



The Democratic Paradox

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From the theory of “deliberative democracy” to the politics of the “third way,” the present *Zeitgeist* is characterised by an attempt to negate the inherently conflictual nature of democratic politics. Political thought and practice are stifled by a misconceived search for consensus and the promotion of a bland social unanimity which, as Chantal Mouffe shows, far from being the sign of progress, constitute a serious threat for democratic institutions. Indeed, in many countries this ‘consensus of the centre’ is providing a platform for the growth of populist right-wing parties which, by presenting themselves as the only ‘anti-establishment’ forces, are trying to occupy the terrain of contestation deserted by the left.

Taking issue with the work of John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas on one side, and with the tenets of the third way as practised by Tony Blair and theorised by Anthony Giddens on the other, Mouffe brings to the fore the paradoxical nature of modern liberal democracy. Against those who affirm that, with the demise of the left/right divide, antagonism has been eliminated from contemporary post-industrial societies and that an all-inclusive politics has become possible, she argues that the category of the ‘adversary’ plays a central role in the very dynamics of modern democracy. Drawing on the work of Wittgenstein and Derrida, and engaging with the provocative theses of Carl Schmitt, she proposes a new understanding of democracy in terms of ‘agonistic pluralism’ which acknowledges the ineradicability of antagonism and the impossibility of a final resolution of conflicts.

## The Democratic Paradox Details

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## Ryan says

The 4 stars out of 5 is appropriate. This book is quite observant and insightful until about page 98, when Mouffe takes her well-founded description of the problem and offers a very weak and ineffective solution. I feel that for the study of the decline of democracy and classical liberalism this book is very useful, while its solutions to the problem are useless.

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## Fernando G says

Una interesante, lógica y bastante teórica discusión en torno algunos de los elementos constitutivos de la democracias moderna. Mouffé a través de diferentes ensayos establece puntos de vista claros /teóricos, sobre los postulados de Habermars y Schmitt, para ir develando, lo que desde su punto de vista se vuelve en una paradoja democrática.

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## Lee Ann says

A difficult read, as philosophy often is, but this is an interesting argument about the role and structure of democratic society that uses interesting source material.

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## Erdem Tasdelen says

After having read this book I don't feel I've found out much more about Mouffe's thoughts on democracy than I had already gathered from various sources before. The essays seem to be repetitive versions of the same ideas and reading one should be enough - I don't see why they all needed to come together to constitute a book.

Though I agree with her on most points, especially the vital necessity of envisioning a different conception of democracy, I find her argumentation slightly elusive. I am having trouble imagining how her ideas of the political sphere can be turned into policies. She repeatedly argues that politics is not a representation of already established identities of a priori citizens, and that they are produced through politics and policies (which sort of goes without saying at this point), but doesn't elaborate on how dissensus and agonism can be practically implemented as systems of governing. Although the global liberal-democratic trend of the last 20 years or so might indeed be conceived as one that tries to present itself as the ultimate rational end that all societies should reach, where neo-liberalism is widely accepted as the truly contemporary way of structuring the relationship between politics and economics, don't we encounter dissensus and agonism all the time anyway (I'm using the term agonism loosely here, since to me the distinction between antagonism and agonism seems to be semantic play)?

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## Diego says

Un trabajo muy importante que nos recuerda la importancia de la división derecha / izquierda en el espectro político y la paradoja que implica el reconciliar los valores del liberalismo con aquellos de la democracia, en lo que hoy en día llamamos la democracia liberal. El punto mas importante es que nos recuerda que hoy mas que nunca existe espacio para la radicalización es decir para buscar expresiones fuera del consenso que excluye todo fuera del centro o fuera de lo que considera racionalmente apropiado de la discusión política y por lo tanto amenaza ala pluralidad y de esta forma a la democracia.

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## Egor Sofronov says

The most intelligent betrayal of utopia and embrace of liberal democracy.

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## Rebecca says

This book may be over my head, and while I'm finding it interesting, I need to downsize my reading to either the essentials or the pleasures, and this one isn't either. May return to it later, or may find something else that looks at the same topic in a more readable and illuminating fashion.

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## Richard Gallagher says

This book is dead on!

Accurate description of the evolution of democracy and some concrete suggestions on how it should proceed going forward

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## Lazaros Karavasilis says

Πολυ καλο βιβλιο για το θεμα της ελλειμματικης δημοκρατιας των αρχων του 21ου αιωνα με αμεση προβολη και στη παrouσα κατασταση της νεοφιλελευθερης ηγεμονιας μετα την οικονομικη κρ?ση. Η κριτικ? που ασκε?ται τ?σο στον Ρωλς ?σο και στον Σμ?τ βρ?σκει τα κεν? στις θεωρ?ες που ?χουν αναπτ?ξει οι δ?ο προαναφερθ?ντες. Επ?σης, το θ?μα της αγωνιστικ?ς δημοκρατ?ας, ?πως το αντιλαμβ?νεται η Μουφ μπορε? ?ντως να συνδρ?μει στην αναν?ωση της ριζοσπαστικ?ς πολιτικ?ς. Ωστ?σο, το βιβλ?ο παrouσι?ζει κ?ποια "κεν?". ?να απο αυτ? ε?ναι η επ?τευξη της αγωνιστικ?ς δημοκρατ?ας: καλ? ιδ?α με προοπτικ? χωρ?ς ?μως να υπ?ρχει σαφ?νεια ως προς την επ?τευξη της. ?να ακ?μη θ?μα ε?ναι η μεικτ? σκ?ψη της απ?ναντι στην συναιν?ση και την σ?γκρουση στην πολιτικ?. Ισχυρ?ζεται ?τι δεν ε?ναι κατ? της συνα?νεσης αλλ? προτε?νει μια συνεχ? σ?γκρουση π?νω στο επ?πεδο της πολιτικ?ς ?χι με τους ?ρους του Σμ?τ αλλ? με ?ρους ανταγωνισμο? στο πλ?σιο της δημοκρατ?ας, ?πως την εννοε? η Μουφ. Συμπερασματικ?, πολ? καλο βιβλ?ο με αρκετ? κεν? ?μως ως προς την επιδ?ωξη των στ?χων και των μηνυμ?των που θ?λει να περ?σει.

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## Leonardo says

Discutido en La razón populista Pág.210

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## Donald says

This book presents a branch of political theory I had never been exposed to before, and it is well argued and written. The central premise of Mouffe's position (via Schmitt) is that there is a fundamental conflict between liberalism and democracy; in fact, liberal democracy is constituted and defined by this conflict. Consensus is impossible. Unlike Schmitt, she does not take this to mean that liberal democracy is going to fail.

I agree with a lot of Mouffe's descriptions of the modern State, but I think her proposed solutions and strategies are stupid (Negriist alternative globalization, really?!?). Still, it was interesting to read someone defending liberal democracy in a fairly honest and inventive way.

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## Megan Aveni says

This book lays a very good framework for explaining the struggles any democracy has in discovering the balance between liberty and equality. Sections of this book are difficult to understand because they are in direct response or in critique of several other authors that are not commonly known to the average American reader. I would suggest that if you wish to fully understand Mouffe's arguments and ideas that you also read the other authors she alludes to.

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## Grace says

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe seeks to get to the heart of the liberal-democratic project. Rather than seeing liberal-democracy as a stable, unified historical project, Mouffe instead sees a contingent and often-contested alliance between two distinct historical projects: the democratic project (based on equality) and the liberal project (based on liberty). Writing in the 90s, Mouffe is especially critical of the "Third Way" and the acceptance by social-democratic parties of the hegemony of neoliberalism. This "consensus of the centre" and the foreclosure of a left alternative to neoliberalism has fueled, in Mouffe's eyes, the rise of far-right populist parties which threaten the very continuation of the liberal-democratic project. It's easy to see the parallels of this analysis with the current American political situation. As the Democratic Party has consistently failed to deliver substantive change for the working class and for people of colour, these populations became disillusioned with the democratic progress and did not vote for Hillary Clinton, allowing far-right populist Donald Trump to take power. In this her analysis seems prescient.

What is missing from Mouffe's analysis is, of course, class. Mouffe takes a post-Marxist perspective in *The Democratic Paradox* and, rather than expanding her analysis, instead marginalizes the impact of class on contemporary democracy. The hegemony of neoliberalism is not an isolated event but one that is deeply

connected to the evolving structure of global capital accumulation. Instead of offering an anti-capitalist alternative to liberal-democracy, Mouffe seems primarily concerned with preserving liberal-democracy against far-right populism. Indeed, in the introduction, Mouffe states offhand: "We might have given up the idea of a radical alternative to the capitalist system, but ..." Hardly an inspiring message!

In the conclusion, Mouffe uses a Lacanian "ethics of the Real" which she sees as "particularly suited to a pluralist democracy." But does not the "ethics of the Real" denote something much more radical than simple pluralist democracy or a reinvigorated social-democratic politics? The Real threatens to rip apart the very symbolic order with its constitutive Law. In Alenka Zupančič's words, "In relation to the 'smooth course of events,' life as governed by the 'reality principle,' ethics always appears as something excessive, as a disturbing 'interruption.'" <sup>1</sup> This "ethics of the Real" allows us to think beyond the hegemony of liberal-democracy and to create a truly radical emancipatory politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Zupančič - "Introduction," in *Ethics of the Real*