

Articulated Power Relations - Markus Miessen in conversation with Chantal Mouffe

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In December 2006, London-based architect and writer Markus Miessen went to meet political theorist and Professor of Political Theory Chantal Mouffe. In a series of conversations at Westminster, he used his current investigation into 'conflict- and non-consensus-based forms of participation as a form of alternative spatial practice' as a starting point to question Mouffe about democratic life and her understanding of what she calls 'conflictual consensus'.

Markus Miessen

Chantal, you have written extensively on the struggle of politics and the radical heart of democratic life. Could you please explain to us the main thesis of your latest book "On the Political"?

Chantal Mouffe

My objective in 'On the Political' consists of two aims: the first one is from the point of view of political theory. I am convinced that the two dominant models in democratic political theory—which are the aggregative model and on the other side the deliberative model, represented, for example, by the work of Jürgen Habermas—are not adequate to grasp what is the challenge that we are facing today. I wanted to contribute to the theoretical discussion in political theory by proposing a different model, one, which I call the agonistic model of democracy. My second aim corresponds to my central motivation, which is a political one. I have been trying to understand why in the kind of society we are living today—which I call a post-political society—there is an increasing disaffection with democratic institutions. I have for some time been concerned with the growing success of right wing populism parties but also, more recently, with the development of Al Quaida forms of terrorism. I feel that we do not have the theoretical tools to really understand what is happening. Of course I do not claim that political theory is powerful enough to explain everything. But I think that there is a crucial role that political theory can play in helping us to understand our current predicament. So far, it has not been helpful at all. In

fact, one could even say that it has been contra-productive. We have been made to believe that the aim of democratic politics was to reach a consensus. Obviously, there are different ways in which this consensus is being envisaged. But the common idea is that the distinction between Left and Right is not pertinent any more. It is what we find in Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. They argue that we should think beyond Left and Right, and, according to Beck, that we need to re-invent politics in terms of 'sub-politics'. This is of course typical of liberal thought, which, as Carl Schmitt indicated, has never been able to understand the specificity of the political. When liberals intend to speak about politics, they either think in terms of economics—and that would definitely be the aggregative model—or in terms of morality, and this represents the deliberative model. But what is specific to the political always eludes liberal thought. I consider this as a serious shortcoming because to be able to act in politics one needs to understand what is the dynamic of the political.

And would this constitute the book's main thesis?

Yes, this is why, in the book, I insist that the dimension of the political is something that is linked to the dimension of conflict that exists in human societies, the ever-present possibility of antagonism: an antagonism that is ineradicable. This means that a consensus without exclusion—a form of consensus beyond hegemony, beyond sovereignty will always be unavailable.

Could you please explain the relationship between your theory and the work of Carl Schmitt?

I think that the strength of Schmitt's critique of liberalism is precisely to have shown that liberalism is, and must be, blind to this dimension of antagonism and that it cannot acknowledge that the specificity of the political is the friend and enemy distinction. Schmitt is definitely right when he insists on that point. My main disagreement with Schmitt concerns the consequences that he draws from that. Schmitt believed that liberal pluralist democracy is an unviable regime and that—because of that dimension of antagonism, which exists in human societies—the only kind of order that can be established is an authoritarian kind of order. Pluralism according to him could not be accepted within the political association, because it would necessarily lead to a friend and enemy struggle and therefore to the destruction of the political association. This was really a challenge for me, because—on the one hand—I agree with Schmitt on the ineradicability of antagonism. On the other hand, I want to assert the possibility of a pluralist democracy. This is why I developed this model that I call an agonistic model of democracy in which I am trying to show that the main task of

democratic politics is, to put it in a nutshell, to transform antagonism into agonism.

How is this model being expressed?

What I mean by that is that they are two ways in which this dimension of antagonism can be expressed in society. One is what we could call 'antagonism proper', which is the friend and enemy relation. Schmitt was right to claim that this is something that will lead to the destruction of the political association if it is allowed to be played out inside a political community. But there is another way in which antagonistic conflict can also be played out and this is what I call agonism. In that case we are faced not with the friend-enemy-relation, but a relation of what I call adversaries. The major difference between enemies and adversaries is that adversaries are, so to speak, 'friendly enemies' in the sense that they have got something in common: they share a symbolic space. Therefore there can exist between them what I call a conflictual consensus. They agree on the ethico-political principles that inform the political association but they disagree about the interpretation of those principles. If we take those principles to be 'liberty and equality for all', it is clear that those principles can be understood in many different conflicting ways and this will lead to conflicts that can never be rationally resolved. You can never say this is the correct interpretation of liberty or equality. This is how I envisage the agonistic struggle, a struggle between different interpretations of shared principles, a conflictual consensus: consensus on the principles, disagreement about their interpretation.

You have argued that democratic processes should aim to supply an arena in which differences can be confronted. Could you please clarify how agonism as a constructive form of political conflict might offer an opportunity for constructive expression of disagreements?

I think that it is very important to envisage the task of democracy in terms of creating the institutions that will allow for conflicts, which will necessarily emerge, to take an agonistic form, i.e. to be a conflict between adversaries. Not between enemies. If that agonistic form is not available, it is very likely that, when conflicts emerge, they are going to take an antagonistic form.

In this context, what exactly do you mean by institution?

I use 'institution' in a very wide sense, in terms of an ensemble of practices, language-games, discourses but also traditional institutions as parties and other political institutions as well as different forms of participations among a diversity of people at local and other levels

I am interested in your critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Could you please elaborate on your distinction between their idea of an “absolute democracy” in relation to what you call “forms of construction of we/they compatible with a pluralistic order”?

Indeed. The institutional aspect is something on which I disagree with the view that Hardt and Negri put forward in *Empire* and later in *Multitude*. Theirs is a very anti-institutional view, they are against all forms of local, regional, or national institutions, which they declare to be fascistic. They think that belonging to specific places is something that should be overcome and believe that we should propel some kind of cosmopolitan view and understanding. The *Multitude* should not have any form of belonging. I think this is completely inadequate theoretically, because what they do not acknowledge—and in that sense I think they do share something with most liberals—is the importance of what I call ‘passions’ for political collective identities. They do not realize the importance of the passions -Freud would call it the libidinal investment [an attachment of strong, intense emotional energies to an issue, person, or concept], which are mobilized in the creation of local, regional, or national forms of identities. They think that those attachments could and should be overcome. In fact, in that point they are not so far from Habermas with his idea of post-conventional identities and his notion of post-national Europe. From the point of view of a philosophical anthropology, I find this completely inadequate. My main disagreement with Hardt and Negri refers to the possibility of an ‘absolute democracy’, a democracy beyond any form of institution. It is even difficult for me to imagine what this could be. There is a messianic tone in their view. They think that we could reach a perfect democracy in which there will no longer be any relation of power, there will be no more conflict, and no more antagonism. It goes completely against the point that I want to defend and which is at the basis of most of my work, which is precisely the fact that antagonism is ineradicable. It can be tamed, this is what agonism tried to do, but we will never arrive at the point where it has definitely been overcome.

Is there someone in this context that you feel more sympathetic with than Hardt and Negri?

When I am thinking of democracy, I am much more interested, for example, in Jacques Derrida and his notion of a ‘democracy to come’. Insisting on the fact that this democracy will always be ‘to come’, there is never a point in which we can say that democracy has been realised...

...while Hardt and Negri are waiting for this to happen.

The moment we say democracy has been realised, we pretend to be in a situation in which we can say: what exists at the moment is a perfect democracy. Such a democracy would have ceased to be pluralistic because there would no longer be any possibility for discussion or conflict. This is an idea that goes absolutely contrary to my idea of an agonistic democracy. For me, there is democracy as long as there is conflict and that existing arrangements can be contested. If we arrive at a point where we say 'this is the endpoint, contestation is no longer legitimate', this means the end of democracy. I have another problem with Hardt and Negri. I see their entire theory as some re-formulation—even if it is in a different vocabulary, A vocabulary influenced by Deleuze and Guattari—of the type of Marxism of the Second International. It is the same type of determinism in which we basically don't have to do anything; just wait for the moment in which the contradiction of Empire will bring about the reign of the Multitude. All the crucial and fundamental questions for politics are automatically evacuated. To give you an example—they see the alter-globalisation movement as one of the manifestations of the power of the Multitude. I also think it's an interesting movement, but the problem with this movement is that it is very heterogeneous. Within the alter-globalisation movement we can find many groups with many very different and often conflicting objectives. For me, the political task is how to create a chain of equivalence among those different struggles. How to make them converge into a movement, which presents some form of unity. This is of course something that Hardt and Negri disagree with completely. They believe that the very heterogeneity of the movement is its force. They argue that because these groups within the movement are not linked on a horizontal level, but go straight vertically to the power of Empire and so their capacity of subversion is much greater.

What is your feeling towards this?

I think that this is completely inadequate. One of the main reasons why this alter-globalisation movement is, at the moment, encountering difficulties is precisely because they have not yet managed to establish enough forms of coordination between the different forms of struggles.

How does that relate to an institutional scale?

The people who, in this movement, are influenced by Hardt and Negri do not want to have anything to do with existing institutions such as parties or trade unions. They want a pure movement of civil society, because they are afraid—and there I can see that they have got a point—that if you enter into contact with established institutions they will try to neutralise or to recuperate you. This

danger exists. I would not want to negate that. On the other hand, without a form of synergy between the alter-globalisation movement and those institutions I don't think that important advances can be made. I can give you an example of that: for instance, they celebrate very much the movement of the Piqueteros.

The movement of unemployed workers in Argentina...

Yes. This is exactly the kind of movement of civil society opposed to any form of institution that Hardt and Negri advocate. To be sure, such a movement managed to bring down the government of de la Rúa [Fernando de la Rúa, president of Argentina from December 10, 1999, to December 21, 2001]. Their main slogan was "que se vayan todos" ["they must all go, we do not want anything to do with politicians"]. The problem however is that when it came to the moment of re-establishing some kind of order, at the time of the elections, the Piqueteros were absolutely impotent, because they had no relay at all with the institutions or the parties. So when the elections took place it was a struggle between traditional parties, between Menem [Carlos Menem, President of Argentina from July 8, 1989, to December 10, 1999, representing the Justicialist Party] and Kirchner [Néstor Kirchner, sworn in as President of Argentina on May 25, 2003]. Thank god, Menem was defeated. Kirchner won and turned out to be much more radical than expected. He tried to establish contact with the Piqueteros in order to bring them into his government. He managed to work with one part of that movement. There are still parts that do not want to have anything to do with the government. Those are people are now very isolated. I think this example shows that when those movements of the so-called Multitude are not articulated with more traditional forms of politics, they cannot go very far.

Would this 'one voice' –or, in your words, a 'more traditional form of politics'–not require some form of consensus? It seems to me that it requires a certain form of negotiation to bring these different voices together or not?

Well, I mean it will be a conflictual consensus, you see. Some kind of articulation, I prefer this term, between the different movements so that they manage to have some form of common aim. I don't like to use the concept of consensus in this case, because it carries more than I think is necessary. A conflictual consensus suggests that we are working together towards a common aim. This is enough.

Could you please describe more precisely what these practices and institutions could potentially be or how they would come into being? I am particularly interested in the

formation of alternative institutions and knowledge spaces here.

The essential differences and conflicts are going to remain, but there is at least articulation. In regards to Hardt and Negri, what needs to be put into question is the idea of a necessary process. I am not sure whether Capitalism is its own gravedigger. This is what they claim and this is what the Second International claimed as well. They believe that Empire will bring itself down. It's the traditional Marxist argument that the productive forces will reach a stage in which they are necessarily going to create an emergence of forces—which is the Multitude—that will bring the prevailing system down. Unfortunately, I cannot share this optimism. I do not believe that this process is a necessary one. I think that it is a possibility, but only a possibility and that—in order to take place—a political intervention is necessary. This is what they don't see. I have seen a film that was made in Germany, called "Was Tun?". It's about the alter-globalisation movement and the influence of Hardt and Negri in it. At the end of the film, the filmmakers ask both of them: "so, what is to be done?" And Negri answers: "wait and be patient". And Hardt's answer is: "follow your desire". This is their kind of politics and I seriously do not think that this is enough. 'Just wait, the development of capitalism is going to bring about the reign of the Multitude'. This is not the way in which we can today envisage radical politics. In fact, I have got many more issues of contention with Hardt and Negri, but we cannot possibly go into these today.

Since—as you have said—we are now facing a situation in which it is crucial to think about a form of commonality that allows for conflict as a form of productive engagement, could a model of 'bohemian participation', in the sense of an outsider's point of entry, allow for the 'outsider' to become a role-model for the future?

According to me, what is really necessary today is to create an agonistic public space, an agonistic type of politics. This is really what is missing. We are living in a situation, which in 'On the Political' I call 'post-political', in which we are constantly being told that the partisan model of politics has been overcome, that there is no more Left and Right: there is this kind of consensus at the centre, in which there is really no possibility for an alternative. We are told that given the state of globalisation, there is nothing what we can do. And that is why most socialist parties or labour parties have moved so much towards the centre. What they offer is really not fundamentally different, from what centre-right parties offer. There is now a general consensus that there is no alternative, which I think is extremely dangerous. In my view such a situation has created the terrain for the rise of right-wing-populism in Europe.

They are the only parties who say: 'there is an alternative to this consensus at the centre and we will offer it. We will bring back to you the people the voice that the establishment has taken away from you. We will provide you with the possibility to exercise popular sovereignty'. Of course the alternatives they present are inadequate and not acceptable because they are usually articulated in a xenophobic language. But given that right-wing populist parties are often the only ones who pretend to represent an alternative, I don't think it is surprising that they are attracting more and more people. They are also the only ones trying to mobilise passions and to offer forms of identification with a strong affective component. It is very important for the left to understand that instead of reacting through moral condemnation, they need to understand the reasons for the success of those parties so as to be able to provide an adequate answer.

In this context, what is your specific understanding of dissensus?

I think that what is important is to subvert the consensus that exists in so many areas and to re-establish a dynamic of conflictuality. And so, from that point of view, I can see that what you call 'the outsider' could play a role. Personally, I would put it differently, because it is more the person who disagrees, who will have another point of view. It is not necessarily an outsider. It could be somebody from within the community, somebody who has a different point of view, who is not part of the prevailing consensus. He or she will allow people to see things differently.

Yes, but is this not precisely the outside voice that is entering the arena? It depends on those who will be able to access existing debates and discourses untroubled by their disapproval.

Of course; in some cases it can be somebody from the outside who suddenly opens up the view and says 'look, there are also those other things that you do not take into account'. So, yes, it can be an outsider, but it need not be an outsider. There are also some voices within the communities that have been silenced. But I agree, you could say that it is an outsider to the consensus. I think it is important to hear most of the voices that have been silenced or that have not been able to express themselves. I am not necessarily saying that they have not been gained the right to speak, but maybe a voice that has not yet emerged, because the whole culture of consensus simply does not allow for people to envisage that things could be different, you see. This is what I like in the slogan of the alter-globalisation movement: 'another world is possible'. I think it's really important for all of us to begin thinking in these

terms. Another world is possible. And the present neoliberal hegemony has tried to convince us that things can only be as they are. Fortunately, this is not the truth. All those forms of what we call the productive engagement to disturb the consensus are crucial to bring to the fore the things that consensus has tried to push aside. In the creation of what I call an agonistic public space, there are many different voices and kinds of people that all play a role. For instance, I think that this is definitely an area where artists, architects, or people who are engaged in the entire field of culture at large, play an incredibly important role, because they provide different forms of subjectivities from the ones that exist at the moment.

It seems to me that there is an urgent need to undo the innocence of participation. Isn't this kind of practice precisely the modus operandi that we can find so many 'socially relevant' practices today? It seems interesting how particular practices have hijacked the notion of participation as an unquestionably positive, user-driven means of engagement. In this context, it could be useful to think through a concept of 'conflictual participation' as a productive form of interventional practice.

I think that is an important point. Today, we are in a phase that I call the post-Washington-consensus phase. Of course the Washington-consensus is still in place. It is fortunately more and more challenged, particularly in Latin America, where what is happening is quite interesting. More and more countries simply say that they do no longer want to obey the IMF or the World Bank and want to organise things in their own ways. The power of globalisation has begun to realise that it needs to use a different strategy. A strategy of participation. And this is why participation has become such a buzzword. But participation in many cases consists simply for people to auto-exploit themselves. They are not just going to accept things the way they are, but they are going to actively contribute to this consensus, to accept it. And this is why I find your notion of the 'Violence of Participation' very interesting. We need to realise that participation can also be very dangerous.

What constitutes the danger?

I was in a discussion at LSE [London School of Economics] where there were people that participated in the Davos Forum as well as people who participated in Porto Alegre. They were all bringing to the table their different experiences. The person who had been in Porto Alegre was telling a story of the event and then the person who had joined the Davos Forum would say: 'but that's incredible, because it's exactly the same thing that was discussed in Davos.'

It's exactly the same thing'. And the person was understanding this as something optimistic and I was saying 'but wait a minute, they cannot possibly be talking about the same thing'. The fact that there is the same vocabulary is because the people at Davos have realised that they need to transform their vocabulary. They need people to feel that they are part of this movement. I am very suspicious of this notion of participation. As if participation by itself was going to bring about real democracy. Of course there are many different forms of participation. If it's some kind of agonistic or conflictual participation, as you call it, in which there is a real confrontation between different views, then, yes, I think it's very good. But participation can also mean participating in some form of consensual view in which nobody is really able to disturb the consensus and in which some form of agreement is pre-supposed. I would definitely not see that as something positive. Participation really depends on how you understand it. It is certainly not an innocent notion.

Any form of participation is already a form of conflict. In order to participate in any environment or given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. How can one move away from romanticised notions of participation into more pro-active, conflictual models of engagement? What would you refer to as micro-political environments and what and where do micro-political movements exist?

Concerning the issue of space, I don't think that there is such a big difference between what you call micro-political, macro-political, and geo-political, because I think that this dimension of the political is something that can manifest itself at all levels. It is important not to believe that there are some levels that are more important than others. In a way it is coming back to what I have said before in regards to Hardt and Negri. When we began to organise the European Social Forum, they were against this idea. Because they were saying the struggle should be at a global level. There is no point in having a European Social Forum, because this automatically is privileging Europe. But I think that it is very important to have Social Forums at all levels: cities, regions, nations– all those levels and scales are very important. The agonistic struggle should take place at a multiplicity of levels and should not privilege the geo-political one or the micro-political one, but instead realise that the political dimension is something that cannot be localised in a privileged space. It is a dimension that can manifest itself in all kinds of social relations, whatever the specific space is like. As many recent geographers have insisted, space is always something, which is striated, to use an expression, which Deleuze and Guattari are criticising. Because what they are thinking of is a smooth and

homogeneous space, while Doreen Massey argues that every form of space is always some configuration of power relations. It means that what I would call the hegemonic struggle, or the political struggle, need to take place at all those levels. There is a multiplicity of levels in which the agonistic struggle needs to be launched. This is why I think that there is a potential for politisation at multiple levels and it is important to engage with all those levels and not just simply say, oh well, the global struggle is the most important one; because this is not the case. We need to really try to transform and articulate power relations at all levels where they exist.

Chantal, many thanks for your time.

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