

## Book Review Forum

*Statement* The editors do not necessarily agree with the statements contained in the book reviews, and neither they nor the RGS-IBG assume responsibility for the reviewers' assessments of the books that they evaluate.

### On the Political by Chantal Mouffe

London: Routledge, 2005, 168 pp, £8.99 paperback ISBN 978 0 415305 21 1

### Introduction

The series editors of *Thinking in action*, Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, have recently sought to develop 'a major new series that takes philosophy to the public. Each book in the series is written by a major international philosopher or thinker; engages with an important contemporary topic, and is clearly and accessibly written' (inside cover). Some of the contributions to this series include *On cosmopolitanism* and *Forgiveness* (Jacques Derrida); *On the internet* (Hubert Dreyfus); *On immigration and refugees* (Sir Michael Dummett); *On belief* (Slavoj Žižek); *On film* (Stephen Mulhall) and *On humanism* (Richard Norman). No doubt geographers will be engaging with these works, as well as the focus of this review forum, Chantal Mouffe's *On the political*. For in recent years Mouffe has engaged with an increasing number of geographers to explore the nature of geo-politics in the modern era.

*On the political* comes to one clear conclusion in this regard. There is a trend among certain geo-political theorists and politicians to support 'post-political' aspirations. For Mouffe, the 'post-political' is that aspiration to move beyond adversarial politics, to see the adversarial model of politics as obsolete. Dominant post-political theories and practices are wide-ranging. They include 'Cosmopolitanism', 'Smooth World' and certain ideas of 'Global Civil Society', as well as 'The Third Way', 'Deliberative Democracy', 'Good Governance' and 'Partisan Free Democracy'. In her latest book Mouffe seeks to develop an alternative conception of politics to these seemingly endless post-political aspirations. Against the trend, Mouffe's 'agonistic model of democracy' instead focuses upon the development of a particular understanding of the space of democracy which will be discussed and debated in the following pages by David Featherstone, Noortje Marres and Deborah Thien<sup>1</sup>.

In this very brief introduction I would like to flag up one important point. Mouffe encourages us to develop a space of democracy which is explicitly 'territorial', not 'deterritorialized'. This means that Mouffe's latest book will be of further interest to many geographers, given recent debates in this journal and the wider discussion about (de)territorialization in geography more generally (see Pugh *et al.*, 2007 in this issue of *Area*, for example).

On reading this particular review forum it will be seen that Mouffe's quasi-republican agonistic view of politics demands that we stay responsible to 'territorial governance'. Mouffe is particularly supportive of the development of large, territorial, regional units. Her recent active involvement with European debates, such as the *Dilemmas of Democracy in Europe*, attended by European politicians and academics in June 2006, reflects a wish to encourage the development of a multi-polar world; a world where Europe can form a counter-hegemonic territorial space of democracy to the United States, for example.

This aspiration of a multi-polar world directly opposes the normative thrust for a 'deterritorialized world'. As one prominent example of this, Hardt and Negri (2000) famously advocate a 'Smooth World' without borders. In direct contrast to Mouffe, they want to relinquish territorial sovereignty. According to Hardt and Negri, 'the multitude' of people who inhabit the earth should instead govern themselves without such forms of representation. In direct contrast to Hardt and Negri, but also cosmopolitan theorists (Archibugi, 1998) and certain supporters of global civil society (Kaldor, 2003), Mouffe firmly argues for strong institutions of territorial democracy.

For Mouffe, a European agonistic model of democracy, facilitated by such institutions, is necessary to develop a sense of public accountability and legitimacy to the different geo-political claims which are expressed by adversarial political identities. It is also necessary to ensure that these claims are not repressed by dominant global relations of power. In her most up-to-date public lectures Mouffe (unpublished) has been very precise in this regard; taking Deleuzian-inspired theorists in particular to task, for supporting the normative thrust of deterritorialization:

'Against those who celebrate the virtues of "deterritorialization" and advocate "nomadism" I am convinced that radical politics cannot avoid "territorialization" and that all forms of territorialization should not be perceived as machines of capture. It is a mistake to believe that reference to territory is by nature backward-looking and reactionary and that it has fascistic tendencies. . . . The celebration of lines of flight, hybridity, openness, body without organs, etc. distracts us from the task of engaging politically with the manifold of institutions which constitute the necessary "organs" of society. What is at stake is the challenging of the power relations and geographies of power which construct those organs so as to make them more open to democratic contestation.'

And so, whilst at the forefront of what has become known as 'radical democracy', Mouffe is equally clear that radical political movements must remain responsible and accountable to wider scale institutions of territorial governance. Mouffe's formulation of agonistic territorial governance, whilst seeking to ensure that different political demands are articulated and not repressed, is equally concerned that radical democracy remains legitimated through a broader regional sense of public accountability. For Mouffe, this requires that a multi-polar world, with agonistic territorial spaces of democracy be developed. The alternative posed by some is that a new, trans-national, *unelected* elite should decide what is legitimate action, replacing publicly accountable territorial regions. By others, that territorial sovereignty should be relinquished in favour of handing power over to a global 'multitude'. In the following reviews, David Featherstone, Noortje Marres and Deborah Thien explore such themes in their conflicting opinions of *On the political*.

**Jonathan Pugh,  
Newcastle University**

## Note

- 1 It will also be one of the themes of a recent network established by Jonathan Pugh, Chantal Mouffe, Doreen Massey and Fanscoise Verges, entitled 'The Space of Democracy and the *Democracy of Space*', funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-451-25-4226). Other academics that are so far involved include Tim Ignold, David Howarth, Uma Kothari, Nina Laurie, Scott Lash, John Forester, Patsy Healey, Susan Owens, Susan Fainstein, Susan Christopherson, Deborah Thien, Maarten Hajer and Jean Hillier. Conversations are being organised over the next two years at Harvard, Cornell, California, Newcastle, The Centre for the Study of Democracy, Goldsmiths, the Institute of British Geographers/Royal Geographical Society, Beijing and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

## References

- Archibugi D** 1998 Principles of cosmopolitan democracy in **D Archibugi, D Held and M Köhler** (eds) *Re-imagining political community: studies in cosmopolitan democracy* Polity, Cambridge
- Hardt M and Negri A** 2001 *Empire* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Kaldor M** 2003 *Global civil society: an answer to war* Polity, Cambridge
- Pugh J Hewett C and Chandler D** (2007) Debating (de)territorial governance *Area* 39 107–109

## Contesting the political

Chantal Mouffe's persuasive post-structural account of the political developed through her writings on radical

democracy, and through her collaborative work with Ernesto Laclau, has become a key, if contentious, influence on critical human geography (see Barnett, 2004). This short book is a useful and accessible statement of Mouffe's key arguments about the political. These arguments are used to speak to key debates and tensions in contemporary politics such as the rise of the far right and the political challenges of globalization. Her central contention is that the move away from a notion of the political centred on conflict and contestation has had devastating consequences for both understandings and practices of politics. Here she continues her engagement with Carl Schmitt, the creative and rigorous critic of liberal democracy, whose work was framed by extremely problematic relations with Nazism<sup>1</sup>. His account of the political as the product of friend-enemy relations and his insistence on the 'ever present possibility of antagonism' is the central theoretical reference point here. This review assesses the importance of Mouffe's account of conflict as foundational to the political and considers the geographies of antagonism at work here. It concludes by considering what is at stake in this shift to Schmitt from Gramsci, the most significant theoretical presence in *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, albeit in post-Marxist and anti-essentialist guise.

Mouffe's foregrounding of conflict and antagonism provides a welcome counterpoint to the rise of a consensual approach to the political where challenging power relations and neo-liberalism have frequently become placed off limits. As a result the role for politics has been re-imagined, by theorists like Anthony Giddens, as to 'pilot citizens' through the challenges of transformations such as globalization (Giddens, 1998: 64). For Mouffe such a 'post-political' vision denies the role of conflict in the political, and is based on an inadequate understanding of the constitution, and persistence of, collective political identities. She argues that the key challenge facing contemporary politics is not to move beyond conflict, but to find ways of dealing with conflict in democratic terms. She proposes the transformation of antagonistic articulations of conflict to agonistic ones where 'enemies' are reconfigured as 'adversaries'. For Mouffe, this allows politics to be reconfigured as a domain where citizens get to choose between 'real' alternatives about issue and conflicts in society, rather than being faced with a consensual morass. She envisions these conflicts being resolved through negotiation between adversaries where there is a shared consensus about the terms of debate and a commitment to democratic values of liberty and equality. This move from antagonism to agonism is presented as a remedy for many of the tensions facing contemporary liberal democracies, such as voter alienation, the rise of the far right and the challenges of globalization.

This reassertion of contestation and unequal power relations at the centre of the political is an important project. I feel, however, that Mouffe presents the shift from antagonism to agonism as something of a panacea and that this shift depends on a reductive account of the practices and geographies of contestation. While reasserting the