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politics and passions

the stakes of democracy

CSD PERSPECTIVES

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For some time I have been concerned with what I see as our grow-
ing inability to envisage in political terms the problems facing our
societies: that is, to see them as problems the solutions to which
entail not just technical but political decisions. These decisions
would be made between real alternatives, the existence of which
implied the presence of conflicting but legitimate projects of how
to organize our common life. We appear to be witnessing not the
end of history but the end of politics. Is this not the message of
recent trends in political theory and sociology, as well as of the
practices of mainstream political parties? They all claim that the
adversarial model of politics has become obsolete and that we
have entered a new phase of reflexive modernity, one in which an
inclusive consensus can be built around a 'radical centre'. All those
who disagree with this consensus are dismissed as archaic or con-
demned as evil. Morality has been promoted to the position of a
master narrative; as such, it replaces discredited political and social
discourses as a framework for collective action. Morality is rapid-
ly becoming the only legitimate vocabulary: we are now urged to
think not in terms of right and left, but of right and wrong.

This displacement of politics by morality means that there is now
no properly 'agonistic' debate in the democratic political public
sphere about possible alternatives to the existing hegemonic order;
as a consequence, this sphere has been seriously weakened. Hence
the growing disaffection with liberal democratic institutions, a dis-
affection which manifests itself in declining electoral participation

and in the attraction exerted by right-wing populist parties that challenge the political establishment.

There are many reasons for the disappearance of a properly political perspective: they include the predominance of a neo-liberal regime of globalization, and the influence of the individualistic consumer culture which now pervades most advanced industrial societies. From a more strictly political perspective, it is clear that the collapse of communism and the disappearance of the political frontiers that structured the political imaginary for most of the last century have caused the political markers of society to crumble. The steady blurring of the distinction between right and left which so many celebrate as progress is, in my view, one of main reasons for the growing irrelevance of the democratic, political public sphere. It has negative consequences for democratic politics. Before returning to this point I would like to examine the responsibility of political theory for our current inability to think in political terms – a phenomenon with which I, as a political theorist, am particularly concerned.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY

In recent years the traditional understanding of democracy as an aggregation of interests – the 'aggregative' model – has been increasingly displaced by a new paradigm: 'deliberative democracy'. One of the main tenets of this new model is that political questions are, by nature, moral and can, therefore, be addressed rationally. The objective of a democratic society, in this view, is the creation of a rational consensus. This consensus would be reached by using deliberative procedures with the aim of producing outcomes that were impartial and met everyone's interests equally. All those who question the possibility of achieving such a rational consensus

and who claim, instead, that the political is a domain in which one should always rationally expect to find discord are accused of undermining the very possibility of democracy. As Jürgen Habermas has put it:

> If questions of justice cannot transcend the ethical self-understanding of competing forms of life, and existentially relevant value conflicts and oppositions must penetrate all controversial questions, then in the final analysis we will end up with something resembling Carl Schmitt's understanding of politics.[1]

This trend in political theory of conflating politics with morality – understood in rationalistic and universalistic terms – tries to eradicate an aspect of politics that cannot, in fact, be eradicated: antagonism. This approach has contributed to the current displacement of the political by the juridical and the moral, each of which is perceived to be a terrain on which impartial decisions can be reached. There is, therefore, a strong link between this kind of political theory and the retreat of the political. That is why I am concerned by the fact the deliberative model of democracy is often presented as being well suited to the present stage of democracy. No doubt this type of theory chimes with 'third way' politics and its pretensions to be located 'beyond left and right'; but, as I argue below, it is precisely this post-political perspective which makes us incapable of thinking politically, of asking political questions, and of offering political answers.

This displacement of the political by the juridical is very clear in the work of John Rawls. Rawls offers the US Supreme Court as the best example of what he calls the 'free exercize of public rea-

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[1.] Jürgen Habermas, 'Reply to Symposium Participants', *Cardozo Law Review*, Volume 17 (March 1996), nos 4-5, p. 1493.

son', in his view the very model of democratic deliberation. Another example is Ronald Dworkin who, in many of his essays, gives primacy to the independent judiciary, which he sees as the interpreter of the political morality of a community. According to Dworkin all the fundamental questions that a political community faces – to do with employment, education, censorship, freedom of association, and so on – are better resolved by judges, providing they interpret the constitution with reference to the principle of political equality. There is, in Dworkin's worldview, very little left over for discussion in the political arena to resolve.

Even a pragmatist such as Richard Rorty, despite his important and far-reaching critique of the rationalist approach, fails to provide an adequate alternative to it. Rorty, too, privileges consensus and neglects the dimension of the political. Of course, the consensus he advocates is reached through persuasion and 'sentimental education', not rational argumentation; nevertheless, he believes in the possibility of an all-encompassing consensus and, thus, in the elimination of antagonism.

The current situation can be seen as the fulfilment of a tendency which, as Carl Schmitt argued, is inscribed in liberalism, with its constitutive inability to think in truly political terms and its consequent resorting to other discourses: economic, moral, or juridical. It might seem paradoxical, even perverse, to refer to Schmitt, a declared adversary of liberal democracy, in an attempt to remedy the deficiencies of liberal democratic theorists. However, I am convinced that we can often learn more from intransigent critics than from bland apologists.

The strength of Schmitt's critique is that it highlights the main shortcoming of liberal thought: its inability to apprehend the specificity of the political. In *The Concept of the Political* Schmitt writes:

> In a very systematic fashion liberal thought evades or ignores state and politics and moves instead in a typical recurring polarity of two heterogeneous spheres, namely ethics and economics, intellect and trade, education and property. The critical distrust of state and politics is easily explained by the principles of a system whereby the individual must remain *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*.[2]

In other words liberal thought is necessarily blind to the political: liberalism's individualism means it cannot understand the formation of collective identities. Yet the political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification; the political always has to do with the formation of an 'Us' as opposed to a 'Them', with conflict and antagonism; its *differentia specifica*, as Schmitt puts it, is the friend–enemy distinction. Rationalism, however, entails the negation of the ineradicability of antagonism. It is no wonder, then, that liberal rationalism cannot grasp the nature of the political. Liberalism has to negate antagonism since antagonism, by highlighting the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to make a decision on an undecidable terrain – reveals the limits of any rational consensus.

In my view this denial of antagonism is what prevents liberal theory from understanding democratic politics. The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear simply by denying it, by wishing it away (the typical liberal gesture): such a negation only leads to impotence; and liberal thought *is* impotent when confronted by antagonisms which it believes belong to a bygone age when reason did not control archaic passions. This impotence, as I show below, is at the root of the current inability to grasp the nature and causes of the new phenomenon of right-wing

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[2] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976), p. 70.

populism spreading throughout Europe. That is why it is extremely important to listen to Schmitt when he states that the political can be understood 'only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy groupings, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics, and economics'.[3] With this crucial insight, Schmitt is drawing our attention to the fact that the political is linked to the existence of hostility in human societies, a hostility which can take many forms and manifests itself in many kinds of social relations. In my view, recognizing this is the starting point for thinking properly about the aims of democratic politics.

Schmitt never developed these insights theoretically. That is why, in my work, I have tried to formulate them more rigorously on the basis of a critique of essentialism developed in several currents of contemporary thought. This critique shows that one of the main weaknesses of liberalism is that it deploys a logic of the social based on a conception of being as presence, conceiving of objectivity as being inherent in things themselves. As a result it cannot apprehend the process by which political identities are constructed. It is unable to recognize that identity is always constructed as 'difference' and that social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. What liberalism refuses to admit is that any form of social objectivity is ultimately political and that it bears the traces of the acts of exclusion which govern its constitution.

The notion of the 'constitutive outside' clarifies this point. Henry Staten uses this term to refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida with notions such as *supplement*, *trace* and *differance*.[4] The term 'constitutive outside' is meant to highlight the

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[3] Ibid., p. 35.

[4] Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Basil Blackwell, 1985).

fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, one which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy: for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman. Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference – that is, the perception of something 'Other' that constitutes an 'exterior' – is a precondition for the existence of any identity, we can formulate better Schmitt's point about the ever present possibility of the friend–enemy relationship. Put another way, we can begin to envisage how social relations can become the breeding ground of antagonism.

Indeed – as already indicated – political identities, which are always collective identities, entail the creation of an 'Us' that only exists by distinguishing itself from a 'Them'. Such a relation is not necessarily antagonistic. But there is always the possibility that an 'Us'–'Them' relationship can become a friend–enemy relationship. This happens when the 'Other', until now merely considered to be different, begins to be perceived as questioning our identity and threatening our existence. From that moment, any form of Us–Them relationship – religious, ethnic or economic – becomes the locus of an antagonism.

It is important to acknowledge that the very condition of possibility of the formation of political identities is at the same time the condition of impossibility of a society from which antagonism has been eliminated. Antagonism – as Schmitt repeatedly stressed – is an ever present possibility. This antagonistic dimension is what I call the 'the political'; I distinguish it from 'politics', which refers to the set of practices and institutions the aim of which is to create order, to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always conflictual because they are traversed by 'the political'. To use Heideggerian terminology, one could say that 'the political' is situated at the level of the ontological, while politics belongs to the ontic.

AGONISTIC PLURALISM

These considerations on the shortcomings of liberal democratic theory should make clear the basis of my conviction that, in order to understand the nature of democratic politics and the challenges with which it is confronted, we need an alternative to the two main approaches in democratic political theory. One of those approaches, the aggregative model, sees political actors as being moved by the pursuit of their interests; the other, the deliberative model, stresses the role of reason and moral considerations. *Both* of these models leave aside the central role of 'passions' in the creation of collective political identities. In my view one cannot understand democratic politics without acknowledging passions as the moving force in the field of politics. That is why I am working on a new model: 'agonistic pluralism'. This attempts to tackle all the issues which the two other models, with their rationalist, individualistic frameworks, cannot properly address.

My argument is this. Once we acknowledge the dimension of 'the political' we begin to realize that one of the main challenges facing democratic politics is how to domesticate hostility and to defuse the potential antagonism in all human relations. The fundamental question for democratic politics is not how to arrive at a rational consensus, that is, a consensus not based on exclusion: this would require the construction of an 'Us' that did not have a corresponding 'Them'; an impossible feat because – as we have seen – the condition of the constitution of an 'Us' is the demarcation of a 'Them'. The crucial issue for democratic politics, instead, is how to establish this 'Us'–'Them' distinction in a way that is compatible with pluralism. The specificity of modern democracy is precisely its recognition and legitimation of conflict; in democratic societies, therefore, conflict cannot and should not be eradicated. Democratic politics requires that the others be seen not as enemies to be destroyed but as adversaries whose ideas should be fought,

even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be questioned. Put differently, what is important is that conflict does not take the form of 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but of 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries). The aim of democratic politics is to transform potential antagonism into agonism.

This is why the central category of democratic politics is the category of the 'adversary', the opponent with whom we share a common allegiance to the democratic principle of 'liberty and equality for all' while disagreeing about its interpretation. Adversaries fight each other because they want their interpretation to become hegemonic; but they do not question their opponents' right to fight for the victory of their position. The 'agonistic struggle' – the very condition of a vibrant democracy – consists of this confrontation between adversaries.[5] In the agonistic model the prime task of democratic politics is neither to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere; it is, rather, to 'tame' these passions by mobilizing them for democratic ends and by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.

This understanding of the term 'adversary' needs to be distinguished sharply from its use in liberal discourse. In this understanding the presence of antagonism is not eliminated, but 'sublimated'. By contrast, what liberals mean by 'adversary' is simply 'competitor'. They envisage the field of politics as a neutral terrain on which different groups compete for positions of power. These groups do not question the dominant hegemony nor wish to transform the relations of power; their aim is to dislodge others so that they can occupy their place. This is merely competition among

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[5] For a development of this argument, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

elites. In the agonistic model, however, the antagonistic dimension is always present; there is a constant struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally; one of them needs to be defeated. This is a real confrontation but one that is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries.

Liberal theorists are unable to acknowledge not only the presence of strife in social life and the impossibility of finding rational, impartial solutions to political issues, but also the integrative role that conflict plays in modern democracy. A well-functioning democracy requires confrontation between democratic political positions. Without this there is always a danger that democratic confrontation will be replaced by confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identification. Too much emphasis on consensus, together with an aversion towards confrontation, produces both apathy as well as a lack of interest in political participation. This is why a democratic society requires a debate about possible alternatives. It must provide political forms of identification around clearly differentiated democratic positions; or, in Niklas Luhman's words, there must be a clear 'splitting of the summit', a real choice between the policies put forward by the government and those of the opposition.[6] Consensus is necessary, but it must be accompanied by dissent. Consensus is needed both about the institutions which constitute democracy and about the ethico-political values that should inform the political association. There will always be disagreements, however, about the meaning of these values and how they should be implemented. In a pluralist democracy such disagreements, which allow people to identify themselves as citizens in different ways, are not just legitimate but necessary; they are the stuff of democratic politics. When

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[6] Niklas Luhman, 'The future of democracy', *Thesis 11*, No. 26 (1990), p. 51.

the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are obstructed because of a lack of democratic forms of identification, passions have no democratic outlet. This lays the ground for forms of politics that articulate essentialist identities – nationalist, religious or ethnic – and for increased confrontations over non-negotiable moral values.

BEYOND LEFT AND RIGHT

This is why we should be suspicious of the current tendency to celebrate the blurring of the frontiers between left and right and to advocate a politics 'beyond left and right'. A well-functioning democracy needs vibrant clashes of democratic political positions. Antagonism can take many forms; it is illusory to believe that it can be eradicated. In order to allow for the possibility of transforming antagonistic into agonistic relations there must be political outlets for the expression of conflict within a pluralistic democratic system that offers opportunities of identification around democratic political alternatives.

In this context I would like to emphasize the pernicious consequences of the fashionable thesis – put forward by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens – that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete. In their view the friend–enemy model of politics is characteristic of classical industrial modernity, the 'first modernity'. Now, they claim, we live in a different, 'second', 'reflexive', modernity, in which the emphasis should be put on 'sub-politics', on the issues of 'life and death'.

At the core of this conception of reflexive modernity – as in the case of deliberative democracy, though in a different form – is the view that the antagonistic dimension of the political can be eliminated and the belief that friend–enemy relations have been eradicated. In post-traditional societies, it is claimed, collective identities are no

longer constructed in terms of 'Us' and 'Them'. This means that political frontiers have evaporated and that politics must therefore, in Beck's expression, be 'reinvented'. Indeed, Beck pretends that the generalized scepticism and the doubt prevalent today preclude the emergence of antagonistic relations. We have entered an era of ambivalence in which nobody believes any more that they possess the truth. As it was precisely this belief from which antagonisms stemmed there is, without it, no longer any reason for antagonism to exist. Any attempt to organize collective identities in terms of left and right and to define an adversary is thereby discredited as being 'archaic' or (to talk like Tony Blair) 'Old Labour'.

Conflictual politics is deemed to belong to the past; the favoured type of democracy is consensual and depoliticized. Nowadays the key terms of political discourse are 'good governance' and 'partisan-free democracy'. In my view it is the inability of traditional parties to provide distinctive forms of identification around possible alternatives which has created a terrain on which right-wing populism can flourish. Indeed, right-wing populist parties are often the only ones which attempt to mobilize passions and to create collective forms of identifications. By contrast with all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivation, they are well aware that politics consists in the creation of an 'Us' counterposed to a 'Them' and that it requires the creation of collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse: it provides collective forms of identification around the notion of 'the people'.

In addition, social-democratic parties in many countries, under the banner of 'modernization', identify more or less exclusively with the middle classes and have stopped addressing the concerns of those groups whose demands are considered to be 'archaic' or 'retrograde'. In view of all this, it is no surprise if those groups who feel

excluded from an effective exercize of citizenship by what they perceive as the 'establishment elites' are becoming increasingly alienated. In a context in which the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neo-liberal form of globalization – and that we have to accept its dictates – it is small wonder that more and more people are keen to listen to those who claim that alternatives do exist and that they will give back to the people the power to make decisions. When democratic politics can no longer shape the discussion about how we should organize our common life, when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth functioning of the market: in these circumstances the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration. We should realize that to a great extent the success of right-wing populist parties is due to the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things can be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable mechanisms of exclusion in which xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when these parties are the only ones offering an outlet for political passions their claim to offer an alternative can be seductive. As a result, their appeal is likely to grow. In order to formulate an adequate response to them, it is necessary to understand the economic, social and political conditions in which they have emerged. The ability to do this presupposes a theoretical approach that does not deny the antagonistic dimension of the political.

POLITICS IN THE MORAL REGISTER

It is crucial to understand that the rise of right-wing populism cannot be stopped by moral condemnation: this, the dominant response to this phenomenon – and a predictable one, for it chimes with the dominant post-political perspective – has so far been completely inadequate. It is, however, a reaction worth examining

closely as doing so will provide some insight into the form in which political antagonisms take today.

As already indicated the dominant discourse asserts that the adversarial model of politics is at an end and that a consensual society, beyond left and right, has arrived. However, politics, as I have argued, always entails an Us–Them distinction. This is why the consensus advocated by the defenders of partisan-free democracy cannot exist without a political frontier being created and an exterior being defined, a 'Them' which assures the identity of the consensus and the coherence of the 'Us'. This 'Them' is today conveniently designated as the 'extreme right', a term which refers to an amalgam of groups and parties covering a wide spectrum, from fringe groups of extremists and neo-Nazis through to the authoritarian right and up to the various new, right-wing populist parties. Of course, such a heterogeneous construct cannot help one grasp the nature and the causes of the new right-wing populism. It is, however, very useful as a way of securing the identity of the 'good democrats'. Indeed, since politics has supposedly become non-adversarial, the 'Them' necessary to secure the 'Us' of the good democrats cannot be envisaged as a political adversary. So the extreme right comes in very handy because it allows one to draw a frontier at the moral level, between 'the good democrats' and the 'evil extreme right'; the latter can then be condemned morally instead of being fought politically. This is why moral condemnation and the establishment of a 'cordon sanitaire' around the 'extreme right' have become the dominant answer to the rise of right-wing populist movements.

However, what is in fact happening is very different from what the advocates of the post-political approach would have us believe. Politics, with its supposedly old-fashioned antagonisms, has not

been superseded by moral concerns about 'life issues' and 'human rights'. Antagonistic politics is very much alive, except that now it is being played out in the register of morality. Indeed, far from having disappeared, frontiers between 'Us' and 'Them' are constantly being created; but, since the 'Them' can no longer be defined in political terms, these frontiers are drawn in moral terms, between 'us, the good' and 'them, the evil ones'.

My concern is that this type of politics – one played out in the moral register – is not conducive to the creation of the 'agonistic public sphere' which, as I have argued, is necessary for a robust democratic life. When the opponent is defined not in political but in moral terms, he can be envisaged only as an enemy, not an adversary: no agonistic debate is possible with the 'evil them'; they must be eradicated.

It should therefore be clear that the approach which claims that the friend–enemy model of politics has been superseded in fact ends up reinforcing the antagonistic model of politics that it has declared obsolete; it does so by constructing the 'Them' as a moral, that is, as an 'absolute' enemy, which, by its nature, cannot be transformed into an 'adversary'. Instead of helping to create a vibrant, agonistic public sphere with which democracy can be kept alive and indeed deepened, all those who proclaim the end of antagonism and the arrival of a consensual society are – by creating the conditions for the emergence of antagonisms that democratic institutions will be unable to manage – actually jeopardizing democracy.

Unless there is both a profound transformation in the way democratic politics is envisaged and a serious attempt to address the absence of forms of identification which would allow for a democratic mobilization of passions, the challenge posed by right-wing populist parties is unlikely to diminish. As the recent success of Le Pen in France, the Pim Fortuyn List in Holland, the People's Party

in Denmark, and the Progress Party in Norway – not to mention the important advances already made by similar parties in Italy, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland – new political frontiers are being drawn in European politics. There is a danger that the old left–right distinction could soon be replaced by another distinction, one much less conducive to pluralistic democratic debate. Hence the urgent need to relinquish the illusions of the consensual model of politics and to create the foundations of an agonistic public sphere.

By limiting themselves to calls for reason, moderation and consensus, democratic parties display their lack of understanding of the workings of political logic. They do not understand the need to counter right-wing populism by mobilizing affects and passions towards democratic ends. They do not grasp that democratic politics needs to have a real purchase on people's desires and fantasies and that, instead of opposing interests to sentiments and reason to passions, it should offer forms of identifications which challenge those promoted by the right. This is not to say that reason and rational argument should disappear from politics; rather, that their place in it needs to be rethought. I am convinced that what is at stake in this enterprise is no less than the very future of democracy.

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