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Agonistic Pluralism: The right compass on the long way to counter-hegemony?

In opposition to the dominant aggregative model and the leading deliberative alternative, Chantal Mouffe has proposed the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’, as *the* theoretical tool for achieving radical democracy - a vision of how democracy has to be understood in a *postmarxist* as well as *postmarxist* way. At the same time the concept serves as a guidance for the theoretical and politico-practical elaboration of counter-hegemonic positions. In this paper my critique will point to this last mentioned aspect, arguing that her concept is less biting, than it pretends to be.

From a theoretical point of view the concept has inconsistencies and in politico-practical terms, the concept focuses primarily on the form in which counter-hegemonic politics can be articulated and less on the contents that might motivate a ‘war of positions’ with a chance of success. In addition, the model of counter-hegemony remains vague if it is to gather only the ‘polyphony of voices, each of which constitutes its own irreducible discursive identity’¹ through a chain of articulation. The reason for this is the theoretical neglect of the basic economic structure that characterizes the political and social field, as well as – by putting this issues at the core of the theoretical design – the fear of falling into an essentialist discourse, with its semantics of economic reductionism, or with the revival of the privileged historical subject. Both points don’t have to lead to death ends.

Inconsistencies

With the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ Chantal Mouffe emphasizes the plurality of opinions and values in the political sphere, the inevitability of conflict in political life, the impossibility of finding a final, rational and neutral solution to a conflict and the taming of destructive conflict or ‘antagonism’. Mouffe defines ‘the political’ as the antagonistic framework in which every position and collectivity is entrapped and as the ineradicable tendency among groups of human beings to mutual ‘antagonism’. In her view, liberalism denies the true nature of ‘the political’, whereas the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ faces up to this reality, channelling it in a non-destructive way. Far from being built on a rational ground on which a universal consensus could be achieved, democracy is rather structured by a vigorous but mutually tolerant contest among groups of people united by passionately shared identifications.

¹ Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). 2 edn. (London: Verso), p. 191.

In Chantal Mouffe's view these groups seek to achieve a dominant or hegemonic status for their view of things. That means that every political position is contingently imprisoned in hegemonic relationships, that every position defines itself in dependence/rejection of a constitutive outside/other and that every political collectivity with its plans or programs is constitutively built on a us/them distinction.

On the one hand the concept of 'agonistic pluralism' serves to highlight the contingent formation of powerblocks – or to say it with Gramsci and the neogramscian scholars: of historical blocks – with the aim of fixing their own interpretation, definition and practical implementation of the terms 'freedom' and 'equality' in society and politics. By consequence the political field of democracies is a battlefield occupied by opposing political groups, each of them aiming to present their own semantics and practices as uniquely universal and objectively valid on the background of shared liberal values such as 'liberty' or 'equality'. Each of them trying to fix the ground on which humans get aware of their consciousness and of their role.

This struggle for hegemony depends on the alliances those groups undertake and on the circumstances of the socio-political substrate. Both of them are presented as contingent and changeable, so that the actors involved are caught in self-made nets, whose nodes they can undo or strengthen only through power effects. In spite of this open-ended procedure the aim of a hegemonic block is to cover this struggle by presenting itself as the incarnation of objectivity without any alternatives. In this sense I agree with Chantal Mouffe when she emphasizes that hegemony is precisely where power and objectivity meet.²

As soon as a powerblock gets victorious in defining the contents of 'equality' and 'freedom', in implementing its own ideology and the practices shaped by this ideology in a large number of civil society institutions, it gets hegemonic, which means that the social, economical and political process follows and – in a reflexive way – strengthens this hegemonic power. Counter-hegemony is therefore not only about challenging the existing and dominant order, but also related to a vast intervention in all fields of civil society, to attack and change the hegemonic power wherever it is manifest and sedimented. On this account counter-hegemony doesn't aim at invading the palace of glass, on the contrary it has to act step by step in several fields of struggle – it has to engage in a 'war of position' as Gramsci put it.

In liberal democracies, as Chantal Mouffe argues, the main task is not to eliminate the dimension of conflict, but rather to avoid its escalation into war, to domesticate the ubiquitous dimension of

² 'This point of confluence between objectivity and power is what we have called 'hegemony'.' Chantal Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox*. (London: Verso 2000). p. 21.

antagonism³ and – to say it with Ralf Dahrendorf⁴ – to canalize the struggle for political power and influence in institutional ways.

The political space in liberal democracies is for Mouffe not a playground for a project that leads, somewhere in a distant future, to a final objective reconciliation of all possible differences. The dimension of conflict remains constitutive for this space. There are in Mouffe's view no essentialisms or universalisms behind this space, waiting to be discovered by rationalist thought, and functioning as an illuminated road-sign on the way to a fully reconciled society but rather particular claims presenting themselves as universal principles, rooted on essentialist premises and built on arguments that everybody could presumably sustain rationally.

On the other side, the dismissed essentialism seems to reenter into the theoretical design of 'agonistic pluralism' through an ontological backdoor. As Chantal Mouffe insists the political is by nature always antagonistic. In line with Carl Schmitt, for whom there is a deep-seated natural human tendency to 'antagonism', i.e. the urge to get a sense of collective identity through mutually opposed positions rooted on the framework of 'friend versus enemy', Mouffe highlights that the tendency to antagonism is 'the essence of >the political<'⁵. There is always a 'us', that is constituted in rejection but at the same time in a constitutive dependence of a 'them'. The contents of those collective identities can always vary, insofar as they are always caught in the flow of signs and significations, but their fundamental ground, on which they relate as opponents, stays unvaried.

Collective identities are, so to speak, always contingently built on the essential and fundamental basis of 'the political'. Everything is historically formed, except the basic antagonistic structure, which shapes and forms precisely that which is being historically formed. This is a strange contradiction for a theory that presents itself as anti-essentialist, but relies strongly on essentialist premises. It seems that there is as Slavoj Žižek put it a 'nice self-referential irony at work here: there is history only insofar as there persist remainders of >ahistorical< essentialism.'⁶

A similar inconsistency is also present in Mouffe's argument that this onto-fundamental base of political life – antagonism – has to be tamed into agonism by democratic institutions. Apart from the evident normativity this claim includes, and from the rational credit it needs to evoke, what is empirically new about this claim? A critical reader could challenge this concept by saying that it only reflects the status quo in a fashionable and trendy post-structuralist, or -marxist or -schmittianism theory. In addition he or she could add that the concept of 'agonistic pluralism'

³ „... the aim of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*.“ Ibid. p. 103.

⁴ See for instance: Ralf Dahrendorf. *Konflikt und Freiheit*. (München: Piper 1972).

⁵ Chantal Mouffe. *On the Political*. (London: Routledge 2005). p. 8.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek. *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*. (London: Verso 2009). p. 22.

not only relies on a rationalist normativity, but even more, that this concept, and despite Mouffe's anti-universalistic engagement, comes precisely as a universal principle on which democratic societies should be built on.

Another problematical aspect of this concept is its implicit circularity. The agonistic struggle for hegemony takes place, as we have noted above, on the background of commonly shared values. Those actors fighting for hegemony have to conceive of each other as adversaries. An adversary is, as Mouffe points out, 'somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question'. In other words an adversary is a 'legitimate enemy' with whom 'we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality.'⁷ So, to conceive of each other as adversaries, the founding structure of political life – antagonism – must already have been tamed by democratic institutions into agonism. The implementation of agonistic pluralism thus presupposes precisely the kind of actors it has to bring about.

How to escape this simultaneity of the non-simultaneous? By a consensus between several adversary positions fixing a framework of political life with its principles and rules, in which disputes still continue about how these principles and rules should be interpreted? And if so, don't we have here at least a weak version of an 'overlapping consensus' based on rational reflections, sharply criticized by Chantal Mouffe?

On the other hand, one could argue that the existing order is nothing but the result of power interventions made by political groups seeking hegemony. As soon as a group gets victorious in its struggle, its preferred world-view gets dominant. Thus, in consequence we could say that, since the current hegemony is liberal, liberal values appear to be legitimate for us. Would this still be the same if we had a fascist hegemony? Would their world-view and values be legitimate?

If hegemony is conceived in this strict sense, only as an effect of power, then every value, principle or interest is no more than an expression of dominant power formations, and every alternative to this has to cope with the existing structures in some way. We are then, to say it simply, imprisoned in the ruling order with no way out. A recourse to Gramsci, however, shows that hegemony is primarily built on consensus. In order to become hegemonic a particular group must, first of all, be able to convince the subalterns of its own world-view and political program. I'll come to that later.

⁷ Chantal Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox*. (London: Verso 2000). p. 102.

Let's come back to the usefulness of the politico-practical aspect of the concept of 'agonistic pluralism'. As we have seen, the concept aims to radicalize democracy by stressing the dimension of conflict and its centrality and permanence for political life, and by doing so, it redraws the conceptual field of political theory. Away from a consensus-based thinking towards to a hegemonic understanding of political life, that is a political life that is constitutively shaped by power relations with no universal, rational or neutral point of rescue or final reconciliation. This theoretical framework has undoubtedly some *point de force* – especially its conception of political life as a complex and conflictual network of power effects and of hegemonic struggles – but it has the before-mentioned theoretical as well as some politico-practical weaknesses. In fact the model of agonistic democracy and the concept of agonistic pluralism both aim to radicalize democracy, but far from analyzing the concrete battlefield, on which a war of position has to take place and a vaster democratization of the political, economical and social institutions and structures could be achieved, the analytical interest is focused mainly on democratic procedures, conceptualized now as agonistic.

A mere dispute about how democracy is supposed to be formed, provides no policy tools at hand that could be useful to really break through the current hegemony. The critical work remains formal and offers no theoretical support useful to shape, motivate and channel counter-hegemonic positions. Because if we understand a crisis in a gramscian way, as a condition in which the old is dying and the new can not yet be born, then the mere description of the procedural form of radical politics is not enough. Above all, their content must be figured out analytically, so that a counter-hegemonic movement can gain motivation, form and vigor. Finally without any content each form collapses.

In this context we have to ask how today's dominant world view and order work. Under the successful ideological mantra that there is no alternative to the neoliberal variant of capitalist order, today's neoliberal hegemony is reproducing exactly those power relations, economical structures and legislations of wealth-division necessary to its own survival. The task of the left – as Mouffe rightly argues – should therefore be to formulate alternatives and to spread these claims in all possible fields of civil society as well as to engage by this into a 'war of positions'.

I agree to the extent that a counter-hegemony should in this respect challenge the dominant order with other convictions. However, without an analysis and critique of the dominant order, its world-view and its central interests and also without connecting this critiques with an appeal

to reason and to justice – valid not only for a particular group but for all members of the society – I do not see how this might work.

For that a return to the basic structure of the dominant hegemony – to its economic base or to put it with Gramsci: to the economic-corporative interests – is necessary. A mere concentration on the multiple sectors on the battlefield, with issues ranging from migration, ecology, gender, identity and cultural policies respectively, runs the risk of ending into a cacophony of claims, not only unable to interfere with the central base of the neoliberal economic and political order, but – and worse still – to be incorporated and commodified into this. As long as these struggles on different issues aren't conceptualized and theorized in close connection with the economic dimension affecting them, they lose their poignancy and increase the mutability of postfordist capitalism.

Now, for such a critical work, the doctrines of the Second International can be dismissed, without thereby throwing the baby out with the bath. Economic structures may not determine people's consciousness, but – as Marx wrote in his later works – they do affect and condition it. In his preface to his critique of political economy he writes that the totality of the production relations forms the economic structure of society, the real base, on which a juridical and political superstructure rises, with specific forms of consciousness – not determined by or reflecting the latter, but rather – corresponding to it.⁸ For Marx – and in this case also for Engels – consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process.⁹ In other words, thought itself, consciousness, ideology, truth, is nothing but thought about the economic state of things. Now, this statement has not to be read in an economic determinist or essentialist way.

Despite the crude materialism sometimes attributed to him, Marx himself, in certain places, intimates that he is not an economic determinist. In one of the places where he distinguishes the base from the superstructure, he says that 'the material transformation of the economic conditions of production [...] can be determined with the precision of natural science,' and this is separated from the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic – in short, 'ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict [in the base] and fight it out'.¹⁰ In fact,

⁸ „Die Gesamtheit dieser Produktionsverhältnisse bildet die ökonomische Struktur der Gesellschaft, die reale Basis, worauf sich ein juristischer und politischer Überbau erhebt und welcher bestimmte gesellschaftliche Bewußtseinsformen *entsprechen*. Die Produktionsweise des materiellen Lebens bedingt den sozialen, politischen und geistigen Lebensprozeß überhaupt.“ Karl Marx. *Vorwort zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (1859)*. MEW 13. 7. Auflage. (Berlin: Dietz 1971). p. 9. (my emphasis)

⁹ „Das Bewusstsein kann nie etwas anderes sein als das bewusste Sein, und das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklicher Lebensprozess.“ Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels. *Die Deutsche Ideologie (1854-1856)*. MEW 3. (Berlin: Dietz 1958). p. 26.

¹⁰ „In der Betrachtung solcher Umwälzungen muss man stets unterscheiden zwischen der materiellen, naturwissenschaftlichen treu zu konstatierenden Umwälzung in den ökonomischen Produktionsbedingungen und

that may be a site in which, coupled with the conflict in the base, men can, in Marx's words, 'fight it out', to determine the shape society is going to take – which perhaps can affect the base itself. For Marx there is no strict determination between the consciousness of men and the material production of life, but there is a close connection of conditionality between the two. The awareness of this connection is indispensable for any political theory dealing with capitalism as well as for any politico-practical advice to organize and direct the struggle against the present order of things. Gramsci goes in the same direction when he emphasizes that people's way of thinking and acting as well as the power effects and relation of subordination shaped by them, are not determined by crude economical relationships but rather by the dominant interpretation of these economical relationships.

For Gramsci hegemonic power has to rely on legally approved coercion through a vast consensus in society. A consensus that requires the adaptation of the dominating classes vis-a-vis the underprivileged one, but still an adaptation that moves only until the point where the core economic-corporative interests of the dominant classes aren't questioned. 'Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.'¹¹

What is Chantal Mouffe's position on that? When she formulates the claims necessary for counter-hegemonic politics, she concentrates on aspects relating to the economic structures.¹² But at the same time she denies a proper analysis and critique of these economic structures and focuses instead on the form a counter-hegemonic political collectivity should have nowadays.

Since in Mouffe's understanding no social structure nor privileged subject position plays the decisive role for the political struggle – because ultimately all identities are in her eyes contingent – she suggests as a politico-practical tool the concept of the chain of articulation.

In her view, the front lines of modern societies have their own logic, and the only commonly shared foundation is the antagonistic framework of the political. Through a chain of articulation

den juristischen, politischen, religiösen, künstlerischen oder philosophischen, kurz, ideologischen Formen, worin sich die Menschen dieses Konflikts bewusst werden und ihn ausfechten.“ Karl Marx. *Vorwort zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (1859)*. MEW 13. 7. Auflage. (Berlin: Dietz 1971). p. 9.

¹¹ Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (New York: International Publisher 1971). p. 161.

¹² Chantal Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox*. (London: Verso 2000). p. 126.

several subject positions, with their own history of identity and struggle, can interact and link each other to a forever changeable conglomerate, unifying the different claims and struggles in a powerblock, able to engage in a ‘war of position’ against the dominant hegemonic power.

In this view resistance has to be conceptualized in the mode of a football game, with permanent potentially changing teams and no longer in the way of a duel between two big collective identities, with their interests and tactics. But as long as such a chain of articulation doesn’t conceive of the economic power relations and structures as fundamental and decisive for the own fighting disposition, and as long as this accumulation of different wills doesn’t articulate a clear and explicit social collective identity with over-particularistic claims – this is as I see it the sense of Gramsci’s notion of the ‘modern prince’ – it fails to direct the energies, motivations and fighting strategies to the very ground where all the other cultural, ethical or emancipatory struggles are rooted in – the capitalist economic order. In this sense the chain remains fragile and manipulable for the interests of capital.

Final remarks

So, is the concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ an adequate and right compass on the long way to counter-hegemony? The comments and results so far deny this question. The concept appears not only inconsistent from a theoretical or logical point of view, it stands also on weak feet concerning its politico-practical usefulness. The reason is – to keep it short – that without any appeal to reason – something Mouffe implicitly evokes to strengthen her concept – and without the articulation of over-particularistic claims, that challenge the decisive economical structures and interests of nowadays social and cultural policies, radical politics can’t get informed, motivated, shaped and become counter-hegemonial. And thus it seems to me, that Chantal Mouffe’s concept remains more in a *postmarxist* tradition, than in a *postmarxist* one.