

Beyond Liberalism? The Postmodern Conception of Democratic Politics

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One striking feature of contemporary political theory is that liberalism, as an ideology, is being dissociated from democracy; and democratic political institutions are being justified through a conceptual vocabulary that shares little with the narrative of liberalism. In recent times, the most important input to this enterprise has come from postmodernism. This is not the first time that a distinction is being made between liberalism and democracy. Carl Schmitt has made this distinction earlier, and more recently, it has been argued that democracy as a form of self-government need not always be accompanied by a commitment to the philosophy of liberalism. Indeed, as Parekh shows, democracy functions even in societies that have a conception of the self that is markedly different from the liberal perception of the individual (Parekh: 1993).

Parekh points to the existence of non-liberal societies that have democratic forms of government; the postmodernists, on the other hand, argue that a radical democratic politics must necessarily abandon the philosophical baggage of liberalism. In other words, they do not merely critique liberalism and concede the possibility of non-liberal democracies, rather they claim that pluralist democracy is possible only when we distance ourselves from the inheritances of Enlightenment rationality and its political counterpart – namely, liberalism.

Liberal democracy has been the target of attack since the end of the nineteenth century. At that time, the socialists questioned both the liberal commitment to free market economy and its defense of the right to property. They showed that the prevailing inequalities of wealth hindered the realization of the ideals of freedom and liberty. Today, by comparison, attention is focussed on the liberal conception of the self. Here too, the object of critique is not the atomistic conception of society; rather the notion of a free, self-determining and non-differentiated individual is being interrogated and rejected.

Criticism of this kind has come primarily from two quarters: a) the communitarians; and b) the postmodernists. The former argue that liberalism separates the person from his/her beliefs, ambitions and commitments. It operates with an image of a bare or 'unencumbered'

person (Sandel: 1984). Rejecting this conception of the self, the communitarians assert that we cannot speak of an abstract individual or person. Individuals are not merely embodiments of abstract humanity: they are subjects with names and identities (Gray: 1988). Their identity is derived from the social and cultural communities to which they belong (MacIntyre: 1981). That is, their values and conceptions of good life are not simply the product of their free will and individual choice. Rather, they are shaped by their community membership.

Beginning with this understanding, the communitarians uphold and underline the value of moral ties that bind an individual to a community. They criticize liberalism for undermining the community and for denying the existence of shared primary goods. In fact, they maintain that the neglect of community life is responsible for the ills of modernity. In their view, liberalism has, among other things, led to the disintegration of family, moral anarchy and a deep sense of alienation in society. In this context, by emphasizing the existence of a shared perception of common good, the communitarians seek to re-establish a consensus of values in the public domain.

The communitarians are critical of the liberal conception of unencumbered self, and through their writings, they seek to replace this with a picture of a 'radically situated self'. Along with this, they seek to revitalize political and public life by building upon a community's conception of good life. The postmodernists, on the other hand, question the attempt to shape public life around the notion of a common good that is derived from the moral values of a society. That is, they are critical of any attempt to build national life around a single conception of good life. Yet, they endorse the idea of a socially situated and culturally derived self. The postmodernists begin with the assumption that we cannot speak of a person in the abstract. Individuals have particular names and determinate histories. Indeed, their identities are shaped by these predicaments. However, they go on to argue that individuals do not get their identity from any one community. Each person is a member of several communities: s/he belongs to a particular family, tribe, class, gender and professional group. As such, a person's identity cannot be constituted around a single focal point. Further, since individuals take on several subject positions, we cannot *a priori* privilege any one vantage point or conception of good life.

The postmodernists endorse the view that democratic political institutions are desirable because they allow individuals to pursue their own separate conceptions of good life. However, they maintain, that we

need to preserve democratic political arrangements 'while abandoning their Kantian backup' (Rorty 1983: 584). In particular, they feel that the language that liberalism inherited from the Enlightenment – viz. the notion of essentialism, universalism and rationalism – needs to be abandoned as it is unsuitable for defending these institutions. For instance, they argue that the liberal attempt to *justify* democratic political arrangements by invoking the notion of intrinsic human rights or abstract human essence must be given up because these ideas assume the existence of an 'essential' human self that exists outside of time and space. Emphasizing the contingency of selfhood, Rorty writes that we must drop the idea of a 'humanity as a natural kind with an intrinsic nature, an intrinsic sets of powers to be developed or left undeveloped' (Rorty 1986a: 12).

In lieu of an essentialist language, we should think of historically constructed community of people and recognize that the human dignity is the 'comparative dignity of a group with which a person identifies herself. Nations or churches or movements are ... shining examples not because they reflect rays emanating from a higher source, but because of contrast-effects – comparisons with other worse communities. Persons have dignity not as an interior luminiscence, but because they share in that contrast' (Rorty 1983: 586-7). Following upon this, Rorty states that we must give up the search for justifications for our contemporary political institutions; since all such enterprises look for a foundational language, we should instead offer an 'apologetics' for them: that is, realize the relative validity of our convictions and stand up for them (Rorty: 1986b).

Chantal Mouffe takes the argument a step further. She maintains that liberalism, guided by the Enlightenment rationality, sees the political as the domain of law and reason. Through the political it seeks to create order and consensus in society. It does this by relegating most contentious matters – e.g., conflict of religious beliefs and moral values – to the private spheres. The public domain is, as a consequence, immunized and sheltered from conflicts and contestations that dominate the social life. This image of the political has, she maintains, been reinforced in the recent past. The collapse of the Soviet Union has given Western democrats a sense of security. They feel that the last major antagonism and conflict in the political domain has been eliminated, and reason has triumphed once again.

This understanding of the political is, according to Mouffe, responsible for the fact that western democrats have been unable to comprehend the

explosion of ethnic, religious and nationalist conflicts in the public domain. For them these conflicts represent deviations from the norm: 'a short parenthesis before rationality imposes its order' (Mouffe 1993: 1). Worse still, they have been guilty of endorsing assimilationist cultural and political policies. By derecognizing all identities, except that of a citizen, liberalism has remained insensitive to the predicaments of particular communities. In fact, some might even say, that it has defied the basic democratic norms by ignoring significant differences among individuals. At the very least, it has helped to legitimize the hegemony of the majority community.

Mouffe's major criticism of liberalism is that it cannot 'but remain blind to the specificity of the political in its dimension of conflict and decision' (Mouffe 1993: 2). She argues that we must acknowledge the inevitability of conflicts and contestations in political life. Instead of seeing conflict as a threat or disturbance that must be eliminated, we must realize the constructive role played by antagonisms in political life. Indeed, she goes on to argue that consensus is not desirable in political life: the call for "consensus and unanimity is fatal for democracy" (Mouffe 1993: 5).

Chantal Mouffe's conception of democratic politics rests upon three related arguments. One, the Hobbesian state of nature – i.e., endless conflict and war of all against all – can never be eradicated. It can, at best, be regulated and controlled. Two, given the inevitability of conflicts and contests, we should not pursue unanimity and consensus in political life. Parties must express the conflict of wills; if they fail to do so, then conflicts are likely to assume other guises. Three, a distinction between 'us' and 'them' is central to political life. The specific feature of democracy is that it does not annihilate the 'other'. Instead of treating 'them' as enemies who must be destroyed, it represents 'them' as 'an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated' (Mouffe 1993: 4). Thus, while a group fights against its adversary, it does not question the latter's 'right to defend themselves' (Mouffe: 1993).

While linking the political with the presence of antagonisms, Mouffe argues that the political should not be envisaged as a specific sphere of society; nor should it be associated with certain types of institutions. Rather, it must be conceived 'as a dimension that is inherent to every human society' (Mouffe 1993: 3). The liberal democrats, obviously, fail to take cognizance of this. They present the political as being free of controversies. Rawls, for instance, begins with the assumption that individuals must, in order to pursue their separate interests, share

certain primary goods: namely, rights, liberty and opportunity. He further maintains that the principles of justice presented by him are those that would be accepted by all rational individuals who wish to pursue their self interest. More importantly, by placing his negotiating parties behind the veil of ignorance, he makes all antagonisms and relations of power disappear from the deliberations. By giving priority to individual interests 'independently of their possible articulation by competing alternative discourses' (Mouffe 1993: 48), he uses a form of reasoning that is specific to moral discourse. Or, to put it more sharply, he collapses the political into the moral.

For political theorists of the postmodern persuasion this is a common liberal fallacy: one that is in need of correction if pluralist democracy is to survive. The plea to distinguish the political from the moral is supported by the claim that antagonisms are an integral and unavoidable aspect of political life. While the moral represents uniformity and universality, contests inhere in the political. To give an example: every identity is, they argue, relational. That is, it involves a distinction between 'self' and 'other', 'us' and 'them'. Affirmation of a difference, that constitutes the self from the outside, is the inevitable condition of all existence. Hence, one cannot visualize the presence of the 'self' without the 'other'. Politics, particularly, democratic politics, must take cognizance of this.

The co-existence of 'self' and 'other' implies that conflicts and contests are inevitable. There is no way in which we can resolve them permanently. Under the circumstances, it is said, the task of radical democratic politics is to build solidarities among sets of 'we'. More specifically all those groups that are engaged in fighting against existing forms of oppression and domination should imagine a possible unity in the form of 'rainbow coalition' (Laclau: 23); and recognize that their separate struggles can supplement each other.

In presenting this conception of radical democratic politics, the postmodernists reaffirm the assumption that there is neither a universal class nor a single project of human emancipation. The sources of domination and forms of antagonisms are many and these cannot be grasped through any metanarrative, nor can they be challenged by one social movement. One needs, in other words, plural projects of emancipation.

The conception of democratic politics, presented in the writings of the postmodernists, has gained considerable popularity and support on two counts. a) At a time when new social movements were seen as

fragmented struggles that could not take the place of revolutionary forces in society, postmodernists instilled a ray of hope. They pointed to the radical potential of these diverse struggles and explored the possibility of forging solidarities between them. In performing this task, they occupied the space vacated by the traditional left while simultaneously providing a philosophical anchor to the new social movements. b) It made a strong case for differentiating the moral from the political. In fact it justified this distinction philosophically through its understanding of the relationship of self and other. Previously Oakeshott had differentiated the political from the moral. However, he associated the political with the existence of a formal, non-instrumental bond, and maintained that in a democracy individuals should be related only through the common recognition of the rules. The postmodernists, by comparison, are not satisfied with a procedural republic. Mouffe, for instance, argues that we need political unity and procedures alone cannot provide that. '[P]rocedures are not deemed sufficient for creating the political unity of a democracy and a more substantial homogenization is required' (Mouffe 1993: 130).

There is no doubt that the postmodernist conception of democratic politics is one of the most influential ideas of our time. However, one needs to consider whether it is able to offer an alternative vocabulary for defending democratic political arrangements. One also needs to examine if its conception of pluralist democracy constitutes a viable statement of democratic aspirations. These questions must, in particular, be asked of Chantal Mouffe because she outlines the most coherent and detailed idea of democratic politics within postmodernism. Besides, with her writings, there is a major shift in postmodern political theory.

Earlier statements of postmodernism made no distinction between contending political agendas. The critique of essentialism, on the one hand, and indiscriminate commitment to heterogeneity of every kind, on the other, meant that postmodernism could not privilege any point of view permanently. That is, it could not tell us anything about the way conflicts between identities and life-forms should be settled. All that it could say was that contests exist and they are open. To participate in political life we have to make a choice: i.e., we have to decide which side of the contest we are going to join and build solidarities for. Since choices are made primarily on pragmatic grounds, they were, in a manner of speaking, equally valid. Consequently, a commitment to democracy involved that we should refuse to privilege any one point of view; but more importantly, that we be willing to accept the result of encounters

and contests, irrespective of what they are.

The significant thing about Chantal Mouffe's statement is that she does not reduce democratic politics to open encounters. Although she maintains that conflicts and contests are unavoidable and necessary for democratic politics, she asserts that we need to have a set of procedures for determining the will of the state and an agreement on certain political principles that give substance to democratic citizenship (Mouffe 1993: 129). In making this assertion, Mouffe gives a substantive content to the notion of democratic politics. Indeed, she associates it with a commitment to liberty and equality, whatever be our interpretation of it.

Like all postmodernists, Mouffe upholds cultural, religious and moral pluralism in society. However, she goes on to argue that we cannot have 'pluralism of political principles' (Mouffe 1993: 131). To put it a little differently, Mouffe distinguishes between the political and the cultural domain, and reaffirms the liberal distinction between the private and the public, church and the state, civil law and religious law (Mouffe 1993: 132).

The liberals, it must be noted, allot for the diversity of religious and moral beliefs by relegating these activities to the private sphere. That is, a commitment to religious norms, moral values or cultural practices are regarded as matters that concern only the self. By comparison, they associate the public domain with the expression of shared political beliefs. In a way Mouffe reaffirms this point of view. Despite her rejection of an essentialist and universalist language, she does not allow differences to creep into all sphere of social and political life. Democratic citizenship thus continues to require an affirmation of shared political principles.

Chantal Mouffe deviates from liberalism when she concedes that the national political life is embedded in cultural practices. In fact she recognizes that these practices generally reflect the cultural orientation of the majority. To take care of the problems that arise on account of a homogenizing majority culture, she suggests that we should try to distinguish between those values and customs in public morality that are derived from or specific to Christianity and those that are an expression of the principles of pluralist democracy (Mouffe 1993: 132). The former, she maintains, must not be imposed on society; the latter, by inference, can be. Mouffe obviously believes that a distinction can be made between public norms that are influenced by Christianity and those that are not; and that by allowing heterogeneity in the former we would be able to resolve most of the existing problems facing liberal democracies. Although Chantal Mouffe does not explain this further, it would be interesting to

apply her schema to some of the existing points of contention to see if it provides a viable alternative. Let us take two commonly known cases – namely, the decision to close shops on Sunday and compulsory schooling for children. According to Mouffe's framework, the former would constitute a practice that is derived from Christianity; hence, one could allow heterogeneous practices in this sphere. However, the decision of gypsies not to send their children to school would probably represent a violation of the accepted political principles. In so far as compulsory education for children is not a value derived exclusively from Christianity, it would have to stay. Quite obviously, such an approach would generate considerable conflict; in fact it would require a strong interventionist state, and one wonders whether that would be in the interest of democratic politics.

The problem with Chantal Mouffe's conception of democratic politics is that she associates the homogenizing tendencies of liberalism with the preponderance of Christian values in public life. Consequently, she ignores the fact that liberal politics has been insensitive to community identity, and, historically, it has led to the destruction of the cultural life of the minorities. In fact, the alternative proposed by her shares the inadequacies of liberalism in this respect. It is therefore hardly surprising that Mouffe identifies friends and adversaries along liberal lines. The most striking example of this being that she feels that the liberal arch rival – Islam – cannot be integrated with democratic politics as it does not accept the distinction between the private and the public, the church and the state, civil law and religious law (Mouffe 1993: 132). The fact that the public-private distinction is being interrogated within liberalism itself, and political theorists have repeatedly shown that church and religion permeate the secular, makes her reference to Islam quite significant and pertinent. Indeed, after pre-judgements of this sort, one might also ask just what kind of heterogeneity would there be even in the cultural domain.

While elucidating the nature of the political domain, Mouffe maintains that in a democracy the 'other' must not be seen as an adversary that has to be destroyed. All those who accept the 'rules of the game' should be treated as adversaries whose 'existence is legitimate and must be tolerated' (Mouffe 1993: 4). In other words, we can fight against them, but should not 'question their right to defend themselves' (Mouffe 1993: 4). Two things need to be mentioned here. One, in Chantal Mouffe's framework, the 'self' and the 'other' are caught in a dyadic relationship. Since an identity is constituted only in relation to its 'other' and the latter 'blocks'

the full realization of the identity, it must, of necessity, be subverted. Negating the contingent 'other' is thus an integral part of the project of radical democracy (Gupta 1996: 185-8). Two, if we are to treat the 'other' as an adversary and not as an enemy, then we need to grant the 'other' more than just constitutional rights. That is, instead of allowing the 'other' the right to defend themselves, we need to engage with them in the hope of understanding each other and revising our respective points of view. Irrespective of whether we reach a consensus or not, listening to the other and opening oneself to them is absolutely essential. Otherwise, the alienation of the self from the other will necessarily result in the annihilation of the other – a result that would not be in keeping with the ideals of democratic politics.

Seen from this perspective, it becomes evident that democratic radical politics requires not the existence of shared political principles and procedures; rather it rests upon the inclination to grant an equal respect to the 'other'. Procedures are essential in so far as they can institutionalize ways in which the 'self' and 'others' enter into conversation; and political principles will arise from such forms of collective participation. At the very least, existing political principles would need to rest upon wider consensus. If we share the postmodern distrust of consensus-building, then the present set of antagonisms and challenges to democracy are likely to persist.

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