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Chantal mouffe on the political

How will democratic politics deal with conflicts? This is the issue that is at the heart of my reflection on the political and which I will address in this paper. I begin by delimiting the general framework of my approach, the theoretical foundations of which have been drawn up in Hegemony and socialist strategy, written together with Ernesto Laclau. In this book, we argued that the two concepts needed to understand what kind of political nature are contradictions and hegemony. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognise the dimension of radical negativity that prevents the full totalisation of society and brings out the ever-present possibility of antagonism. This requires abandoning the idea of a society beyond division and power, and overcoming the lack of a final foundation and with the insecure capacity that permeates every order. This means recognising the hegemonic nature of any kind of social order and imaginitism society as a product of a series of methods aimed at creating order in a context of unforeseen events. The methods of articulation by which a certain order is created, and the meaning of social institutions firmly therein, are what we call hegemonic methods. Each order is the temporary and precarious articulation of conditional methods. Things could always have been different and each order is based on the exclusion of other possibilities. It is always an expression of a certain configuration of power relationships. What is accepted at any given moment as the natural order, in common with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity that would be exterior to the methods that brought it to become. Each order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by contrahegemonic methods that try to disarticulate it to install another form of hegemony. In *The Return of the Political* (1993), *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) and *On the Political* (2005), I have developed my reflection on the political, perceived as the antagonistic dimension inherent in all human societies. I have proposed to distinguish between political and political; the political refers to this dimension of antagonism that can take many forms and can emerge in various social relationships, a dimension that can never be eradicated, politics refers to the ensemble of methods, discourses and institutions that strive to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence under conditions that are always potentially contradictory because they are influenced by the dimension of the political. The denial of the political dimension is, I have argued, what prevents liberal theory from coming to terms with violence and planning democratic policies adequately. Indeed, the political in its antagonistic dimensions cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it and wishing it away, which is typical liberal gesture: such negation only leads to impotence, an impotence that characterizes liberal thinking when confronted with the emergence of contradictions and forms of violence which, according to its theory, belong to a bygone era when reason had not yet managed to control supposedly archaic passions. The main problem with liberal rationalism is that it uses a logic in social that is based on an essentialist notion of being as a presence, and that it sees objectivity as inherent in the thing itself. Therefore, it cannot seize the process of building political identities. It cannot recognise that there can only be one identity when it is constructed as a difference and that any social objectivity was constituted by acts of power. What it refuses to acknowledge is that any form of social objectivity is ultimately political, and that it must bear the traces of the exclusionary acts governing its Constitution. The concept of being outside can be helpful here to make this argument clearer. This term has been suggested by Henry State (1985) to refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida through performances such as addition, track and difference. Its purpose is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity involves the establishment of a difference, a difference that is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy: for example, between black and white, male and female, etc. Once we have understood that each identity is relational and that the confirmation of a difference—i.e. the perception of something 'external'—is a prerequisite for the existence of an identity, then we can begin to imagine how a social relationship can become the breeding ground for antagonism. When we deal with political identities that are always collective identities, we are dealing with the creation of a us that can only exist by its demarcation from one them. This does not, of course, mean that such a relationship is necessarily an antagonistic. But that means there is always the possibility that this us/them relationship becomes a friend/enemy relationship. This happens when the others, who until now had been regarded as simply different, begin to be perceived as questioning our identity and threatening our existence. From that moment on, any kind of us/them relationship, it is religious, ethnic or economic becomes the locus of an antagonism. What is important here is to recognise that the very condition of opportunities for the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility for a society from which contradictions would have been eliminated. Antagonism is therefore a Opportunity. An Agonist model When one takes into account the shortcomings of liberal theory, we can understand why, in order to understand the nature of democratic politics and the challenge it faces, we need an alternative to the two main approaches of democratic political theory—the aggregates and deliberative—because neither of them recognises the political antagonistic dimension. The aggregated model sees political actors as moved by the pursuit of their interests; deliberative stresses a role of reason and moral considerations. Both approaches, albeit in a different way, assume that there is a consensus reached through rational procedures: instrumental rationality in the first case, communicative rationality in the second. A key problem with both models is that they ignore the central role that passions play in the creation of collective political identities. My claim is that democratic politics cannot be imagined without recognising influences as the mobile force of politics. It is to remedy all the shortcomings that I have devised an alternative model of democracy that I call agonistic, which seeks to tackle all the issues that cannot be properly addressed by the other two models because of their rationalist individualist framework. In a nutshell, my argument goes as follows. Once we have recognised the antagonistic dimension of political policy, we begin to realise that one of the greatest challenges of democratic politics is to try to defuse the potential contradictions that exist in human relations. The fundamental question of democratic policy is not, in fact, how to arrive at a rational consensus, a consensus reached without exclusion; this would require the construction of a us that would not have a similar one. Yet this is impossible because the very condition of the Constitution for us is to delimit one of them. The crucial question for democratic policy, then, is how to establish this distinction between the CIS and those who constitute policies in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism. Conflicts in democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated because the peculiarity of modern democracy is precisely the recognition and legitimisation of conflicts. What democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as opponents whose ideas would be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend these ideas will never be called into question. To put it another way, what is important is that the conflict does not take the form of an antagonism (struggle between enemies), but the form of an agonism (struggle between opponents). We could say that the purpose of democratic policy is to potential antagonism to an agonism. According to the agonist perspective, the central category of democratic politics is the category of the opponent, the opponent with whom we have common allegiance to the democratic principles of freedom and equality for all, while disagreeing on their interpretation. Opponents fight each other because they want their interpretation to be hegemonic, but they do not question their opponents' right to fight for victory in their position. This confrontation between opponents is what constitutes the agonistic struggle that is the very condition of a living democracy. For the agonist model, the primary task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or to banish them to the private sphere in order to create a rational consensus in public space. It is to tame these passions, so to speak, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic goals in order to mobilize them against democratic design. For the record, let me stress that this perception of the opponent must be severely distinguished from the understanding of this term that we find in liberal discourse. According to the understanding of opponents proposed here, and contrary to the liberal view, the presence of antagonism is not eliminated, but sublimated. What liberals call an opponent is, in fact, simply a competitor. They imagine politics as a neutral terrain where different groups compete to hold positions of power; their goal is simply to upset others in order to take their place without questioning the dominant hegemony and fundamentally transforming the relations of power. It's just a competition among the elite. In an agonistic policy, however, the antagonistic dimension is always present because what is at stake is the struggle between opposing hegemonic projects that can never be reconciled rationally, for one of them must be defeated. It is a real confrontation, but a confrontation that takes place under conditions governed by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the opponent. Liberal theorists can recognise not only the main reality of infighting in social life and the impossibility of finding rational, impartial solutions to political issues, but also the integrative role that conflicts can play in modern democracy. A well-functioning democracy requires a confrontation of democratic political positions. If this is lacking, there is always a danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identification. Too much emphasis on consensus, along with aversion to confrontation, leads to apathy and to dissatisfaction with political participation. This is why a society requires a debate on possible alternatives. It must provide political forms of identification around clearly differentiated democratic positions, or to put it in the terms of Niklas Luhman, there must be a clear division of the summit, a real choice between the policies put forward by the government and the opposition. Although some form of consensus is undoubtedly necessary, it must be accompanied by differences of opinion. There is a need for consensus in the institutions that make up democracy and the ethical political values that should inform the political association, but there will always be disagreement sensitising about the meaning of these values and how they should be implemented. In a pluralist democracy, such differences are not only legitimate but also necessary. They allow for various forms of citizenship identification and are the stuff of democratic politics. When the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered by a lack of democratic forms of identification, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet and the ground is laid for various forms of politics articulated around essentialist identities of a nationalist, religious or ethnic nature, and because confrontations are multiplied over non-negotiable moral values, with all the expressions of violence that such confrontations entail. Beyond the left and right, therefore, we should be suspicious of the current tendency to celebrate the blurring of the boundaries between left and right and those who advocate a policy beyond the left and right. A well-functioning democracy requires a vibrant tight-knit between democratic political positions. Antagonisms can take many forms and it is illusory to think that they could be eradicated. In order to enable the possibility of transforming them into agonistic relations, it is necessary to provide a political outlet for the expression of conflict within a pluralistic democratic system offering possibilities of IDENTIFICATION around democratic political alternatives. It is in this context that we can understand the very pernicious consequences of the fashionable treatise presented by Ulrich Beck (1997) and Anthony Giddens (1994), who both claim that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete. In their view, the friend/enemy model of politics is characteristic of classical industrial modernity—the 'first modernity'—but they claim that we now live in another, 'second' modernity, a reflexive one where emphasis should be placed on sub-politics, on the issues of life and death. What underlies this perception of reflexive modernity is the possibility of eliminating the political in its antagonistic dimension and the belief that friend/enemy relations have been eradicated. The claim is that in post-traditional societies we find no more collective identities constructed the term of us/them, which means that political boundaries have evaporated and that politics must therefore be reinvented, in order to use Beck's expression. In fact, Beck suggests that the general skepticism and centrality of doubt that is premising today precludes the emergence of antagonistic relationships. We have entered a time of ambivalence where no one can believe that they possess the truth (a belief that was precisely where contradictions originate from). Therefore, there is no more reason for their emergence. Any attempt to organize collective identities in terms of left and right, and to define an adversary, is thus discredited as archaic. Politics in its conflicting dimension is considered to be something of the past and the kind of democracy that is praised is a coherent, completely depoliticised democracy. Nowadays, the most important conditions for political discourse are good governance and partisan free democracy. I believe that it is the inability of democratic parties to provide distinct forms of identification of possible alternatives that have created the terrain for the current flourishing of right-wing populism. Indeed, right-wing populist parties are often the only ones trying to mobilise passions and create collective forms of identification. Against all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motives, they are well aware that politics always consists in creating one us versus one of them, and that it means creating collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse because it provides collective forms of identification around the people. If we add to this the fact that under the banner of modernising social democratic parties, in many countries they have identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle class and that they have stopped addressing the concerns of the popular sectors -- whose demands are regarded as archaic or retrograde -- we should not be surprised at the growing alienation of all those groups that feel excluded from the effective exercise of citizenship by what they perceive as the establishment elite. In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neoliberal form of globalisation and that we must accept its dictates, little wonder that more and more people are anxious to listen to those who claim that alternatives exist and that they will give back to the people the power to decide. When democratic politics has lost its ability to shape the discussion of how we should organise our common lives, and when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for smooth work in the market, the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration. It is important to recognise that to a large extent the of right-wing populist parties comes from giving people some kind of hope, with the belief that things could be different. Of course, this is an illusory hope based on false premises and on unacceptable exclusion mechanisms where xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when they are the only ones offering an outlet for political passions, their pretense is to offer an alternative seductive and their appeal is likely to grow. In order to be able to think of an adequate response, it is necessary to understand the economic, social and political conditions that explain their emergence. And this presupposes a theoretical approach that does not deny the antagonistic dimension of the political. Without a profound transformation of the way democratic politics is planned, and without a serious attempt to address the lack of forms of identification that would allow the democratic mobilisation of passions, the challenge posed by right-wing populist parties will remain and even increase. New political boundaries are being drawn in European politics, which entail the risk that the old left-right distinction may soon be replaced by another that is much less favourable to a pluralist democratic debate. It is therefore urgent to abandon the illusions of the model of consensus in politics and to create the foundations of an agonistic public sphere. By limiting themselves to demands for reason, moderation and consensus, democratic parties show their lack of understanding of how political logics work. What they do not understand is that democratic politics must have a real buy on people's desires and fantasies and that, instead of opposing interests against feelings and reason to passions, it should offer forms of identification that represent a real challenge for those promoted by the right. The aim of democratic policy is the construction of a people, a collective will, and that is why democracy has a necessarily populist dimension. However, this people can be constructed in different ways, and what is at stake in the agonist struggle is precisely the chain of equivalence through which the collective will is to be established. The peculiarity of pluralist democracy is that it recognises that the people are not one but divided, but it does mean that it is necessary for a people to create an opponent to define an opponent, yes, the creation of one of us always requires the determination of one of them. An agonistic approach to recent protest movements In addition to allowing us to understand the reasons for the growing success of right-wing populism, the agonist approach may also shed light on the recent protest movements in liberal-democratic societies. In *On the Political* (2005), in which I criticised the current post-political trend, I argued that we witnessed a as a result of the consensus at the which has come to dominate the politics of most European societies. This consensus, which is the result of the undisputed hegemony of neoliberalism, deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate in which they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives. Until recently, it was mainly through right-wing populist parties that people were able to vent their anger towards such a post-political situation. With the recent protests, we see the emergence of other ways, much more respectable, to react to the democratic deficit that characterises our post-democratic societies. But in both cases, what is at stake is a deep dissatisfaction with the current regime. If so many people across the population, not just young people, are now taking to the streets, it is because they have lost faith in traditional parties and they feel that their voice cannot be heard through traditional political channels. As one of the motto of the protesters claims: We have a voice, but we do not have a vote. Perceived as the refusal of the post-political order, current protests can be read as a call for the radicalization of existing democratic institutions, not for their rejection. What they demand is better, more inclusive forms of representation. In order to satisfy its demand for a voice, existing representative institutions must be transformed and new ones created in order to create the conditions for an agonistic confrontation in which citizens would be offered real alternatives. Such a confrontation requires the emergence of a real left that can offer an alternative to the social liberal consensus dominant in center-left parties. The case of Greece, I believe, can serve as an illustration of such an approach. In Greece, popular mobilisations were led by a coalition of several left-wing parties (Syriza) whose aim was to come to power through elections and implement a series of radical reforms. Their aim was clearly not the downfall of liberal democratic institutions, but their transformation to make them a means of expressing popular demands. The French situation can also provide interesting elements for reflection. It has often been noted that the occupy movement, unlike many other European countries, was almost insignificant in France. Some people have tried to explain this supposed anomaly by the fact that the austerity measures had not been as drastic there as in other countries and that unemployment was not so high. But why, then, did we see several occupation camps in Germany where the economic conditions are better? To look for an economic explanation is to miss the deep causes that are of a political nature. I am not suggesting, of course, that the French do not have serious reasons for protesting, but among young people many seem to think that significant political channels still available to express their demands. No doubt a middle-right and centre-left consensus has also been installed in France, but faith in the power of politics to change things has not waned as in other European countries. This is because there is a more radical agenda on the left of the Socialist Party. The capacity, for example, of the Jean-Luc Melenchon candidate of the Front de gauche, a coalition of several left-wing parties—to mobilize young people in the 2012 presidential election was truly remarkable. Many young people who in other countries would have been found in Occupy camps, or remained skeptical of political engagement, felt that there was room for their demands in the Front de Gauche programme and participated with great enthusiasm in Melenchon's campaign for a citizens' revolution. The problem is not, of course, limited to young people, because there are also important popular sectors whose interests are ignored by the traditional democratic parties. In previous papers examining the growth of right-wing populist parties, I argued that their success was largely due to the fact that they were often the only ones to address the concerns of the working class. In their development towards the Center, socialist parties have abandoned the people whose demands they see as archaic and retrograde and they are now confined to representing the interests of the middle class. This, of course, explains the success of Marine Le Pen in France and the fact that many French workers are now voting for the Front National. Melenchon and Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, are often accused of being populist, but far from being a basis for criticism, this should be seen as a virtue. The purpose of a left-wing popular movement should be to mobilize passions against the construction of a people in order to bring about a progressive collective will. A people can, of course, be constructed in different ways and some of them are incompatible with a left-wing project. It all depends on how the opponent is defined. While right-wing populism identifies the opponent with immigrants or Muslims, the opponent of a left-wing populist movement should be the configuration of forces that sustain neoliberal hegemony. Democracy or representation? At the heart of the dispute over how to interpret the recent protests, lies a very old discussion about the nature of democracy and the role of representation. Two positions confront each other; it regards representative democracy as an oxymoron and argues that a real democracy needs to be a direct or even a presentistic one. another claim that far from being contrary to the representation of democracy is one of its conditions. This is an issue I have in previous work, and it may be useful to re-review some of the arguments in this discussion in order to clarify what is at stake in the dispute in question. In *The Democratic Paradox* (2000), I argue that Western liberal democracy is the articulation of two traditions: liberalism with its emphasis on freedom and pluralism and democracy, which postulates equality and popular sovereignty. Although both have important strengths, they are ultimately incompatible and the history of liberal democracy has been driven by the tension between claims to freedom and the demands for equality. What has happened during neoliberal hegemony is that the liberal component has become so dominant that democratic values have been eroded. Several previous democratic advances have been phased out and under the motto of modernization, the core democratic values have been dismissed as archaic. Without underestimating the democratic shortcomings of social democracy, it is clear that the situation has drastically worsened under neoliberal hegemony. The democratic value of equality has been set aside, comfortably replaced by elections in the discourse of the third way and its social liberal avatars. It is truly regrettable that so many parties on the centre-left are ready to take into account what has rightly been called a post-democratic condition. However, there are alternatives, and we should not accept the current situation as the final way of formulating liberalism and democracy. The experience of progressive governments in South America over the last decade proves that it is possible to challenge neoliberalism and to redefine the priority of democratic values without relinquishing liberal representative institutions. It also shows that, far from being an obstacle to democratic progress, the state can in fact be an important means of promoting popular demand. The recent awakening of citizens in Europe and the UNITED States is very encouraging because it breaks with the post-political consensus. A taboo has been broken and many voices are now being heard questioning the inequalities that exist in our societies. However, in order to effectively challenge neoliberal hegemony, it is important that all the energy that has broken out is not diverted to the wrong alloys. I fear that this is what could happen if representative institutions become the main target of the protests. There is no denying that representative institutions are in crisis in their current liberal democratic form, but I do not believe that the solution exists in the establishment of an unrepresentative democracy or that extra-parliamentary struggles are the only means of making democratic progress. Such views are popular because they are consistent with the idea, fashionable among sectors of the left, that the crowd could organize themselves avoid taking power and become a state, finding such an anti-political strategy among activists involved in the various movements in upset is worrying because it prevents designing an adequate strategy for their fight. When representation is seen as the problem, the aim cannot be to work with the

current institutions to make them more representative and more accountable, but to make them completely overboard. The purpose of the movements will be visualised in terms of emigration from given forms of democracy, because attempts to transform existing institutions are vain and that representative democracy must renounce. Many of those who reject representation identify representative democracy by its current post-democratic form and with the actual way of working by the parliamentary system. They do not see that the problem is the way in which representative institutions operate at the moment and the fact that so many votes are excluded from representation. What must be called into question is the lack of options offered to citizens, not the very idea of representation. A pluralistic democratic society cannot exist without representation. For starters, as the anti-essentialist strategy has made clear identities are never already given, but are always produced through discursive construction; this process of construction is a process of representation. It is through representation that collective political topics are created and they do not exist in advance. Any claim of a political identity is thus internal, no exterior of the representation process. Secondly, in a democratic society in which pluralism is not conceived in a harmonious anti-political form, and which takes into account the ever-present possibility of contradictions, representative institutions (by giving shape to the division of society) play a crucial role in enabling the institutionalisation of this conflict-based dimension. However, such a role can only be fulfilled by the availability of an agonistic confrontation. What is at the heart of our current post-political model is the absence of agonistic confrontations, and this will not be addressed by horizontalist methods. This does not mean that these methods have no role to play in an agonistic democracy. I am convinced that the diversity of extra-parliamentary struggles and the many forms of activism are valuable, not only in raising awareness and bringing forward issues that are being neglected, but also in providing a world for the cultivation of different social relations. What I am arguing is that these methods cannot compensate representative institutions, and that it is necessary to create synergy between them and other more institutional forms of struggle. If the protest movements refuse to establish alliances with traditional channels, which are impenetrable to democratic transformation, their radical potential will be lost. Amazingly some activists are still celebrating the horizontalist experience of Argentina in 2001, presenting them as the model to follow, without recognizing the limits of such a strategy. They do not seem to realise that the democratic progress that has taken place there, as in other South American countries over the last ten years, has been made possible thanks to an articulation of extraparliamentary and parliamentary struggles. These are the experiences that the European left can learn from, and it is high time to stop romanticising spontaneism and horizontalism. The demand for democracy now being made in a number of different directions can only have lasting effects if the activists involved in these movements, instead of implementing a withdrawal strategy, agree to become part of a progressive collective will engaged in a position alchemy to radicalise democratic institutions and to establish a new hegemony. What is needed to combat right-wing populism is the formation of left-wing populism, a populism in which the opponent is not constructed in a xenophobic (for example anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim) way, but as a collective will aimed at an alternative to neoliberal globalisation whose opponents are the forces behind this project, such as the multinationals, the financial corporations. It is clear that, under the current circumstances, such a project cannot be conceived solely in a national way, and that it needs to be thought of at European level. The idea that I want to leave with you is therefore that if our aim is to promote democracy in tomorrow's Europe, we should contribute to the formation of a left-leaning European populist movement that will challenge the current post-political neoliberal consensus shared by centre-right and centre-left parties. ReferencesBeck, Ulrich. Reinvention of politics: Innovative democracy in the global social order. Cambridge Polity press, 1997.Giddens, Anthony. Beyond left and right. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1994.Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. Hegemony and socialist strategy. Towards a radical democratic policy. London, Verso 2001.Mouffe, Chantal. The return of politics. London, Verso, 1993.—. The democratic paradox. London, Verso, 2000.—. On the political: Thinking in action. London, Routledge, 2005.State, Henri. Wittgenstein and Derrida. London, Basil Blackwell, 1985. 1985.

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