial standpoint that is equally in the interest of all. In order for this presumption to be fulfilled, those decisions must be the result of appropriate public processes of deliberation that follow the procedures of the Habermasian discourse model. The fundamental idea behind this model is that for the norms and institutional arrangements to be valid they should have been agreed by all affected by their consequences according to as process of deliberation whose features are defined by Benhabib in the following way:

1. Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chance to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate, and to open debate;
2. All have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation;
3. All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. There are no prima facie rules limiting the agenda or the conversation, nor the identity of the participants, as long as each excluded person or group can justifiably show that they are relevantly affected by the proposed norm under question (1996, p.70).

Let's examine this model of deliberative democracy closely. In their attempt to ground legitimacy on rationality its advocates must make a distinction that plays a key role in their approach, the distinction between "mere agreement" and "rational consensus." This commands the values of the procedure, which are impartiality and equality, openness (no one and no relevant information is excluded), lack of coercion, and unanimity. In combination, those values will guide the discussion towards gen-

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eralizable interests to the agreement of all participants and they will produce legitimate outcomes. In other words, the process of public discussion can be guaranteed to have reasonable outcomes only to the extent that it realizes the conditions of ideal discourse: the more equal and impartial, the more open that process is and the less participants are coerced and ready to be guided by the force of the better argument, the more likely truly generalizable interests will be accepted by all persons relevantly affected.

Habermas and his followers do not deny that there will be obstacles to the realization of the ideal discourse but these obstacles are conceived as empirical ones. They are due to the fact that it is unlikely, given the practical and empirical limitation of social life, that we will ever be completely able to leave aside all our particular interests in order to coincide with our universal rational self. This is why the ideal speech situation must be conceived as regulative idea. On the other side, Habermas now accepts that there are issues that have to remain outside the practices of rational public debates like existential issues that concern not questions of justice but of the good life, or conflicts between interests groups about distributive problems that can only be resolved by means of compromises. But he affirms that "this differentiation within the field of issues that require political decisions negates neither the prime importance of moral considerations nor the practicability of rational debate as the very form of political communication" (1991, p. 448). Habermas is adamant that political questions can be decided rationally and that the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments as envisaged by his approach is the most suitable procedure for reaching the rational formation of the will from which the general interest will emerge. He considers that the superiority of his approach with respect to Rawls' one lies in its strictly procedural character which allow him to "leave more questions open because it entrusts more to the *process* of rational opinion and will formation" (1995, p. 130).

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Deliberative Democracy: a Critique

There are several ways in which such an approach could be criticized but I will only envisage two of them here. We can, for instance, use Wittgenstein's insights to undermine Habermas's conception of procedure and to challenge the very idea of a neutral or rational dialogue. For Wittgenstein to have agreement in opinions there must first be agreement on the language used and this, as he points out, implies agreement in forms of life. According to him, procedure only exists as a complex ensemble of practices. Those practices constitute specific forms of individuality and identity that make possible the allegiance to the procedures. It is because they are inscribed in shared forms of life and agreements in judgments that procedures can be accepted and followed. They cannot be seen as rules that are created on the basis of principles and then applied to specific cases. Rules for Wittgenstein are always abridgments of practices, they are inseparable of specific forms of life. Therefore, distinctions between "procedural" and "substantial" or between "moral" and "ethical" that are central to the Habermasian approach cannot be maintained and one must acknowledge that procedures always involve substantial ethical commitments.

Following Wittgenstein's lead also suggests a very different way of understanding communication and the creation of consensus. As he says, "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; but the end is not certains propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting* that is at the bottom of the language-game," (1969, p. 28e). For him agreement is established not on significations (Meinungen) but on a form of life (Lebensform). It is, as has been pointed out, an *Einstimmung* fusion of voices made possible by a common form of life, not *Einverstand* product of reason—like in Habermas. Such an approach requires reintroducing into the process of deliberation the whole rhetorical dimension that the Habermasian discourse perspective is precisely at pains to eliminate. It also implies that the limits of consensus are brought to the fore: "Where two principles really do meet which cannot be

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reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and an heretic. I said I would "combat" the other man, but wouldn't I give him reasons? certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion"* (1969, p. 81e).

It is interesting to note that the Wittgensteinian critique of deliberative democracy that I am proposing resonates with Stanley Cavell's critique of Rawls, which is also inspired by Wittgenstein. Since Rawls represents the other important version of the deliberative approach, it is clear that taking Wittgenstein seriously necessarily leads to putting into question the basic assumptions of such an approach. As Cavell points out in his Carus Lectures, Rawls' account of justice omits a very important dimension of what takes place when we assess the claims made upon us in the name of justice in situations in which it is the degree of society's compliance with its ideal that is in question. He takes issue with Rawls' assertion that "Those who express resentment must be prepared to show why certains institutions are unjust or how others have injured them" (1971, p. 553). In Rawls' view, if they are unable to do so, we can consider that our conduct is above reproach an bring the conversation on justice to an end. But, asks Cavell, "What if there is a cry of justice that expresses a sense not of having lost out in an unequal yet fair struggle, but of having from the start being left out" (1990, p. xxxviii). Giving as an example the situation of Nora in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, he shows how deprivation of a voice in the conversation of justice can be the work of the moral consensus itself. He urges us to realize that bringing a conversation to a close is always a personal choice, a decision that cannot be simply presented as mere application of procedures and justified as the only move that we could make in those circumstances. For that reason, we should never refuse bearing our responsibility for our decisions by invoking the commands of general rules or principles.

To take this responsibility seriously requires that we give up the dream of a rational consensus as well as the fantasy that we could escape from our human form of life. In our desire for a total grasp, says Wittgenstein, "We have got on the slippery ice where

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there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk: so we need *friction.* Back to the rough ground" (1958, p. 46e).

Wittgenstein, however, is not the only one to destroy the very ground of the deliberative model. Another way of revealing the inadequacy of the Habermasian approach is by problematizing the very possibility of the notion of the "ideal speech situation" conceived as the asymptotic ideal of intersubjective communication free of constraints, where the participants arrive at consensus by means of rational argumentation. This can be done, following the lead of Slavoy Žižek, through Lacan. Indeed a Lacanian approach reveals how discourse itself in its fundamental structure is authoritarian since out of the free-floating dispersion of signifiers, it is only through the intervention of a master signifier that a consistent field of meaning can emerge. As Žižek shows (1992, chapter 3), for Lacan the status of the master signifier, the signifier of symbolic authority founded only on itself (in its own act of enunciation) is strictly trascendental: the gesture that "distorts" a symbolic field, that "curves" its space by introducing a non-founded violence in *stricto sensu* correlative to its very establishment. This means that if we were to substract from a discursive field its distortion, the field would disintegrate, "de-quilt." Lacan undermines in that way the very basis of Habermasian view, according to which the inherent pragmatic presuppositions of discourse are non-authoritarian, since they imply the idea of a communication free of constraint where only rational argumentation counts.

What those two different types of critique bring to the fore is that, far from being merely empirical, or epistemological, the obstacles to the realization of the ideal speech situation are ontological. Indeed, the impediments to the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility because, without those so-called impediments, no communication, no deliberation could ever take place. We therefore have to conclude that the very conditions of possibility of deliberation constitute at the same time the conditions of

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impossibility of the ideal speech situation. There is absolutely no justification for attributing a special privilege in this respect to a so-called "moral point of view" governed by impartiality and where an impartial assessment of what is in the general interest could be reached.

An Alternative to Deliberative Democracy

I want to stress that what is really at stake in the critique of "deliberative democracy" that I am proposing here is the need to acknowledge the dimension of power and antagonism and their ineradicable character. By postulating the availability of public sphere where power and antagonism would have been eliminated and where a rational consensus would have been realized, this model of democratic politics denies the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities. This is why it is unable to provide an adequate model of democratic politics.

On contrary, this question of power and antagonism is precisely at the center of the approach that I want to put forward and whose theoretical bases have been delineated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). What we attempted to do in that book was draw out all the consequences for a radical conception of democracy of the ineradicability of power, of antagonism, and of the fact that there can never be total emancipation but only partial ones. This means that the democratic society cannot be conceived any more as a society that would have realized the dream of a perfect harmony or transparency. Its democratic character can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself the representation of the totality and claim in that way to have the "mastery" of the foundation. The central thesis of the book is that social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. This implies that any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show the traces of exclusion that governs its constitution. The point of convergence—or

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rather mutual collapse—between objectivity and power is precisely what we mean by "hegemony."

This way of posing the problem indicates that power should not be conceived as an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves. Political practice in a democratic society does not consist in defending the rights of preconstituted identities, but rather in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain.

According to such a view, democracy requires that the purely constructed nature of social relations finds its complement in the purely pragmatic grounds of the claims to power legitimacy. This implies that there is no unbridgeable gap between power and legitimacy—not obviously in the sense that all power is automatically legitimate, but in the sense that: a) if any power has been able to impose itself, it is because it has been recognized as legitimate in some quarters; and b) if legitimacy is not based in an a prioristic ground, it is because it is based in some form of successful power. This link between legitimacy and power is precisely what the deliberative model is unable to recognize, since it has to posit the possibility of a type of rational argumentation where power has been eliminated and where legitimacy is grounded on pure rationality.

The approach that I am advocating involves a displacement of the traditional relations between democracy and power. For the Habermasian vision of "deliberative democracy," the more democratic a society is, the less power would be constitutive of social relations. But if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values. To acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them, while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power, this is what is specific to the project of "radical and plural democracy" that we are advocating.

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Another distinct character of our approach concerns the question of the de-universalization of political subjects. We try to break with all forms of essentialism. Not only the essentialism that penetrates to a large extent the basic categories of modern sociology and liberal thought and according to which every social identity is perfectly defined in the historical process of the unfolding of being; but also with its diametrical opposite: a certain type of extreme post-modern fragmentation of the social that refuses to give the fragments any kind of relational identity. By putting an exclusive emphasis on heterogeneity and incommensurability, such a view impedes recognition how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged by radical democratic politics.

An Agonistic Model of Democracy

The consequences of the above-mentioned theses for democratic politics are far-reaching. They provide us with the theoretical terrain necessary to formulate an alternative to the model of "deliberative democracy," one that I call "agonistic pluralism."

In order to clarify the basis of this alternative view, I propose to distinguish between "the political" and "politics." By "the political," I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. "Politics," on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political."

It is only when we acknowledge this dimension of "the political" and understand that "politics" consists in domesticating hostility, only in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations, that we can pose the fundamental question for democratic politics. This question, *pace* the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a rational consensus reached without exclusion, that

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is, indeed, an impossibility. Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them." The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them distinction—which is what a consensus without exclusion pretends to achieve—but the different way in which is established. What is at stake is how to establish the us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

In the realm of politics, this presupposes that the "other" is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an "adversary," i.e., somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question. This category of the adversary does not eliminate antagonism, though, and it should be distinguished from the liberal notion of the competitor, with which it is sometimes identified. An adversary is a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy. But our disagreement concerning their meaning and implementation is not one that could be resolved through deliberation and rational discussion, hence the antagonistic element in the relation. To come to accept the position of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity, it has more of a quality of a conversion than of rational persuasion (in the same way as Thomas Kuhn has argued that adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a type of conversion). To be sure, compromises are possible; they are part of the process of politics. But they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation.

Hence, the importance of distinguishing between two types of political relations: one of *antagonism* between enemies, and one of *agonism* between adversaries. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an "antagonism" into an "agonism." This has important consequences for the way we envisage politics. Contrary to the model of "deliberative democracy," the model of "agonistic pluralism" that I am advocating asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational con-

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sensus possible, but to mobilise those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence.

To deny that there ever could be a free and unconstrained public deliberation of all matters of common concern is therefore crucial for democratic politics. When we accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion, we can begin to envisage the nature of a democratic public sphere in a different way. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body— which is characteristic of the holistic mode of social organization—a democratic society makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values. To be sure, pluralist democracy demands a certain amount of consensus, but such a consensus concerns only some ethico-political principles. Since those ethico-political principles can only exist, however, through many different and conflicting interpretations, such a consensus is bound to be a "conflictual consensus." This is why a pluralist democracy needs to make room for dissent and for the institutions through which it can be manifested. Its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as on the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. To borrow a term from system theory, we could say that pluralist politics should be envisaged as a "mixed-game," i.e., in part collaborative and in part conflictual and not as a wholly co-operative game as most liberal pluralists would have it. When the agonistic dynamic of the pluralist system is hindered because of a lack of democratic identities that one could identify, there is a risk that this will multiply confrontations over essentialist identities and non-negotiable moral values.

The inherently conflictual aspect of pluralism, linked to the dimension of undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonism is precisely what the deliberative democracy model is at pains to erase. By postulating the availability of a non-exclusive public

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sphere of deliberation where a rational consensus could obtain, they imagine that they can close the gap between legitimacy and rationality, finally resolving the tension that exists in democracy between the collective will and the will of all. But this is to transform pluralist democracy into a self-refuting ideal, since the moment of its realization would also be the moment of its disintegration.

This is why an approach that reveals the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion is of fundamental importance for democratic politics. By warning us against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, it forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive. An "agonistic" democratic approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and recognizes the forms of exclusion that they embody, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality. Awareness of the fact that difference allows us to constitute unity and totality while simultaneously providing essential limits is an agonistic approach that contributes in the subversion of the ever-present temptation that exists in democratic societies to naturalize their frontiers and essentialize their identities. Such an approach would, therefore, be much more receptive than the deliberative democracy model to the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses, and to the complexity of the power structure that this network of differences implies.

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