Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle? Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Model of Politics

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According to Carl Schmitt, the political is essentially characterized by the antagonistic opposition between friends and enemies. In several recent books, Chantal Mouffe has taken hold of this central Schmittian idea and has used it as a starting point for a critique of the consensual nature of both contemporary political theory and contemporary political practice.[1]

On the theoretical level, Mouffe argues that the current emphasis on the need for a reasonable political consensus, as found in John Rawls's political liberalism or in Jürgen Habermas's model of deliberative democracy, is misguided.[2] Theories like these are based on a universalistic logic which misrepresents the true nature of the political and fails to understand its dynamics. Because of its *individualistic* framework, so the argument goes, consensualism lacks the conceptual means to understand politics as a power struggle between collective identities. Moreover, as a result of its *rationalistic* premises, it refuses to accept that political oppositions cannot be resolved by rational means and that politics is ultimately about making decisions in an undecidable terrain. Finally, because of its *universalistic* aspirations, consensualism is unwilling to recognize that our social order is not organized on the basis of universal rational or moral principles, but rather on the basis of necessarily contingent and, therefore, "hegemonic" articulations of power relations.[3]

On the political level, Mouffe claims that the tendency to downplay the importance and the persistence of political oppositions is dangerous because it tends to hamper the proper workings of the political sphere. Political oppositions that are unable to appear in the political arena are bound to re-emerge elsewhere in a much less tractable guise. In this regard, Mouffe associates the rise of right wing populist parties in Western Europe with the dominance of "third way" politics and the alleged disappearance of the left/right distinction. Similarly, she believes the emergence of international terrorism to be the result of the unipolar nature of our current neoliberal world-order, in which the hegemonic dominance of the United States leaves no opportunity for the representation of real political oppositions on the international scene.[4]

According to Mouffe, the main problems connected to consensualist theories and practices stem from their one-sided commitment to a liberal strand of political thinking. Consensualists fail to appreciate that liberal democracy is a political regime based on a paradoxical mixture of two political traditions and thus combines the universalistic logic of liberalism with the antagonistic logic of democracy. In order to reinstate the importance of this latter logic, Mouffe elaborates her own model of agonistic pluralism. Therein, she acknowledges the importance of a thin consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality as the constitutive symbolic framework of any liberal democratic regime. At the same time, however, the agonistic model emphasizes that this thin consensus remains conflictual. Democracy is characterized by an open-ended political struggle in which agonistic opponents advocate different and incompatible interpretations of the core values of liberty and equality.

Although Mouffe provides an interesting challenge to contemporary consensualism and although she rightly emphasizes that a reassessment of the relationship between the democratic and the liberal logic is crucial for a proper understanding of liberal democracy, her own agonistic alternative remains problematic. In this paper, a comparison with both Claude Lefort's model of democracy and Ernesto Laclau's model of populism reveals that Mouffe's agonistic model of politics is marred by some crucial but persistent ambiguities which result from an unresolved tension between the alleged hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle on the one hand and the presence of a common symbolic framework on the other.

After exploring these ambiguities, I argue that Mouffe's model is most coherently disambiguated by emphasizing a crucial distinction between two kinds of political struggles. First, the struggle necessary to establish the democratic regime itself and to maintain it in the face of inimical challenges should be understood as a hegemonic struggle in which democrats aim to impose and uphold the ethico-political values of liberty and equality. Second, once a democratic symbolic framework has been established, however, the remaining open-ended struggle over the proper interpretation of these values should be understood as a democratic, *non*-hegemonic struggle. Such a disambiguation of the agonistic model implies, on the theoretical level, that the minimal consensus on the values of liberty and equality does more conceptual work than Mouffe herself seems to acknowledge. On the political level, this disambiguation points to the importance of upholding and protecting these values as the constitutive ideas of liberal democracy. It is thereby crucial, in order for democracy to maintain itself as a political regime, that democrats are able to distinguish between legitimate democratic adversaries who share a commitment to these values and antagonistic enemies of democracy who do not.

I. Agonistic Pluralism

According to Carl Schmitt, the antagonistic logic of the political is incompatible with the universalistic and apolitical principles of liberalism.[5] Therefore, the liberal democratic regime, which tries to combine aspects of both logics, is inconsistent and should be rejected in favor of a truly democratic regime. This true democracy will be based on the antagonistic opposition between, on the one hand, our own people, characterized by a homogeneous national identity, and, on the other hand, as potential enemies, all other nations with different and incompatible national identities.

Of course, as confirmed by historical events, this model does not seem to provide a really attractive conception of democracy. Interestingly, however, Mouffe argues that an alternative model of democracy is conceivable which gets rid of the homogenizing tendencies of Schmitt's approach but which nevertheless retains the insight that the logic of the political is essentially antagonistic. Mouffe points out "with Schmitt against Schmitt" that the homogeneous nature of the people is an illusion because the antagonistic dimension of the political is also present *within* the boundaries of the political community.[6] Therefore, the unity of the people is not simply empirically given, but is itself the result of an open-ended political power struggle between competing political collectivities. Whereas Schmitt only leaves room for pluralism on the international level (as a pluriverse of homogeneous states), pluralism should be internalized into the democratic community.

The internalization of pluralism requires, however, a modified conceptualization of the political opponent.[7] Indeed, the democratic opponent is no longer an antagonistic "enemy" who poses an existential threat and whose physical elimination is, therefore, allowed but rather an agonistic "adversary" whose legitimacy as a political competitor we should

acknowledge and respect. Even while in conflict, democratic adversaries see themselves as belonging to the same political association and as sharing a common symbolic space. This space is provided, more specifically, by the ethico-political values of "liberty and equality for all," which are identified as the common good of the liberal democratic society and which guarantee the open and pluralistic nature of the community.[8] Although Mouffe thus acknowledges the central importance of liberty and equality, she also believes, in contrast with the "rationalistic" liberal democrats she challenges, that our commitment to these values is contingent in the sense that they are "merely" constitutive parts of what happens to be our typically Western form of life. Because this form of life is itself the hegemonic result of a contingent historical process, it makes no sense to look for a supposedly universal and rational justification of the principles concerned.[9]

Although, in our Western liberal democratic language game, the ethico-political values represent a (hegemonically imposed) thin consensus, shared by all democratic adversaries, this consensus does not eliminate the agonistic nature of democratic politics. The consensus remains conflictual because a diversity of competing hegemonic projects (such as, for instance, liberal-conservatism, social-democracy or neo-liberalism) aim to impose their own interpretation of what the realization of the ethico-political values requires.[10] The hegemonic nature of these interpretations thereby refers to the fact that the political struggle is a struggle over the transformation of the (always contingent) patterns of power relations that organize society. Since any specific constellation of power relations always excludes other potential social orderings, hegemonic articulations of the common good of the people necessarily involve forms of exclusion that mark a frontier between "us" and "them."[11] In Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy – and unlike Schmitt's, however – this frontier becomes an internal and temporary one. Because pluralism is ineliminable and the democratic struggle is, therefore, necessarily open-ended, the "them" is not a permanent outsider. The hegemonic articulation of the identity of the people is always provisional and the "people" can never be fully constituted. Indeed, the people's identity "can only exist through multiple and competing forms of *identifications*. Liberal democracy is precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications."[12]

In my view, the idea of a constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications is crucial and should be part of any convincing account of liberal democracy. I believe, however, that Mouffe's more specific elaboration of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that characterize the "never fully constituted identity of the people" is unsatisfactory and remains ambiguous in many respects. These ambiguities can be clarified by first introducing two other models which acknowledge the constitutive importance of political struggle.

II. Modeling the Political Struggle: Lefort versus Laclau

Mouffe's idea of a constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications seems to be inspired by Claude Lefort's analysis of modern democracy.[13] According to Lefort, a democratic regime is characterized by the fact that positions of power are held by political leaders on a temporary basis and always remain subject to regular political competitions. This means that although democratic leaders exercise power as representatives of the people, they can never fully identify themselves with the people as a whole. Whereas the democratic struggle generates interpretations of the identity and the will of the people, the open nature of this struggle guarantees that all these interpretations are only temporary and that the will of the people necessarily eludes final identification. In this sense, Lefort argues that democracy

is indeed characterized by an irreducible gap between the actual exercise of power and the symbolic locus of power, which remains an empty place.[14]

The concept of the empty place of power provides a telling image of the *unity-in-diversity* that characterizes modern democracy. Because in the modern age, marked by the "dissolution of the markers of certainty,"[15] the political community is no longer understood as founded on an encompassing divine order, a substantial and permanent determination of the unity and the identity of the people is no longer possible. Instead, the unity of the people now refers to the unity of the *political stage*, where the democratic struggle for power takes place.[16] This struggle for power has a discursive character and the political stage thus simultaneously defines a public space characterized by "majorities being made and unmade. . .the turmoil of exchange and conflict stimulating uncertainty and a happy diversity of convictions."[17] Importantly, the metaphor of the *stage* explains in what sense Lefort provides a *horizontal and synchronic* conceptualization of the democratic struggle.[18] On the political stage, democratic opponents meet each other on an equal level as equally legitimate contestants for positions of power. The fact that some people belong to the current majority and actually control positions of power does not fundamentally change the horizontal nature of their relation to the members of the current minority. Indeed, although the majority is able to rule on the basis of its own temporary interpretation of the will of the people, its will never actually coincides with the will of the people as a whole. Because the minority still belongs to the same public space as the majority, it is always able to challenge the temporary interpretation of the common good in the name of "the people." This explains in what sense the "majority may prove to be wrong, but not the public space."[19] The political stage as a public space coincides with the symbolic locus of power, which always refers to all members of the people indiscriminately.

The horizontal and synchronic nature of the democratic struggle can be further clarified by contrasting Lefort's model with Ernesto Laclau's model of populism.[20] Building on the results of his earlier collaboration with Chantal Mouffe,[21] Laclau analyzes populism as the construction of a popular identity that challenges an existing hegemonic pattern of power relations in society. Populist movements emerge in a society where many citizens feel that their democratic demands towards the people in power remain unfulfilled. In such a situation, it is possible that a *chain of equivalences* between these demands is constructed. On the basis of their shared antagonistic relation to the current people in power, people with demands belonging to different political struggles join forces. The result of this construction is an internal frontier that marks the antagonistic and vertical opposition between these "popular demands" and "power." This chain and the frontier it establishes are consolidated as soon as a part of the chain of equivalences starts to function as a signifier that represents the entire chain. The result is a signifier that signifies the newly constructed "popular identity" of the "plebs" generated by the vertical antagonism.[22] The dynamics of this process can be nicely described with the use of rhetorical figures: the chain of equivalences emerges on the basis of a contiguity between demands (metonymy) that engenders a collective identity in which demands can substitute for one another (metaphor). This collective identity as a totality is ultimately represented by one particular demand in the chain of equivalences (synecdoche, i.e. the part standing in for the whole).[23] In his book, Laclau uses the rise of *Solidarność* as his favorite example to illustrate this mechanism.[24] Indeed, whereas *Solidarność* originally represented the grievances of the workers in Gdansk, it soon became a symbol for the many grievances the Polish citizens had towards their communist leaders. As a result, *Solidarność* became a forceful and, in the long run, successful challenger of the communist regime.

In order to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion involved in this analysis of populism, it should be noted that Laclau analyzes the struggle between the populist movement and the people in power as a *hegemonic struggle for power*. Here, hegemony refers to the presence in society of an antagonistic opposition between two different groups whereby each of these groups claims to represent society as a whole. For Laclau, the antagonistic relation on which the populist identity is based indeed defines a frontier or rupture which automatically delegitimizes all those on the other side as representatives of the people. As a result, the moment of synecdoche, in which one particular demand comes to symbolize the entire chain of equivalences, necessarily leads to yet another moment. Therein, the populist movement as a new popular identity of a rebellious *"plebs" is now also hegemonically identified with the people as a whole ("populus").*[25] The internal frontier necessary for the constitution of the "plebs" thus establishes an ineliminable relation of exclusion between "the people" and the individuals now in power. If successful, the populist movement that has emerged and challenged the current power structure will replace the current hegemonic project with its own exclusionary project. The upshot of this analysis is that the political struggle between the populist movement and the people in power is characterized as a *vertical and diachronic* process of *transmigration*, whereby hegemonic forces are replaced by other hegemonic forces and exclusionary identifications of the people are replaced by other similarly exclusionary ones.[26] Consequently, Laclau explicitly rejects Lefort's use of the idea of the empty place of power. The only emptiness Laclau recognizes is the emptiness of the populist signifier, which is "empty" in the sense that it is able to represent and contain a whole chain of different particular demands. Once the populist subject represented by the populist signifier has succeeded in imposing its hegemonic rule at the expense of its antagonistic opponents, it actually legitimately occupies and embodies the locus of democratic power. The sole difference with traditional regimes, in which the locus of power was embodied by the king, is that the hegemonic occupation is now no longer stable and that the locus of power transmigrates from one hegemonic project into the next.[27]

Although a detailed analysis of the differences between these two models of the political struggle is beyond our present purposes, two related issues should be highlighted. First of all, Lefort's model is in a crucial sense the more inclusive one. For Laclau, the hegemonic struggle over the embodiment of the locus of power is an all or nothing affair. Because the victors of such a struggle ("plebs") identify themselves with the people-as-a-whole ("populus"), the losers are delegitimized as representatives of the people. The political stage is too small for hegemonic opponents to peacefully coexist and, therefore, as also demonstrated by the example of *Solidarność*, losers often risk prosecution or incarceration. For Lefort, however, the maintenance of the symbolic gap between the temporary majority ("plebs"), as the temporary victors of the democratic struggle, and the will of the people ("populus") is essential. This means that the losers of the struggle, the temporary minority, should remain present on the political stage as legitimate representatives of the people. This inclusionary moment, crucial for Lefort and lacking in Laclau, is connected to the second main difference between the two models. For Lefort, liberalism and democracy are necessarily conceptually connected because the individual rights typical of liberalism are necessary to prevent the oppressive embodiment of the locus of power. By ensuring the pluralistic nature of society, these rights successfully guarantee that a temporary majority cannot dispose of the minority as it pleases but has to show continued respect for the members of the minority as equal members of the political community.[28] Laclau, in contrast, agrees with Chantal Mouffe, when she argues that liberalism and democracy generate two different and perfectly separable logics. Although Laclau argues that the hegemonic articulation of democratic

identities could proceed within the framework of a liberal regime – a contention shared by Mouffe and one that we will challenge in the next section – he also points out that the populist or "democratic" mechanisms he describes might apply to movements not committed to the idea of individual rights, and even, for instance, to totalitarian movements.[29]

III. Mouffe's Ambiguities: Hegemonic Struggles in a Common Symbolic Space?

Against the background of the models of Lefort and Laclau, we can now return to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy. As we have seen, Mouffe analyzes liberal democracy in terms of a hegemonic struggle between adversaries who share a common symbolic space. It is now the main thesis of the present paper that this analysis is problematic because it remains ambiguous about Laclau's vertical and Lefort's horizontal account of the political struggle. On the one hand, Mouffe's emphasis on the hegemonic and exclusionary nature of the democratic struggle brings her position in line with Laclau's analysis of the transmigration of hegemonic forces.[30] On the other hand, her focus on the inclusionary role of the ethico-political values and the way in which they transform the enemy into an adversary seem much more in tune with Lefort's account of democracy as a unity-in-diversity. The main problem with this ambiguous stance is that it is unstable because the two models presented are mutually incompatible. In order to illustrate the difficulties the agonistic model faces, I propose to have a closer look at three related ambiguities.

The first ambiguity concerns Mouffe's analysis of the political unity of the people as a democratic community. Mouffe emphasizes that the creation of a political unity always requires an antagonistic opposition, whereby the identity and unity of a "we" can be established and guaranteed only by the demarcation of a "they."[31] Consistently, she confirms that the same mechanism also applies to the creation of the collective identity of the political community as a whole. Indeed, "[p]olitics is about the constitution of the political community not something that takes place within it."[32] If, however, this constitution requires the identification of a "them" not belonging to this community, it follows that even in a liberal democracy, "a fully inclusive political community can never be achieved" and that even here the construction of a "we" means "establishing a frontier, defining an 'enemy.'"[33] Although, so far, this analysis closely resembles Schmitt's account of the unity of the democratic people, Mouffe's next step aims to mark a clear distinction. In contrast with Schmitt, she qualifies the frontier that separates the people from their enemies as an internal one whereby "the 'them' is not a permanent outsider."[34] As already mentioned, democracy indeed requires that any hegemonic interpretation of the identity of the people is temporary in the sense that it can and will be challenged by other competing interpretations. As a result of this ongoing hegemonic struggle, the identity of the people can never be fully constituted and the constitutive gap between the people and its various interpretations remains intact.[35]

Although this account of the constitution of the democratic people might sound persuasive, it is, as it stands, deeply problematic. The problem arises because the idea of a constitutive gap between the people and its interpretations is incompatible with the alleged hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle that is supposed to preserve this gap. Indeed, the idea of the constitutive gap means, at least in a Lefortian understanding, that a temporary majority cannot claim to have constituted itself as the people-as-a-whole. Upholding the distinction between these two different collectivities is of primary importance: in a democratic regime, the collectivity of the temporary majority simply cannot and should not be identified with the collectivity of the people-as-a-whole, encompassing both the majority *and* the minority.

The idea of hegemony, however, does precisely that. In the synecdochal movement in which a particular claims to represent the universal, the distinction between these two collectivities is suppressed. As soon as the "plebs," as part of the population, identifies itself with the "populus," it rejects those outside of the plebs as legitimate members of the community, thereby collapsing the gap that is needed to keep the locus of power empty.[36]

Now, in order to solve the incoherence of her account, Mouffe could pursue one of two options, both of which, however, require significant changes to her theory. Choosing the way of Lefort, she could stick with the idea of the constitutive gap and reject the hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle as described here. Because her current account, however, only provides a clear explanation of the antagonistic constitution of the temporary majority (the "plebs"), she would, in this scenario, now have to provide an additional account of the constitution of the people-as-a-whole encompassing both the majority and the minority (the "populus"). Of course, it could be argued that Mouffe has already explained that the adversaries on the opposite sides of the internal and temporal frontier are bound together by their shared commitment to the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all. The problem, however, is that this explanation does not refer to any antagonistic mechanism at all. Therefore, unless Mouffe is prepared to renounce her earlier crucial claim that all political collectivities are necessarily constituted on the basis of an antagonistic opposition, she would owe us an additional account of which opposition is at stake in the constitution of the "populus."[37] Choosing the way of Laclau, on the other hand, Mouffe could try to confirm the hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle and reduce the idea of the constitutive gap between the people and its identifications to the idea that politics is characterized by a transmigration from one hegemonic embodiment of the locus of power to the next. On this scenario, however, the frontier drawn between hegemonic antagonists is no longer an internal one and the alleged common symbolic framework is unable to perform any integrating function. As this model would thereby merely describe a series of transitions from one homogeneous interpretation of the will of the people into the next, it would provide a kind of *dynamic version of Schmitt* which fails to distance itself from the more pernicious aspects of his theory.

The second ambiguity in Mouffe's agonistic model concerns the discursive nature of the democratic struggle and refers again to the unresolved tension between the hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle, on the one hand, and the presence of a common symbolic framework on the other. The tension now arises because the idea of hegemony presupposes antagonism as a rupture in the conceptual space or as a discontinuity in the discursive field. The hegemonic articulation of the identity of the people requires ". . .a breach in the continuity of the communitarian space resulting from the *plebs* presenting itself as the totality of the *populus.*" Indeed, the synecdochal movement of hegemony presupposes that antagonistic opponents have visions of the populus that are "strictly incommensurable."[38] The idea of a common symbolic space, on the other hand, is clearly at odds with such a breach and implies that agonistic positions are situated in a continuous, instead of a ruptured, discursive field. Democratic adversaries share a common symbolic space only if their common reference to the core values of liberty and equality is indeed understood by all parties as a *common* reference. This presupposes a minimal discursive overlap between the adversarial positions in the sense of an at least partially shared and therefore debatable understanding of the meaning of these values. Otherwise, it makes no sense to suggest that a "reference to humanity and the polemical use of 'human rights'" allows us "constantly to challenge. . .the forms of exclusion that are necessarily inscribed in the political practice of. . .defining 'the people' which is going to rule."[39] In other words, the reference to the ethico-political values as a

common reference presupposes an at least partial *discursive interpenetrability* of adversarial positions.

In order to resolve this second tension, Mouffe faces the same choice as before. On the one hand, she could take the idea of the common symbolic framework seriously, but then she needs to renounce the hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle. As a consequence, the decisionism that can sometimes be quite strong in her model would also need to be qualified. Indeed, if political decisions are now made within a shared discursive horizon, disagreement becomes at least in some minimal sense *discursive* disagreement. Therefore, it is no longer clear how the theory remains decisionistic "in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain."[40] On the other hand, Mouffe could again try to retain the hegemonic nature of the struggle, but then again the common symbolic framework disappears as a shared point of reference and it becomes unclear how the relativization of Schmittian antagonism into democratic agonism should be understood.

The third ambiguity I wish to highlight concerns the relation between the universalistic logic of liberalism on the one hand and the agonistic logic of inclusion/exclusion on the other. Although Mouffe has always emphasized the contingent (Western) nature of liberal democracy as a regime in which the two logics of liberalism and democratic antagonism contaminate each other in a paradoxical manner, she has also almost always situated her own model of agonistic pluralism within the liberal democratic framework and has presented it as an attempt to provide an analysis of its paradoxical logic in order to strengthen that framework.[41] In her most recent work, however, Mouffe aims to apply the model of agonistic pluralism also in a context which transcends the restricted context of liberal democracy. Indeed, in the account of her model for a multipolar world order, she argues that the belief in the "unique superiority of liberal democracy" constitutes a "serious obstacle to the recognition that the world, as Schmitt observed, is not a 'universe' but a 'pluriverse.'"[42] Instead of aiming for the enforced universalization of the Western model, we should therefore strive for a pluralization of hegemony through the recognition of a plurality of regional powers.[43] Similarly, when advocating a "mestiza conception of human rights," allowing for counter-hegemonic human rights discourses, Mouffe argues that the liberal idea of modernity is just one out of many and that the world is in fact characterized by a pluralism of modernities which can each contain a different answer to the question of "human dignity" and which can each provide their own vernacular version of democracy.[44]

The problem with this recent shift in perspective is twofold. First of all, since Mouffe is making claims about the normative importance of the agonistic logic outside of the context of liberal democracy, she seems to imply that the normative importance of the agonistic logic is universal whereas the logic of liberalism is considered to be a mere contingent element of a typically Western form of life. Mouffe thus faces the paradoxical challenge, shared by all theories of radical pluralism, of explaining how this more general or even universal claim to normative validity for her own theory could be supported. The second problem is more specific and relates to the constitutive role played by the liberal logic in her agonistic model of pluralism. As we have seen, the relativization of the antagonistic enemy into an agonistic adversary results from the presence of the typically liberal-democratic ethico-political principles of liberty and equality. Therefore, even if the paradoxical contamination of the liberal with the democratic logic is contingent from a historical point of view, Mouffe herself seems to recognize that this contamination is *conceptually necessary* in order to guarantee the open and pluralistic nature of the liberal democratic community. Therefore, in making the transition to the global context, Mouffe again faces the same alternative. On the one hand, she could continue to take the need for a relativization of antagonism

seriously, but then she would have to acknowledge that not only the agonistic but also the liberal logic (or at least some functional equivalent) needs to operate on the global level. Or she could, on the other hand, drop the requirement of relativization on the global level, but then she would need to be prepared to fully accept the Schmittian consequences of her position. Whether or not this is the road she prefers in her current work, the account of what prevents the opposition between regional powers or the opposition between different hegemonic human rights discourses from turning into destructive antagonistic oppositions remains as yet strongly underdeveloped if not entirely absent.

IV. Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle

In order to overcome the difficulties Mouffe's account faces, I believe that a more coherent version of agonistic pluralism should carefully distinguish between hegemonic and non-hegemonic struggles. Thereby, this distinction should be understood in view of the unique and twofold power structure characteristic of liberal democracy. On the one hand, liberal democracy resembles other political regimes (e.g. theocracy, communism, fascism, dictatorship) in the sense that it remains itself, unavoidably, a hegemonic regime which has to impose its own particular power structure and its own particular values at the exclusion of other power structures and values which it must reject as politically illegitimate. Here, the struggle of *Solidarność* provides, indeed, an example of a democratic movement which has successfully challenged an undemocratic regime. On the other hand, however, liberal democracy is unique in comparison to other political regimes in the sense that it hegemonically defines an empty place of power which opens up a space for a *non*-hegemonic, horizontal and open-ended contestation between democratic adversaries over the proper interpretation of the will of the people.[45]

Although a full elaboration of an amended version of agonistic pluralism is beyond the purpose of the present paper, I would like to present, in this section, some elements of how this different account could deal with the ambiguities we have detected in the works of Mouffe. Starting with the third ambiguity, I submit that any plausible version of agonistic pluralism needs to take the conceptual connections between the liberal and the democratic logic seriously. It is important in this regard to note that when Mouffe emphasizes the agonistic dimension present in all human societies, she is not merely making an ontological point about the ineliminability of political struggle. Instead she is also making the *normative* claim that agonism should be valued because of its ability to uphold the pluralistic nature of society.[46] From our previous explanations, however, it should be clear that this normative requirement puts serious constraints on the nature of the political struggle. Whereas hegemonic political projects aim to end the political struggle by imposing their own view of society and by delegitimizing their political enemies, democratic political projects should be able to recognize the ongoing legitimacy of their adversaries and the necessarily temporary nature of the exercise of democratic power. As both Lefort and Mouffe have argued, such a relativization of the antagonistic confrontation into an agonistic struggle requires a commitment to the universal inclusionary logic of liberalism and to the ethico-political values of liberty and equality in particular.[47] Interestingly, of course, the commitment to these particular values is not a neutral operation. To be consistent, the agonistic inclusion attempted by agonistic pluralism cannot be unconditional since, as a normative theory, it needs to reject as inimical those political projects that are incompatible with the idea of pluralism. While the recognition of the constitutive gap between the temporary majority and the people defines the non-hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle, any attempt to deny

this gap by identifying a particular popular identity with the people-as-a-whole should be rejected as an attempted hegemonic closure of the democratic project.

In order to deal with the first two ambiguities, the constitution of the democratic people and the structure of the discursive field of democratic politics, we can make use of a line of thought in Mouffe's work which we have not yet taken up. Mouffe repeatedly refers to the notion of the "constitutive outside" which Henry Staten uses to describe some aspects of the work of Jacques Derrida.[48] This notion explains how the constitution of a collective identity always requires the existence of an outside which ". . .has to be incommensurable with the inside, and at the same time, the condition of emergence of the latter. This is only possible if what is 'outside' is not simply the outside of a concrete content but something which puts into question 'concreteness' as such."[49] Mouffe herself makes use of the constitutive outside in order to explain why the identity of the people never coincides with one of its various, concrete interpretations. In order to do this, she interprets the constitutive outside, not sur- prisingly, in terms of an opposition between two antagonistic collectivities, whereby "the people" is constituted in opposition to the minority as its temporary outside. As forcefully argued by Arash Abizadeh, however, this identification of the constitutive outside with a specific group of human beings is highly problematic.[50] In his long analysis of Schmitt's conception of the political, Derrida in fact deconstructs the opposition between friends and enemies in such a way that this very opposition breaks down.[51] What is other, strange or inimical always already haunts what is proper, familiar or friendly. Therefore, the enemy is not an identifiable outside but is always already present inside my own brother or friend and, ultimately, always already present inside my own self. Because a clear distinction between friends and enemies as groups of individuals cannot be made, the Schmittian discourse col- lapses.[52] In order to avoid the problems Mouffe's Derridean-Schmittian approach encounters, I propose, therefore, to qualify Mouffe's assumption that collectivities can only be consti- tuted on the basis of an antagonistic relation with another collectivity in an important respect. Indeed, siding with Abizadeh, I believe that other ways of interpreting the constitutive out- side or "difference" necessary for the constitution of a collectivity might be more successful and that a political community could, more specifically, also be "constructed on the ba- sis of difference from hypothetical values and the *imagined* collective identities centered on them. . ."[53]

Applying this idea to the theory of agonistic pluralism, I propose that the constitution of the democratic people should be understood in terms of the ethico-political values of liberty and equality and that these values define the constitutive outside of the liberal democratic people on the basis of two complementary mechanisms. The first mechanism is hegemonic and therefore still rather Schmittian (Laclauean) in its nature. The ethico-political values define a thin consensus which should be shared by all members of the liberal democratic community. By defining such a shared discursive horizon, however, these values necessarily also mark a hegemonic breach in the discursive field which separates the inside of the democratic community from its outside. As any other hegemonic regime, liberal democracy has its enemies and the political aspirations of collectivities, imaginary or real, which aim to change the power structure of society on the basis of values that are incompatible with liberty and equality, should be deemed illegitimate. The second mechanism is qualitatively different and of a non-hegemonic nature. Although the values of liberty and equality provide a thin consensus, defining the inside of the liberal democratic community, this consensus necessarily remains conflictual. Because of the diversity and historicity of modern societies, the democratic struggle can never reach a final and specific interpretation of what the recognition of these values requires. As Mouffe emphasizes, the distance between the actual

interpretations of the ethico-political values and the *imagined* ideal of a final reconciliation on these matters is, therefore, not of an empirical but of a conceptual nature.[54] This conclusion suggests, however, that it would be more fruitful to identify the constitutive outside of the people not, like Mouffe does, with the temporary minority, but rather, in a non-antagonistic manner, with the necessarily counterfactual and thus imagined ideal of the fully free and equal people.[55] Indeed, although the ethico-political values define the inside of the democratic society, this inside remains, at the same time, *also* the symbolic outside of society which explains its unity.[56] Democratic conflict is constitutive of the unity of the democratic people, not because the "people" is defined in opposition to the temporary minority, but rather because the ongoing democratic struggle over the proper interpretation of the core values of the liberal democratic community binds majorities and minorities in a common, historical and open-ended project.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Chantal Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy is characterized by a series of ambiguities engendered by an unresolved tension between the alleged hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle, on the one hand, and the presence of a thin consensus on the values of liberty and equality, on the other. Additionally, I have shown that a resolution of this tension which aims to avoid the pernicious exclusionary consequences of a strictly hegemonic logic needs to take the thin consensus seriously by reconceptualizing the democratic struggle as a non-hegemonic struggle within a hegemonically imposed empty locus of power.

Although the account of such a reconceptualization has remained sketchy, it will be clear that a further disambiguation of agonistic pluralism along these lines will also necessarily affect the nature and the scope of Mouffe's critique of consensualism with which I began my presentation. On the theoretical level, the reconstruction of the constitutive outside of the democratic community outlined above overcomes the stark and often caricatured opposition between democracy as a hegemonic and contingent power play and democracy as the discursive construction of a fully reasonable consensus. Sure enough, the fact that an ideal consensus on the proper interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality is unattainable reflects the fact that a fully inclusive society is impossible and that exclusionary power can never be fully eliminated. Nevertheless, this does not mean that democracy is a blind confrontation of incommensurable hegemonic projects. Indeed, Mouffe's one-sided emphasis on the collectivistic, decisionistic and contingent nature of democracy should be qualified as a supportive and internal rather than as an encompassing and external critique of liberal democracy.[57] Mouffe rightly points to the importance of collective political action. Nevertheless, the ethico-political values and the basic rights that help implement them identify the individual citizens as the basic moral units in the liberal democratic regime. Without this identification, the pluralistic nature of society and the emptiness of the symbolic locus of power could not be guaranteed. Although Mouffe rightly argues that the democratic process is necessarily open-ended and cannot come to a final rational closure, this does not imply that political decisions are undecidable in some very strong sense. Whereas political decisions involve an irreducible volitional moment, the common reference to the ideal of equal freedom also always provides a common critical standard from which to challenge the injustice of the decisions made in a discursive manner. Finally, if it is accepted that these values play a constitutive role in opening up an empty place of power in which a horizontal, non hegemonic democratic struggle becomes possible, then they are not easily dismissed

as merely contingent and particular Western values. Instead, they appear as the constitutive presuppositions of any genuinely democratic regime.

On the political level, the main problem with Mouffe's approach is that she fails to make a consistent distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic struggles and, thus, to provide a proper account of how to identify and deal with the potential "political enemy" of liberal democracy. Of course, the distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic struggles will not always be clear-cut. Political reality will not necessarily conform to the ideal-typical distinction between horizontal (Lefortian) and vertical (Laclauean) contestations sketched in this paper. The line where an adversary who disagrees about the proper interpretation of the values of liberty and equality becomes an enemy who is no longer committed to these values is necessarily vague. Nevertheless, even a vague line is still a line that defines an outside.[58] Once it is recognized that liberal democracy is itself a hegemonic political regime that is vulnerable to hegemonic challenges by undemocratic enemies, the questions of when and how democracy should protect itself cannot be ignored.

The fact that Mouffe fails to take the problem of the emergence of the enemy seriously shows, for instance, in her analysis of populism. Mouffe is probably right that the impoverishment of the agonistic nature of the party landscape by "third way politics" is at least partly responsible for the rise of extremist right wing populist parties in many countries of Europe (such as the *Front National* in France, the *FPÖ* in Austria or the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium). Nevertheless, her subsequent claims concerning the proper treatment of populist parties are more problematic. Mouffe argues that political antagonisms should not be exacerbated by moralizing them and that we should, therefore, treat populist opponents as regular political adversaries rather than put them behind a so-called *cordon sanitaire* as the moral enemies of democracy.[59] However, the problem with this approach is that our analysis of populism, here and elsewhere, has shown that populism is neither a moral enemy nor a political adversary but rather a *political enemy* of liberal democracy. Indeed, the xenophobic nature of the right-wing populist parties Mouffe refers to could hardly be interpreted as consistent with a commitment to the ethico-political value of equality. Moreover, the advocacy by these parties of a homogeneous and exclusionary interpretation of the will of the people, their aversion to more mediated and representative forms of politics, their emphasis on charismatic leadership and their antagonistic stance towards the establishment as well as towards specific marginalized groups in society, all testify to a hegemonic political project which attempts to close the empty locus of power and, thus, to subvert the basic power structure of liberal democracy.[60]

In Mouffe's analysis of terrorism as the result of a unipolar world order, dominated by the hegemonic power of the United States and by hegemonic Western discourses on freedom and democracy, a similar complication arises. Endorsing an argument by Carl Schmitt, Mouffe castigates the moralization of the current war on terror and argues that "wars waged in the name of humanity [are] particularly inhuman since all means [are] justified once the enemy ha[s] been presented as an outlaw of humanity."[61] The problem with this argument, however, for Schmitt as well as for Mouffe, is that *any* attempt to impose constraints on war and hostility requires the hegemonic imposition of a particular power structure and a particular set of values on all potential antagonists.[62] As a result, a more convincing account of agonistic pluralism faces the challenge, already indicated, of providing a more elaborate analysis of the structures and values necessary to relativize antagonism into more benign agonism on the global level. Additionally, such an account will need to deal with the paradoxical implication that this relativization can never be fully inclusive because it necessarily proceeds on the basis of particular values which can themselves be antagonistically challenged. If the emergence of the political enemies of "human dignity," "liberty," "democracy" or, indeed,

"agonistic pluralism" is a real political possibility which no normative theory can conjure away, developing a more extensive account of how to identify these enemies in a legitimate manner and how to deal with them in a normatively appropriate and politically effective manner becomes an important political imperative.

NOTES

1. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

2. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism. With a New Introduction and the 'Reply to Habermas'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

3. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 135–154; *The Democratic Paradox*, 37–49; *On the Political*, 10–14.

4. Ibid., 64–89.

5. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988 [1926]); Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 105–112, 118–122.

6. Ibid., 2; *The Democratic Paradox*, 53–57; *On the Political*, 14.

7. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 4; *The Democratic Paradox*, 13, 49–57, 98–105; *On the Political*, 14–21.

8. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 32, 47, 65, 85; *The Democratic Paradox*, 102–104; *On the Political*, 31–32, 121–122.

9. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 144–147; *The Democratic Paradox*, 62–67; *On the Political*, 120–125.

10. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 85, 115, 130; "Liberal Socialism and Pluralism: Which Citizenship?," in J. Squires, ed., *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), 81; *The Democratic Paradox*, 102–104; *On the Political*, 32, 121.

11. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 21–22, 98–101; *On the Political*, 17–19.

12. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 56.

13. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 9–44, 213–255; Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 11–12, 122; *The Democratic Paradox*, 18.

14. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 17, 225.

15. Ibid., 19.

16. Ibid., 227.

17. Ibid., 41.

18. In a recent article, Sofia Nässtrom has proposed to replace the idea of the empty place of power with the notion of an "empty time." Although the emphasis on the temporal structure of Lefort's model of democracy might be of importance in the comparison Nässtrom wishes to make with the theory of Frank Ankersmit, the idea of an "empty time" fails to capture the specific horizontal and synchronic structure of the political stage, which is essential for Lefort's understanding of the unity-in-diversity of modern democratic societies. Nässtrom, "Representative Democracy as Tautology. Ankersmit and Lefort on Representation," *European Journal of Political Theory* 5, no. 3 (2006): 321–342, at 334.

19. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 41.

20. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

21. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

22. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 72–100.

23. Mark Anthony Wenman, "Laclau or Mouffe? Splitting the Difference," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 29, no. 5 (2003): 581–606 at 589–90.

24. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 81, 95, 217, 226.

25. Ibid., 86, 93–94, 107, 111, 224–225.

26. Ibid., 170.

27. Ibid., 164–171.

28. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 30, 39–40.

29. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 166. Although he is not always clear about the relation between populism, democracy and politics, it sometimes seems as if Laclau conceives of his model of populism as a more general model of democracy and politics. Indeed, he submits that all kinds of politics, including democratic politics, require the constitution of political groups as political subjects. The constitution of these groups, however, always involves the construction of a chain of equivalences according to the populist mechanism sketched. In this sense, "the political becomes synonymous with populism" (ibid., 154) and "the constitution of a popular subjectivity becomes an integral part of the question of democracy" (ibid., 167).

30. In her recent work, Mouffe herself says surprisingly little about what she means by the hegemonic nature of the democratic struggle. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 21–22, 98–101; id., *On the Political*, 17–19. Therefore, it is unavoidable, in order to get a clearer grasp of what could be meant, to refer to the notion of hegemony as developed in her earlier collaboration with Laclau as well as in the more recent works of Laclau himself. The possible charge, however, that the tensions I am exposing in Mouffe's work are an artifact of the specific understanding of the concept of hegemony I am attributing to her, holds no sway. As the further exposition will make clear, the tensions involve many elements in her theory and go beyond the semantics of hegemony.

31. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 15.

32. Mouffe, "Liberal Socialism and Pluralism," 81.

33. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 114.

34. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 56.

35. Ibid., 56.

36. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 86.

37. Of course, an opposition with other political communities would be the most obvious possibility to pursue. Here, however, Mouffe would need to further explain how a constitutive antagonism could be constructed between different liberal democratic regimes, both committed to the same ethico-political values, and how such an antagonistic model of interstate relations would differ from the Schmittian pluriverse of states.

38. Ibid., 93–94. Compare also "[our notion of the antagonistic frontier requires that] we cannot move from one camp to the other in terms of any differential continuity" (ibid., 83–4); and "The condition of total equivalence is that the discursive space should strictly divide into two camps. Antagonism does not admit *tertium quid*" (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 129).

39. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 44–45.

40. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 12.

41. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 2, 11–12.

42. Mouffe, *On the Political*, 87.

43. Ibid., 118.

44. Ibid., 123–130.

45. Wenman, "Laclau or Mouffe? Splitting the Difference", 601–2.

46. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 18–20.

47. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 32, 47, 65, 85; id., *The Democratic Paradox*, 102–104; id., *On the Political*, 31–32, 121–122; Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 254–272; *Democracy and Political Theory*, 30–44, 165–182; Stefan Rummens, "Deliberation interrupted. Confronting Jürgen Habermas with Claude Lefort," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 4 (2008): 383–408. In a recent paper, Thomas Fossen argues that the normative ideals of Mouffe's agonistic model of pluralism, which he analyzes in terms of a commitment to "emancipation," are very much in line with those of liberalism. Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism: Perfection and Emancipation," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 4 (2008): 376–394.

48. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 2; "Liberal Socialism and Pluralism", 81; *The Democratic Paradox*, 12–13, 135–137; *On the Political*, 15.

49. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 12.

50. Arash Abizadeh, "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity," *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005): 45–60 at 55–58. Compare also Wenman, "What is Politics? The Approach of Radical Pluralism," *Politics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 57–65 at 60.

51. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997), 83–167.

52. Ibid., 88.

53. Abizadeh, "Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other?" 58.

54. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 137.

55. Rummens, "Deliberation interrupted."

56. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 17.

57.   For a similar claim, see Andrew Knops, "Debate: Agonism as Deliberation – On Mouffe's Theory of Democracy," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 115–126 and Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism."

58.   Rather clear-cut cases of political positions outside of the democratic horizon would include, as already indicated, fascism, communism or theocracy. More contentious borderline cases could include neoliberalism, socialism (as the rejection of the private ownership of the means of production) or some forms of nationalism. Importantly, the democratic nature of political positions can and should be discussed in the public debate itself.

59.   Mouffe, *On the Political*, 64–76; "The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right-Wing Populism," in Francisco Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), 50–71.

60.   Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," *Political Studies* 55, no. 2 (2007): 405–424; Nadia Urbinati, "Democracy and Populism," *Constellations* 5, no. 1 (1998): 110–124. Of course, as illustrated perhaps by the rule of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, left-wing populism shares, in some form, all of the potentially dangerous characteristics of right-wing populism. Whereas right-wing populism tends to define the supposedly homogenous identity of the people in cultural or even ethnic terms, left-wing populism usually works with economic categories such as the proletariat or the peasantry. For a sketch of a containment strategy vis-à-vis political extremists inimical to liberal democracy, including an argument in favor of the *cordon sanitaire*, see Stefan Rummens and Koen Abts, "Defending Democracy: The Concentric Containment of Political Extremism," *Political Studies* (forthcoming).

61.   Mouffe, *On the Political*, 78.

62.   In the case of Schmitt, this power structure was the *Jus Publicum Europeum*.

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