Rethinking Political Community: Chantal Mouffe’s Liberal Socialism

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Like her sometime collaborator, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe is devoted to the project of deepening and extending democratic revolution. Crucial to this project is the work of radical intellectuals whose task is to develop vocabularies that give insight to people’s experiences so that they may struggle more effectively to transform relations of subordination and oppression. What Mouffe finds missing today, however, is precisely an effort to create the necessary languages of political analysis and action: “There is a real lack of imagination on the point of view of left-thinking intellectuals in creating new vocabularies which will make possible a radical democratic hegemony.” Aware that new vocabularies cannot consist simply of different words that better fit the world but must also include new practices and institutions, Mouffe is nevertheless principally concerned with developing a post-Marxist political theory, one that gives Marxism its “theoretical dignity” by revising it to address the needs of the contemporary situation. Poststructuralism and liberal-democratic political thought are the unlikely agents enlisted to accomplish a revision that leaves none of the constituent vocabularies unchanged. And it is through this revision, which she calls liberal socialism, that Mouffe hopes to advance us toward radical democracy as a new form of political community.

Central to this new vocabulary are the liberal-democratic principles of liberty and equality for all. Turning the tables on recent challenges to Marxism that are focused on the absence, in current geopolitical arrangements, of “actually existing Marxism,” Mouffe observes that the problem with “really existing liberal democracies is
not their ideals; their ideals are wonderful. The problem is that those ideals are not put into practice in those societies.” The problem, in short, is to take liberal ideals seriously, including what Mouffe calls “the axiological principle of pluralism.” This requires a return to a sense of “the political” and a politics that recognizes “the impossibility of a completely harmonious society.” What this means, of course, is that antagonism, conflict, and exclusion are inevitable and unavoidable, and that pluralism can never be “total” (totally inclusive); it can only be “limited.”

Given this sense of “the political,” and in light of recent neoconservative and neoliberal efforts to use liberal discourse to restore a hierarchic society, Mouffe argues in the following interview that the task of the left is to create a sense of political community by establishing social division (and political frontiers) on a new basis. Toward this end, she offers an important set of distinctions: between antagonism and agonism, and between enemy and adversary. Mouffe explains: “‘Antagonism’ is a relation between enemies; they want to destroy each other. ‘Agonism’ is a relation among adversaries.” The difference between enemies and adversaries is that “you respect the right of the opponent to defend his or her point of view.” Stated somewhat more pointedly, the difference is that respect for difference is put into practice as the principle of action in a democratic political community. Here Mouffe depart[s] from the liberal tradition to suggest that a struggle among adversaries is a struggle to establish a different hegemony, a transformation in the relations of power, rather than a substitution of one elite by another that leaves power relations substantially unchanged. The aim of radical democratic politics is transformative—to create institutions in which conflict does not take the form of an antagonism between enemies that want to destroy one another but instead takes the form of agonism. The category of the enemy does not disappear, as Mouffe goes on to explain in *The Return of the Political*. It remains pertinent as a way of identifying “those who do not accept the democratic ‘rules of the game’ and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community.”

Important to the constitution of political community and to the formation of a radical democratic hegemony is the creation of what Mouffe calls a “chain of equivalence” among different struggles (for example, feminism, gay rights, and anti-racism). A chain of equivalence does not form in terms of a common essence shared by
different groups but through determining the adversary, the “them” to which “we” are opposed. Mouffe argues compellingly that democratic objectives are not going to be realized through essentialist (and separatist) forms of identity politics that merely seek to recognize and celebrate difference. The danger of this kind of identity politics is that it does not recognize the importance of creating a chain of equivalence among different struggles. Politics in this form is, in her view, “the last avatar of liberal ideology and interest-group pluralism.” The only way in which things are going to change, Mouffe argues, is “by shaping a very strong chain of equivalence among different struggles.”

Clearly, rhetoric, argumentation, and the concept of consensus are crucial to the constitution of collective identities and to the functioning of the kind of democratic political community, or societas, that she envisions. Societas names a bond that links citizens (“friends” and “adversaries”) together but that leaves room for dissensus. It is a bond created by common values (for example, liberty and equality), although the definition or interpretation of those values is always in contestation. For Mouffe, there can be no “rational consensus,” which, in principle, means a totally inclusive consensus. Consensus is always based on exclusion, on an excluded element or interpretation. However, as Mouffe points out, “The recognition that any form of consensus, any particular order, cannot exist without some form of exclusion should not be used in order to justify the presence of exclusion.” A radical democratic society is one in which every form and basis of exclusion is continually put in question.

Thus, where there is consensus there is exclusion, and where there is exclusion there is the operation of power and hegemonic struggle. Hegemony is perhaps the pivotal term in Mouffe’s vocabulary. A concept she developed with Laclau in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, hegemony represents a radicalization of the notion of process, of political process. Hegemony is not simply the domination by one group or idea over another; it is a process of ongoing struggle that constitutes and transforms society. It is through hegemonic struggle that political frontiers are drawn and redrawn and political communities are made and unmade. While the left has apparently lost an understanding of the logic of hegemony, the neoconservative and neoliberal new right has gained a hegemonic role in defining the terms of political discourse. What we are seeing,
Mouffe opines, is an "abandonment by left-wing parties of what should be their task, which is to provide an alternative to neoliberal [and neoconservative] discourse."

A particularly rich resource for shaping a radical democratic hegemony that could challenge the new right can be found in the often overlooked role that passions and affects play in politics. Whereas other political theorists maintain that people act in politics to maximize their interests, or act according to reason and rationality, Mouffe suggests that political passions—for example, outrage, anger, empathy, and sympathy—are a basis for constructing a collective form of identification. She asks a searching question: "What makes people crystallize into a 'we,' a 'we' which is to act politically?" Neoconservatives have been particularly effective in mobilizing people's passions toward non-democratic ends. "The real issue for democratic politics," Mouffe says, "is how we can mobilize those passions toward democratic designs." A good question indeed.

Q. As you know, the field of rhetoric and composition is devoted to the study of the practice of writing, broadly conceived. Having written several books and articles, you've certainly had occasion to reflect on the process of writing. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. Well, I certainly would like to think of myself as a writer, and in a certain sense I do. In fact, before studying philosophy and losing some of my writing skill, I very much wanted to be a writer. That's what I dreamed of when I was an adolescent. There are two obstacles preventing me from becoming the kind of writer that I would like. The first is precisely the fact that I do philosophy. I know that some people (I'm thinking of Derrida) can do both. Engaging in some kind of argument through my philosophy very much describes my style of writing. I used to write much better before. But probably the most serious obstacle is the question of language. I can think of myself as a writer when I write in French, but not when I write in English. I can write in English and in Spanish (I'm basically trilingual), but when I write in English, I write in a very different way: I'm much more matter of fact, I stick to the argument, and there are lots of things concerning style that I can't really do in English. Unfortunately,
from the point of view of writing, I write more and more in English. I used to write in French and then have my articles translated into English, but of course that’s not very convenient. Now, if I’m writing for an English journal, I write in English; if I’m writing for a French journal, I write in French. And I realize there’s a big difference. When I write in French, I can write in a much nicer way, and there are lots of things that I can say in French that I can’t say in English. So, when I’m writing in English, I don’t think, unfortunately, that I’m much of a writer.

Q. You have coauthored an important book with Ernesto Laclau and have collaborated with him on other scholarly projects. Do you see collaborative work as a political choice, perhaps especially appropriate in the context of U.S. and European universities which privilege a model of intellectual work that is highly individualistic?

A. In the abstract, I’m in favor of collaborative work; but to be absolutely honest, when Ernesto and I decided to write a book together, it was not at all for any political reason that we thought it was good to do collaborative work. In a sense, I wouldn’t even say it was a choice. We felt that we had to do it. It was important to us because we felt that we were both interested in the same kind of problems and that our two approaches needed to complement each other. In a sense, I felt that what I wanted to say I could not really say on my own, and I think Ernesto felt the same. We felt that by putting our two skills and points of view together we could make an argument that neither of us would have been able to make alone. I must say, though, that many of my feminist friends were against our collaboration. They said, “Be careful in writing with a man. You will see that he’s going to receive most of the credit, especially given the order of your names.” They were really saying that I should not do it, but I felt that it was not a choice, that we were compelled to do it. So I don’t want to say that we made a political choice. It wasn’t like that.

Q. In a theoretical development that parallels and coincides with Ernesto Laclau’s recent work, you claim that “the reformulation of the democratic project in terms of radical democracy requires giving up the abstract Enlightenment universalism of an undifferentiated human nature,” and you seek “a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular.” You offer an alternative model of rationality and knowledge based on the Aristotelian
concept of *phronesis*, characterizing it as a more adequate way to "grasp the kind of relation existing between the universal and particular in the sphere of human action." In what ways is *phronesis* a more useful way to think this relationship?

A. I wouldn’t put it quite as you have, that I offer an alternative model based on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. It’s true that in many of my writings I argue in favor of this model of *phronesis* as being more adequate, but it’s always in the context of a particular debate that has been taking place in political philosophy among the so-called neo-Kantian thinkers and the neo-Aristotelians. As you know, there have been opposing schools of thought on this question: people like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas on the Kantian side; people like Alasdair MacIntyre or Bernard Williams on the neo-Aristotelian side. My sympathies and affinities go toward the neo-Aristotelian in that precise debate. So, when I was intervening in that debate, I was intervening by saying that I think this model of *phronesis*, that practical reason understood not in the Kantian sense but in the Aristotelian sense, is more adequate for thinking about questions of morality, ethics, and politics. But when I’m thinking of an alternative model, and if I’m thinking of where I would locate myself, I certainly don’t consider myself a neo-Aristotelian, even though if I have to choose between the Kantian and the neo-Aristotelian in this debate I would take the side of the neo-Aristotelian.

What I’ve been trying to do recently could be described as more inscribed within a Wittgensteinian approach. I find the late Wittgenstein more interesting, and this is where I find more insight for developing my project of a non-rationalistic conception of politics. Much of my work recently is an attempt to try to develop those ideas for the study of politics. Wittgenstein never developed his work in terms of its meaning for politics, but I think that it can be very usefully appropriated for political philosophy. Of course, there are some affinities here with Aristotelian *phronesis*. It’s the question of practices. I think it’s very important to be able to think in terms of practices because that’s where I find the articulation between the universal and the particular made in a much more adequate way. Another instance of applying abstract principles to the particular, one that’s very important, is Wittgenstein’s analysis of a rule. He says a rule is not an abstract that you apply to a practice; a rule can only exist in its
practical implementation. That's what I find to be the best approach to thinking about the articulation between the particular and the universal. I find Wittgenstein much more useful because it's very difficult to completely separate the Aristotelian conception of *phasis* from the whole metaphysical system of Aristotle. I disagree, for instance, with MacIntyre when he proposes a return to Aristotle. I think that we cannot return to Aristotle today. Of course, there are insights in Aristotle that are important and that we can develop, but I think that Wittgenstein takes us a step further. So I would define myself as a Wittgensteinian but not as an Aristotelian.

Q. You say in *The Return of the Political* that "To defend political liberalism and pluralism within a perspective which is not rationalist, we have to see parliament not as the place where one accedes to truth, but as the place where it ought to be possible to reach agreement on a reasonable solution through argument and persuasion, while being aware that such agreement can never be definitive and that it should always be open to challenge. Hence the importance of re-creating, in politics, the connection with the great tradition of rhetoric, as suggested by Chaim Perelman." In what ways is this rhetorical model different from consensus-based models that have been criticized as being exclusionary, silencing minority viewpoints?

A. First, we should realize that there are different possible readings of Perelman. For instance, the Habermasians read him in a way that puts much more emphasis on the possibility of an inclusive consensus than I do. Everything hinges on the way one understands what Perelman means by "universal audience." The Habermasians believe that such an audience potentially exists and that we can speak to it. In my reading, this is not Perelman's view. What he says is that there are some disciplines like philosophy that by their very nature—what Wittgenstein would call their "grammar"—need to address themselves to the universal audience as if there were such a thing. But I think that Perelman makes it clear that there are always different conflicting conceptions of this universal audience and that therefore there cannot be such a thing. If one accepts this interpretation, Perelman's conception of consensus has to be envisaged in a different way, one that does not conflict with the view I'm advocating.

It's not that I'm opposed to the idea of consensus, but what
needs to be put into question is the nature of consensus because I think that every consensus is by nature exclusionary. There can never be a completely inclusive consensus. I would say that the very condition of the possibility for consensus is at the same time the condition of the impossibility of consensus without exclusion. We can find this same idea in Derrida, but Foucault is the one who made it very clear. It's important to realize that in order to have consensus there must be something which is excluded. So the question is not to say that therefore we're not going to seek consensus. That's where I would differ with Lyotard. I think we need in politics to establish consensus on the condition that we recognize that consensus can never be "rational." What I'm against is the idea of "rational" consensus because when you posit that idea, it means that you imagine a situation in which those exclusions, so to speak, disappear, in which we are unable to realize that this consensus which you claim to be rational is linked with exclusion. And rhetoric is important here. But it must be understood that this is the way in which we are going to try to reach some kind of reasonable agreement—"reasonable" meaning that in certain circumstances this is how a political community, on the basis of a certain principle or something it values, is going to decide what is acceptable; but this process can never coincide with "rational" consensus. It is always based on a form of exclusion.

So, to come back to Perelman, when we are going to try to establish this form of consensus—in fact, to define what the common good is, because that's what is at stake in politics—we can't do without this dimension on the condition that we recognize that there is no such thing as a universal auditoire or the common good and that it's always a question of hegemony. What is going to be defined at the moment as the common good is always a certain definition that excludes other definitions. Nevertheless, this movement to want a definition of the common good, to want a definition of a kind of consensus that I want to call "reasonable" in order to differentiate it from "the rational," is necessary to democratic politics.

Q. One of the striking things about the essays collected in *The Return of the Political* is the way you work with other political theories to develop the elements of your theory of radical democracy. For example, in the opening essay you write, "My objective is to work
with [Carl] Schmitt, against Schmitt, and to use his insights in order to strengthen liberal democracy against his critiques. Would you tell us about your style of doing theory—of working “with,” “against,” and “beyond”—and the way in which it seems to discursively enact some of your key concepts: antagonism, the friend/adversary relation, and articulation, to name three?

A. It’s interesting that you point to the analogy between my concepts, the ones I take to be important, and my style of doing theory because it’s true that when I’m writing I always need to think in terms of somebody I’m arguing against. I can’t just sit and try to develop an idea if it’s not in relation to somebody arguing something different. I’ve got a very adversarial way of arguing. And of course there are certain similarities here with my own conception of agonistic pluralism, my whole idea about what it is to argue in the field of politics. There are two points basically. One is probably something that is more an individual way of doing theory in that not everybody would necessarily work in this way: my way of doing theory is very political because the aim of my theoretical work is political. When I’m doing theory, it’s always because I want in a sense to intervene in politics, so I think that’s the reason why I can’t really set my argument if it’s not in terms of what we could be doing differently. That’s important for my way of thinking. I don’t think I could ever write something if it’s not in terms of what I am arguing against.

Now, the reference to Carl Schmitt makes me want to say something more about that. I think that there is something here that is more specific than this general way of arguing in terms of adversarial relations. I’ve often been asked by people, “Why are you interested in authors who approach the democratic condition so differently from you politically?” Schmitt is probably the most extreme case, but I’m very interested in Michael Oakeshott and in other conservative thinkers. I find that conservative thinkers are more sensitive than liberals like Habermas to a certain dimension which I want to bring to the fore: the critique of rationalism. Both Schmitt and Oakeshott and many conservatives are against rationalism. They are also more aware (certainly, Schmitt is) of a dimension of what I call “the political”: the impossibility of a completely harmonious society. Of course, once that’s said, they derive from this the completely opposite conclusion from the one I’m deriving. In part, that’s why I find somebody like Schmitt
such a challenge. In a sense, he's my favorite adversary because I start from quite a few premises that I share with Schmitt, and at some point I take the opposite direction. I think I'll always feel that it's either Schmitt or me who is right. For Schmitt, the type of pluralism I am advocating is absolutely impossible. His whole project is to put into question the very possibility of pluralism, precisely because if one takes seriously the question of the political, one cannot be a pluralist. My aim is precisely the opposite: to criticize the liberal for not taking serious advantage of the political and to try to reformulate a liberal democratic theory that would be both pluralist and political. That's why I think Schmitt is so important and why I'm working with him, in the sense of having some points at which I agree with him, but against him because we are coming from those common points to argue exactly opposite points of view and to derive opposite consequences. So, I obviously have a very specific adversarial relation with Schmitt.

Q. In "Post-Marxism Without Apologies," you and your coauthor identify yourselves with post-Marxism in an effort to "give to Marxism its theoretical dignity," which as you say "can only proceed from recognition of [Marxism's] limitations and of its historicality. Only through such recognition will Marx's work remain present in our tradition and our political culture." What would you say to Marxists such as Teresa Ebert who contend that we must return to Marx and to a classical Marxism in order to rebuild the left?

A. I must say that I find it very difficult to understand how some people can contend that we should return to Marx and to classical Marxism in order to rebuild the left. It seems to imply that nothing really important and new has been happening in the world since Marx, that all the answers were given in Marx and that what has been wrong is that Marx has not been well understood or well applied, and that by coming back to Marx they seem to imply that they are going to find a solution. For me Marx is a very important point of reference. One of the problems with much of what is going on today is the belief that one can get rid of Marx. Sometimes I'm amazed by the fact that some people speak or write as if Marx never existed. I find that very problematic. It's really an impoverishment of our way of thinking about politics to say, "Well, Marx was wrong." So this is certainly something I find
terribly problematic. But I find just as problematic the idea that Marx was right and that we've got to go back to Marx. It's as if in physics some people were to say we've got to go back to Newton. I think that Marx is a very important point of reference, but if we want to be faithful to the spirit of Marx we should remember that Marx after all was the first one to say, "I'm not a Marxist" and that he was against this kind of mechanistic application of his code. So this is very important if one wants to be faithful to the teaching of Marx.

As an example, take the notion of antagonism. Marx was really the first to develop this notion, so I certainly don't want to get rid of him. I think that too much of liberal theory and democratic theory today is postulated on an exclusion of antagonism. My problem with Marx is that he reduced the question of antagonism to class antagonism. He certainly did not apply this notion to other social relations where antagonism can also exist—for example, the questions of race and gender. So what we need to do is to widen this notion of antagonism in order to make it much more productive for understanding the new forms of antagonism which have emerged. This is not going back to Marx; it is being faithful to Marx by developing his ideas in completely new and different situations. Of course, we define ourselves as post-Marxist but insist very much on the fact that it's "post" but it's also "Marxist." It's not a rejection of that tradition, but it's a tradition that can only be defended by developing it, not by coming back to "the truth" that was given one-hundred years ago to one single individual.

Q. In your efforts to deepen the democratic revolution, you seek to radicalize the idea of pluralism because, as you argue, it is at the heart of modern democracy. You also say that it is necessary to recognize the limits of pluralism. The liberal ideal of pluralism has a hold on a great many people. Would you discuss why it's necessary to move from a "total pluralism" to a more politically democratic and limited version?

A. Here, I think I need to make a series of distinctions because the term pluralism is so differently understood and is used in so many different ways that in order to specify what I mean I need to give a few explanations. First, we need to be able to see the difference between what could be called the empirical fact of pluralism and what I call the axiological principle of pluralism. For instance,
when I say that the idea of pluralism is at the heart of modern democracy, I’m referring to pluralism as an axiological principle—contrary to John Rawls, for instance, who constantly speaks of “the fact” of pluralism, by which he means simply the existence of a plurality of conceptions of the good. That’s not the way I speak of it. Of course there is the fact of pluralism, but from that fact nothing derives. From the fact of pluralism, one could just as well derive an authoritarian politics as a democratic one. In a sense, this is Thomas Hobbes’ position; he is also very aware of the fact of pluralism, but from that he argues that the only form of order to impose is an authoritarian order. So, no things derive necessarily from the fact of plurality.

I think what’s important in what I call modern democracy—and I present this as being a transformation of “regime,” in the sense of a new symbolic ordering of social relations—is the acceptance of pluralism and of conflict (which in my view derives from pluralism), a recognition that we are going to try to create a society in which conflict is not repressed and which is going to make room for dissensus. That’s the type of pluralism that comes from the liberal tradition. I value the liberal tradition because I think that this idea of pluralism cannot be derived from democracy. It’s important to realize that in modern democracy we’ve got an articulation between two different traditions: the democratic one of popular sovereignty, and the liberal one of individual liberty. When I think of pluralism, I think of the idea of individual liberty in John Stuart Mill; that’s what I think of as the liberal tradition. If we take pluralism to be this recognition of individual liberty, the kind of society in which we are not going to try to impose a single conception of the good life on everybody but in which we are going to allow for conflict about what the good life is, then this is incompatible with “total plurality.” I could make the same kind of argument here that I made before with the question of consensus: the condition of the possibility for this kind of pluralism is at the same time the condition of the impossibility for a total pluralism. Total pluralism would mean that we are going to allow people who are against pluralism to have an equal say. In that case, of course, you are not going to be able to have a pluralist society.

Let me give you an example of this: a few years ago during the Rushdie affair in Britain there was a small but vocal group of
fundamentalist Muslims who argued that in the name of pluralism they should be given the right to kill Rushdie legally. They were saying to the British state, "This is what our religion tells us to do, and if you are really pluralist, if you want to recognize all our differences, you should allow us to kill Rushdie and not go to jail." I remember that some liberals were in fact quite worried about this argument. They were saying, "They do have a point. If we are pluralists, we should take those demands into account." Of course, the British state did not allow them to do it, so the state was accused by those fundamentalist Muslims of not being liberal pluralists but liberal fundamentalists. They were saying, "The values that you impose are the values of liberalism; you are not really pluralists." Of course, in a sense they were right, but I think there is no way to escape this. If you want a pluralist society in which there is going to be the possibility for people to express a form of dissensus, then you need to create some kind of consensus on the value of pluralism, of pluralism as an axiological principle. This means that certain people who want to establish a theocratic kind of society are not going to be able to; their voice is not going to be accepted. So in order to have a pluralist society, you cannot have total pluralism because total pluralism would mean that the enemies of pluralism are going to be able to destroy the basis of that society.

Q. Much of your recent work attempts to reformulate the concept of citizenship for a radical and plural democracy. In this effort, you seek to draw on and at the same time transcend two models: the model offered by liberalism and the model offered by civic republicanism. Both of these models inform, either implicitly or explicitly, much composition theory, where the idea of creating an informed, educated citizenry is a goal of many compositionists who see the classroom as the ideal forum for democratic education. Unfortunately, a common view has been of a citizenry composed of an aggregate of autonomous individuals who can band together to pursue self-interest or a sense of the public good. In what ways might compositionists better understand citizenship as a political identity and an articulating principle?

A. What I've been trying to put forward is what I call an agonistic conception of citizenship. In considering the idea of citizenship, I criticize the liberal tradition of interest-group pluralism because for them there is no such thing as citizenship. Of course, they are
citizens but they are defined by the position of rights that they are going to exercise against the state. So I don’t think they could probably be called “citizens” in the meaning of this term in the civic republican tradition, for instance. I’ve been arguing that it’s very important to reintroduce this idea of citizenship which was present in the civic republican tradition: citizenship is an identification, a principle of action. The problem with the civic republican tradition was that in the way that it had been formulated there was no room for pluralism. It postulated that there is a common good and common moral values that we all need to share in order to be good citizens. To be a good citizen is to identify with this common good and with these new shared moral values. I find this an interesting corrective to the disappearance of the idea of the common good and of this feeling of being part of a political community which has been erased from the liberal discourse, but we cannot really accept such a conception, for if we’re going to be faithful to the value of pluralism, we need to make room for dissension about the common good and for different understandings of citizenship.

There is not only one position on what it means to be a good citizen. For instance, I speak of what it means to be a radical democratic citizen, which is different from being a neoliberal citizen, or a neoconservative citizen, or even a social democratic citizen. It’s important to recognize that in a liberal democratic society, there must be some kind of consensus, but a consensus about the main values that make us members of this political community. At the same time, we must recognize that those values—which are liberty and equality for all, which for me are the basic ethical-political principles that inform human coexistence in a liberal democratic society—only exist in their interpretation, and those interpretations will always be in conflict. Take liberty. What is liberty? There is not one rational understanding of liberty. There are many different understandings, and they are all in competition. Take equality; it’s the same. What is equality? There will always be struggle about what equality is. And the “all”? Who belongs to the “all”? This is another term which has been an object of contestation for a long time, and it always will be.

So I think that the consensus needed in a liberal democratic society will always be what I call a conflictual consensus. We agree on what makes us citizens, what links us together, what certain
values link us; but when it comes to defining those values, to interpreting them, there will always be competition. That's what I call an agonistic conception of citizenship. A conception of citizenship is a certain understanding of what those definitions are, a certain interpretation of those values. There must be room for different interpretations of citizenship. We should not teach people that in order to be a good citizen you must act according to the common good; there is no such thing as "the" common good, even though it's an horizon that we cannot do without. Politics must always think in terms of the common good, but we will always define the common good in different ways, and that's what is missing from the civic republican conception. They believe there is a common good and that we should try to find it. Of course, the liberals just say there is no common good. But you cannot completely eliminate the notion of the common good either—otherwise you are in a pure politics of interest groups, and I think that's not good for democratic politics. So, I want to maintain reference to the common good but to pluralize it and make it a contested issue. That's what I call an agonistic conception of citizenship.

Q. So is the common good a kind of floating empty signifier to you?

A. Yes, yes. In fact, it would be a signifier in the way in which Ernesto defines it, a kind of horizon of meaning, something we will always be trying to define. And, of course, it relates to hegemony. A group is hegemonic when it has been able to define what the common good is. A conception of the common good is always a hegemonic definition, meaning that it will need to exclude other understandings of the common good. I think it's very important that radical democrats not pretend that they've got some kind of rational privilege in the way in which they are defining the common good. If, as I very much hope, at some point the definition of the common good that will become common sense and that will be accepted by everybody as natural were to become the radical democratic one, this doesn't mean that we will have therefore reached a rational consensus. It will mean that the other definitions have been displaced, but they are not going to disappear. They can always come back, so we constantly need to fight in order to maintain this hegemony. That's why I think, for instance, it's very dangerous to think in the way that Habermas does: that there is an evolution in which there
are kinds of thresholds of democracy and of morality where once these thresholds are reached, in principle there cannot be any setback. It's always going to be a struggle. We can never take them for granted. I think, for instance, that women are very much aware of the fact that rights can be won and lost. It's not that because we have won one fight we are therefore forever free. We have got to be vigilant with respect to rights because they can be won and lost. This struggle for hegemony and for defining the common good will always go on. There is no point at which it is impossible to lose these rights because we have somehow coincided with rationality.

Q. In composition studies, two terms in particular tend to function as floating signifiers, categories that are essentially ambiguous, open to debate and struggle: the "intellectual" and "democracy." Both of these terms circulate in the disciplinary discourse quite freely and serve as warrants for diverse claims and diverging political projects; consequently, they provide an opening for the field to be articulated to a neoconservative political agenda. For those of us who want to see composition, and education in general, move decisively in the direction of a radical democracy, what do you see as the role of the intellectual in promoting the radical project of democracy?

A. It depends on what we understand by "move decisively." If we mean decisively in the sense that it's something that cannot be overturned, I don't think there is ever the possibility of moving in that way; but if by that we mean strong progress in that direction, this is different. I see intellectuals as the ones who elaborate and provide the vocabularies that then can be appropriated by people in order to give some thought to their experience so that they can transform their relations of subordination and oppression. For instance, in radical democracy it's important to formulate conceptions of equality and liberty in order to allow for a new common sense about equality and liberty to be defined. At this precise moment, the task of the intellectual is particularly crucial. We are facing a big deficit of these kinds of new vocabularies, and we are at a moment in which the hegemony of neoliberal discourse is so strong that it seems as if there is no alternative. Unfortunately—and I am speaking of Western Europe—many socialist parties seem to have been convinced of that. What's happening with Tony Blair in Britain is very much the acceptance
of the dominant discourse of neoliberalism and of Thatcherism and the redefinition of the objective of the left within those parameters. There seems to be no alternative vocabulary. There seems to be no other way to think about this issue, and this is linked to the crisis of social democracy, the crisis of the communist model. Those are vocabularies that do not have any purchase on people's struggles, so the only kind of political language present today is neoliberalism.

There's a real lack of imagination on the point of view of left-thinking intellectuals in creating new vocabularies which will make possible a radical democratic hegemony. If we think, for instance, of what has been happening with neoliberalism, this neoliberal hegemony has been a long time in the making. In fact, there have been people like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman since the 1940s; when there was a stronger social democratic hegemony, they were completely marginalized. They were in fact as marginalized in a sense as we radical democrats are today. Nevertheless, they organized themselves, they created the Mont Pelerin Society, and they slowly began to develop ideas that at some point in the '70s came to be appropriated by movements like Thatcherism and like Reaganism in America in order to give a new form to the political experience and to create new forms of subjectivities. What is missing today is an effort by radical democratic forces to begin to elaborate alternative vocabularies in order to undermine the hegemony of neoliberalism. When I say "vocabularies," of course, I'm not speaking only in terms of linguistics; it also means thinking about what kind of institutions and what kind of practices could be the ones in which new forms of citizenship could exist and what form of grassroots democracy could be conducive to the establishment of this kind of radical democratic hegemony. That's basically what intellectuals should be doing in my view.

Q. In *The Return of the Political*, your notion of politics begins with a view that the criterion of the political is the friend/enemy relation. This perspective makes antagonism and conflict central to politics. In fact, you say it is illusory to believe that antagonisms could ever be eliminated. This view flies in the face of the more comforting belief that political action will eventually lead to the end of politics and the institution of a society free of conflict. What you offer instead is *agonistic pluralism*—a view of the creation...
and maintenance of a radical and plural democratic order based on a distinction between “enemy” and “adversary.” Would you elaborate on the distinction between enemy and adversary and discuss its importance to the formation of your concept of political community, or what you call societas?

A. I’ve already touched on some of these issues when I was talking about the question of pluralism, the question of consensus, and the question of agonistic citizenship. What I will insist on is the importance of the distinctions I’m making between “antagonism” and “agonism,” “enemy” and “adversary.” “Antagonism” is a relation between enemies; they want to destroy each other. “Agonism” is a relation among adversaries. I mean “adversaries” not at all in the sense in which this word is often used by liberal thinkers. The term adversary is a very common term not only in politics but in ordinary discourse. But what most liberal thinkers mean when they speak of the adversary is what should more properly be called an “opponent” or a “competitor,” in the sense that what they want to do is occupy the place of the other. It’s a struggle which is seen not in terms of hegemony but as if I were in a neutral terrain and what I want to do is to push those people who are in power from this place so that I can occupy their place without transforming the relations of power. This is the way in which the struggle among adversaries is thought by liberal theorists, and it’s usually seen as a struggle among elites, a question of replacing one elite with another. Unfortunately, that’s also the way that the new socialist parties in Europe are thinking about politics: it’s to push the conservatives out in order to occupy their place but not at all to establish a new hegemonic form in transforming the relations of power. Because of globalization and neoliberal dominance, they believe that the only thing they can do is to occupy the place of the other and do things a little bit differently.

When I speak of adversary, I’m not thinking at all like that. Struggle among adversaries is a struggle in order to establish a different hegemony. The difference is that you respect the right of the opponent to defend his or her point of view. It is an agonistic struggle among different understandings of citizenship. It is not the Jacobin model in which you want to destroy the other in order to establish your point of view and then not allow the other the possibility of coming back democratically. That’s the
struggle among enemies—the complete destruction of the other. In the struggle among adversaries, you respect the right of the other to have a different understanding of what citizenship is. You in fact are considered part of the political community because you have got the same reverence for the values of liberty and equality. The point is that you’ve got a different understanding of those values and of course you want to fight for the establishment of a new hegemony.

So I would say that the antagonistic dimension doesn’t completely disappear because there is this question of the transformation of relations of power, but it is, so to speak, domesticated. In fact, I have argued that the main aim of democratic politics is to transform an antagonism into an agonism. Probably, “transforming” is not exactly the right word because once antagonism has emerged, it’s very difficult to transform it into agonism. A better way to put it is that it is an effort to create the institution that would make it less likely for antagonism to emerge by providing the possibility for this to take the form of agonism. It is very important for democratic politics to recognize that there is an ever-present possibility of antagonism but that democratic politics is a type of institution in which this is not going to take the form of a struggle between enemies but between adversaries because that is what makes possible the recognition that we are part of a democratic political community. When I speak of societas, that is what I have in mind, this bond that links citizens together but which leaves room for dissensus. It is a bond created by common values, but those common values, as I said before when I was speaking about agonistic citizenship, are formed by a consensus that is always conflictual. What I call a societas is a modern democratic political community linked together precisely on that basis, not by a substantive idea of the common good because that would be a consensus which does not leave room for dissensus. We need consensus, but it needs to be consensus which makes room for different understandings of values. That’s what I think societas is.

Q. You propose that the elaboration of a non-individualistic conception of the individual is one of the most pressing tasks necessary for movement in the direction of a radical and plural democracy. Toward this end, you suggest that the social agent is constituted by an ensemble of subject positions which are con-
structured by a diversity of discourses, among which there is no necessary relation but rather "the constant subversion and overdetermination of one by the others." Through this view you attempt to account for the possibility of agency as well as for such totalizing effects as the social relations of gender, race, and class.

First, would you tell us how this conception of the individual does not easily slide back into the very individualistic conception of subjectivity that you seek to displace, and, would you also elaborate on what seems to be a very useful distinction between agency and subject position?

A. Well, I must confess that I can't really answer about the distinction between agency and subject position because I don't really understand what this distinction could be. I've always had a problem with this idea of agency. It's as if they have put two different problematics together that don't fit. There is no place to introduce this category of agency, which to me belongs to a completely different semantic world than what I am trying to put forward with the idea of subject position. I can't see what in this notion of agency would be different from subject position. Probably, what people want to insist on when they speak of agency is that you are going to be an actor. But, of course, this is what I try to express by the question of "identification," the fact that on the basis of different subject positions, suddenly there is some kind of crystallization into an identification and that is what will make people act. If your identification is along class lines or gender lines, then you will act accordingly. It's that move toward action. But I would try to think of that in terms of identification, which is made possible by the crystallization of a subject position.

But the more general issue here is my view on whether the individual does not slide back into an individualistic conception of subjectivity. What I'm criticizing when I speak of an individualistic conception is basically the liberal idea that is dominant in liberal political philosophy—which, by the way has been highly criticized by the communitarians—that an individual's rights exist so to speak out of the blue, that first you are a fully fledged individual, and then you enter into different social relations. This idea definitely needs to be criticized because epistemologically it doesn't make any sense. The work of Charles Taylor is important in that respect. He has shown how this liberal idea of the individual is a very specific historical position; it never existed
before. And the work of people like Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet has recently shown that this is a completely different conception of the person. So what we take to be "the" individual is really a result of ahistorical and discursive construction. Of course, it is a construction that should be valued and defended, so I don't want to reject this idea. In fact, it's very much the product of what I've insisted is an important part of modern liberal democracy: the idea of pluralism as individual liberty. I think that this is to be defended, but it needs to be expressed in non-individualistic ways, as precisely a product of inscription in certain types of practices—which, by the way, is important because it also makes you realize that you cannot take this individual for granted, that if you don't reproduce those practices which make possible this individuality, and this form of democratic individuality, you might lose it. I would say, without being unduly pessimistic, that in many areas we are in danger of losing this form of individuality because of the many practices of homogenization which don't make possible the re-creation of those forms of democratic individuality. If you take those forms of the individual for granted, as being given, then you don't feel the need to constantly create the practices by which those forms are made possible.

Q. One could argue that the debate about multiculturalism in the U.S. is stalled precisely by a politics of recognition and an imperative to celebrate difference. What do you see as the dangers of the construction of political identities exclusively through a logic of difference?

A. The main danger from the point of view of radical democratic politics is that we can only judge this according to what your political objective is. If we are committed to radical democratic politics, many forms of identity politics are dangerous because they go against the recognition of the importance of creating what I call a "chain of equivalence" among different struggles. They tend to put into question, as being something that will go against their demands, the very idea that they should link their struggle with other struggles. Even if we recognize why, in certain circumstances, people are driven to react in separatist ways, it is ultimately very negative politically because this certainly is not the way in which democratic objectives are going to be realized. Particularly in the current situation with this strong hegemony of
neoliberalism, the only way in which things are going to be able to change is by shaping a very strong chain of equivalence among different struggles. Those forms of identity politics in fact go against the very idea of this chain of equivalence. I would say that they are basically the last avatar of liberal ideology and interest-group pluralism. It's a new form of interest group pluralism which is defined in another way, not so much in terms of interest groups but more in terms of community identities—but it's exactly the same kind of model. Having all those different groups goes against the very idea of the importance of creating this unity because these groups would see unity as undermining their struggle. At the moment when a kind of hegemonic form of politics is more necessary than ever if we are really going to be able to fight the dominant hegemony, those forms of the celebration of differences are developing a kind of politics that makes it much more difficult to do that. That's my main problem with it.

Q. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, you argue that the new social movements—feminism, gay rights, anti-racism, and so on—do not necessarily have a progressive character and that “it is therefore an error to think, as many do, that they spontaneously take their place in the context of left-wing politics.” You go on to say that “There is no unique privileged position. . . . All struggles, whether those of workers or other political subjects, left to themselves, have a partial character and can be articulated to very different discourses.” We wonder if there are not situations in which political identity and agency are produced almost spontaneously and by necessity. For example, consider the four-hundred-year long ordeal of American slavery and the subsequent history of economic and political disenfranchisement (bell hooks calls it “terrorism”). If “position” is discursively produced by historical events, would African Americans not have an oppositional consciousness and a certain epistemic privilege vis à vis U.S. race relations?

A. I do not really see how any group can have epistemic privilege. The case of African Americans could in fact be seen as a good example of my thesis that there is no social movement that will necessarily have a progressive character. But one needs to distinguish what I call “oppositional consciousness.” There, yes, I can see why, given the history of slavery and political disenfranchisement, African Americans would have an oppositional con-
sciousness, but for me that doesn’t bestow any kind of epistemic privilege. Moreover, this kind of consciousness can be articulated in many different ways. There are ways in which this consciousness could be articulated in a way that is not progressive. I don’t think that Farrakhan’s movement is progressive from the point of view of democracy. I can understand perfectly well why in certain circumstances an African American would be attracted to that movement. So it’s not at all a question of blaming, and there are many reasons that explain why this phenomenon can operate. But once that’s said, this can’t be seen as a movement of a progressive character. The same argument can be made for the question of feminism. There are many many different ways in which feminism can be articulated, and some of them are not progressive in the least. The same can be said for the gay movement. We don’t have to believe that every form of reaction against gay oppression is progressive. You could have a form of gay politics that is very sexist or against women, for instance, if it comes from male gays, or one that is not progressive from the point of view of antiracism. You can have groups that are obviously oppressed but who react against those forms of oppression in a way that can’t be called progressive. And I think this is true for every type of group. There is no form of oppression which automatically leads to reacting in a progressive way. That’s why there is always the possibility for a potentially democratic movement to be neutralized and recuperated by right-wing politics.

Q. You say in “Politics and the Limits of Liberalism” that “No state or political order, even a liberal one, can exist without some forms of exclusion.” Your argument is that “it is very important to recognize those forms of exclusion for what they are and the violence that they signify, instead of concealing them under the veil of rationality.” This seems to suggest that full participation in the political order is impossible. If so, and if violence and exclusion are structurally inevitable, on what basis do minorities—or any excluded group, for that matter—contest and seek to overturn their systematic exclusion? That is, how can minorities claim that the violence done to them is unjustified and intolerable?

A. The recognition that any form of consensus, any particular order, cannot exist without some form of exclusion should not be used in order to justify the presence of exclusion. People could argue, “Since we will never have a completely integrated society, why
should we bother to fight at all?” But there’s absolutely no reason to make that argument. We can at the same time recognize that there will always be some forms of exclusion, but nevertheless fight in order to make those forms of exclusion as minimal as possible. In fact, that is specifically the radical democratic understanding of citizenship: knowing that we are not going to realize a fully inclusive society. A radical democratic society should be a society in which exclusion should constantly be contestable because we should constantly wonder if those demands which have been excluded at a given moment should not now be included—knowing that you can never reach the point in which all demands are included. There are demands which by their very inclusion, for instance, will undermine some gains and some rights, so there will always be exclusion. The question is to constantly try to problematize those exclusions.

The second question is about how groups are going to fight to overturn exclusion. There are two points here that I want to make. One is that it’s basically a question of hegemony. That’s why the concept of hegemony is so important; it allows us to understand that what is considered legitimate and illegitimate, just and unjust, at a given moment is always the result of certain relations of power. You can always transform them. Take the case of feminism or the struggle against racism. Those were forms of exclusion that not that long ago were seen as based on nature. It was natural because of course blacks were inferior and women were inferior. But these are things that can be transformed—even those things that are presented as a question of nature. There is always a terrain for intervention. That’s why, in general, a poststructuralist or deconstructionist view is important; it impedes the naturalizing of some forms of exclusion and makes it all a question of the struggle for power and hegemony.

There is another point I want to make which I’ve been working on recently and which is linked to what I see, paradoxically, as the positive aspect of liberal universalistic discourse. The articulation between liberalism and democracy that I was talking about before is a very conflictual one. Carl Schmitt (but also other theorists) speaks of the basic contradiction between liberalism and democracy. I think he’s wrong. It’s not a contradiction. I’ve been trying to present it as a tension. There is a tension because the logic of democracy, which is the logic of popular
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sovereignty, goes against the universalistic logic of pluralism. In order to have a democracy—a working democracy—you need to have a demos. You need to have a demos for citizens to be able to exercise their right of citizenship. To have a demos means that you need to have a “we” and that some people need to be excluded from that “we.” This is an effect of the democratic project because in order for a democratic society to exist, for democratic citizens to be able to express their sovereignty, you need to have the demos and the demos needs to have people who are not part of the demos. That’s the logic of exclusion. On the other hand, I think that it is important that this logic of democracy be articulated with the liberal discourse of human rights, of universality. This discourse goes in the opposite direction. It goes toward what we could call a logic of universal inclusion, which of course is impossible because if it were realized it would in fact undermine the possibility of democracy. But I think that it can also be seen as an important polemical instrument to problematize the exclusions which are needed by democracy. It’s a way to subvert the need for closure. I think that democracy as popular sovereignty implies a moment of closure. Of course, there are many different understandings of liberalism, and here I’m basically thinking of what can be called ethical-political liberalism—the discourse of human rights, let’s say. This can never be realized. Citizenship by itself means specific citizenship. But the discourse of liberalism in its universality allows us to subvert the necessary closure that is inscribed in the very idea of democracy.

Again, let me give an example: it’s clear that most of the struggles for inclusion that have been fought by women and by blacks have used the universalistic discourse of “all men are equal”; if “all,” why not women; if all, why not blacks? I think that rhetorically the power of liberal discourse is very important, and I see human rights as a very important rhetorical device in order to interrupt and challenge the necessary closure inherent in the democratic project. There’s a very productive tension between the two. But if we had only the liberal logic of universalism, it would mean the very disintegration of the political community and of self-government. On the other side, if we had the pure logic of democracy without this universalistic human rights discourse, we could find ourselves in a situation in which it would be too easy to justify those exclusions, to justify that one group of
immigrants, for example, should not be given rights. So I think that this link between democracy and liberal democratic discourse is not a tension that we should try to overcome because it is in this space of tension that we can really create a pluralistic democracy. For me it’s not at all something that must be seen as a bad thing; it’s precisely the most positive feature of a liberal democratic society.

Q. What forms of violence—real and symbolic—are acceptable? Where do you draw the line?

A. There’s absolutely no way in which one could draw the line from an abstract point of view. It’s always a question of what’s acceptable in *which* circumstances and by *whom*. I don’t think that there is some answer that could be given for everybody and for all societies, even for liberal democratic societies. It very much depends on which positions you take, which view of citizenship you are going to defend in the agonistic contestation among notions of citizenship, because obviously the answer to that is going to be different according to the circumstances. Obviously, there are forms of violence which are perfectly justified in order to put an end to a dictatorship. I’m very much worried about the ultra anti-violence movement because violence is not necessarily bad. Violence in some cases might be absolutely necessary in order for a democratic society to emerge. This is a line that we need to draw, but we need to draw it always in different circumstances and there is no answer to where it should be drawn.

Q. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* you and Ernesto Laclau differentiate among “subordination,” “oppression,” and “domination.” Focusing specifically on subordination and oppression, you state that a relation of subordination is one in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another. A relation of subordination becomes a relation of oppression once it is constituted as a site of antagonism and conflict. For those who are committed to identifying the discursive conditions for the emergence of social agency and collective action, the problem, you say, is to explain how relations of subordination become relations of oppression. This distinction offers a rich vocabulary for analyzing and intervening in prevailing social conditions. Yet, the distinction between subordination and oppression seems to be less central to your later work, where *subordination* is the apparent term of choice. Given the centrality of “antagonism” to your theory of
politics, do you no longer find the distinction between subordina-
tion and oppression useful or valid for the political analysis of
social relations?
A. I still find this distinction valid, and probably the reason why you
feel that it has become less central in my later work is that I have
been developing a kind of theory which is more linked with an
analysis of the relations of subordination and is not so much
concerned with the emergence of struggles against those relations
of subordination. But in a different context—for instance, if I
were interested in understanding the dynamics of a certain politi-
cal movement—I probably would speak more of oppression and
less of subordination. So it is not that I've abandoned the
distinction or that I find it less interesting; it's more that given the
type of theory I was developing, I was more concerned with the
relations of subordination. I'm sure that in certain contexts I will
still use the question of oppression. I must say that sometimes in
speech one does not always tend to be so rigorous with one's
terms, so probably in this very interview I've sometimes used the
term oppression when in fact I should have used subordination, but
I still think that the distinction between these terms is important.
Q. In the closing pages of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, you and
Ernesto Laclau argue persuasively that the neoconservative and
neoliberal new right has taken on a hegemonic character which
“seeks a profound transformation of the terms of political
discourse” and which, “under the cover of the defence of
‘individual liberty’ would legitimize inequalities and restore hier-
archical relations which the struggles of previous decades had
destroyed.” In that book and in your recent work, you propose
a hegemonic strategy for the left that does not renounce liberal-
democratic ideology but deepens and expands it in the direction
of a radical and plural democracy. In the face of a neoconservative
effort to restore a hierarchic society, you say that the hegemonic
task of the left is to establish social division on a new basis. What
new social divisions do you believe might be most productive in
moving us toward radical democracy?
A. Well, I'm a bit puzzled about this. I don't remember that we
argue exactly in those terms, saying that the hegemonic task of the
left is to establish “social division” on a new basis. In fact, if we
did say that, I'm not quite sure what we meant. If we used the
term “social division,” I certainly would not use the term today.
But what we had in mind, and what I still would use today, is the notion of "political frontiers," which I think is quite different. The question of social division is not something that we establish; the social division is there. But the hegemonic task of the left is certainly to establish political frontiers on a new basis. If we are going to formulate the question in that way—what new types of political frontiers could be more productive in moving us toward a radical democracy—that is something which I can see as having real meaning. I think one of the important tasks today is the redrawing of the frontier between left and right, not only in terms of radical democracy, but in terms of the very definition between left and right. One of the problems I see—and this is linked to what we were discussing before in terms of the hegemony of neoliberalism, the fact that the socialist practitioners see themselves more as competitors than as adversaries with respect to the practice of the right—is that there’s been a real blurring of the frontier between left and right, which unfortunately has been received as progress. It is viewed that the more societies move toward some kind politics of the center, the more democratic they become. In France, for instance, one of the main themes of the socialists is that they’ve abandoned the Jacobin imaginary and now there is some kind of politics of the center, more of a consensus between left and right. In Britain, Tony Blair speaks of what he calls “the radical middle,” again thinking that the politics of the center is what is needed. And lots of people have been arguing that the left/right distinction is something that is archaic, obsolete, and something that must be abandoned. I think that’s very problematic. Of course, this is connected to my whole idea about politics being about adversaries and agonism. And one can see the reasons why this has happened. Certainly, the collapse of communism is one important reason. The main political frontier which had existed since the end of the Second World War, which was linked in terms of democracy versus communism, has collapsed. People are arguing that now there is no more antagonism. It’s also been argued that the class problem has disappeared because societies now are basically societies of the middle class, so that is a reason why politics should take place at the center. Many different reasons go into explaining this transformation of politics, but I think that this is expressing simply the hegemony of the neoliberal discourse. It’s an abandonment by the left-wing
parties of what should be their task, which is to provide an alternative to neoliberal discourse. Because they don’t have any alternative, they then occupy the same terrain and simply propose little differences.

I think we very much need to redraw a new frontier. I’m not saying that we should go back to the old frontiers because those old frontiers have collapsed, not only because of communism but also because social democracy has become inadequate in terms of many demands. So we need to rethink how we are going to define the difference between the left and the right, and that’s what I call drawing a new political frontier. We need to draw a new political frontier and redefine who the adversary is, who is the “them” to which the “we” of the radical democratic forces need to be opposed in order to establish its unity. If we are unable to define that, there won’t be any possibility of creating a chain of equivalence because the very condition for creating this chain of equivalence is to establish a “them.” In fact, it is in the establishment of the “them” that the chain of equivalence can be established. By the way, what allows for this chain of equivalence to not erase differences is that its unity is not given by a common essence, because a common essence would reduce all the struggles to one single thing. The unity of this chain of equivalence is created by determining the “them” to which we are opposed. So there are still many different struggles, but they are linked together by the fact that we establish a frontier in which we are going to fight the one who we define as our adversary, and this is the condition for defining our unity. You can’t have a democratic politics that is going to try to transform a given hegemony into a transformed relation of power if it’s not on the basis of determining who is the “them,” the adversary, the one we are going to oppose. This is precisely what the politics of the center and the kind of consensus politics that is dominant today is making impossible. They are predicated on the fact that we no longer need those frontiers, that this was something good for old-style left-wing politics, but now the present condition of democracy goes against that. That is completely wrong.

I’d like to add something here that for me explains the urgency of this, even if we are not thinking in terms of the radicalization of democracy but only in terms of defending this miserable part of democracy that we’ve got at the moment against the danger of
the extreme right. Those frontiers which the left is unable to redraw with respect to the right are now being redrawn by the extreme right, which is in fact re-presenting itself. I'm thinking of the situation in France and also in Austria, but to a certain extent there are similar movements in many European countries, movements of the extreme right which are presenting themselves as the only alternative to this wishy-washy consensus type of politics that the democratic parties of center-right and center-left are offering. They are redrawing the frontier between "them"—the alternative to the present order—and those who don't want to change anything. Those movements are getting more and more popular support precisely because they are able to redraw those frontiers while the other groups are not even trying. So, I think politics needs to have political frontiers. In a democratic setting it's going to be redrawn by the extreme right in a way that is going to undermine the very basis of the democratic system.

Q. In her extended critique of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Rosemary Hennessey argues that your focus on the deepening of the democratic revolution through the extension of equality and liberty to the historically marginalized masses is inadequate. She argues that "the systematic workings of power are invariably not dismantled by campaigns aimed solely at the redistribution of political liberties." The point she makes here is traditionally Marxist—that a truly radical politics, appropriate for the present context of global neocolonialism, requires the redistribution of material and economic resources by democratizing the economy. Given that we are in what has been called an advanced stage of capitalism, in which first world multinational corporations are rapidly and continually redrawing political frontiers and creating new colonies, how do you see an anti-colonial or postcolonial politics taking shape in your recent work on "liberal socialism"?

A. I don't know the work of Rosemary Hennessey, and I don't know what critique she makes of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, but if what she argues is that the systematic workings of power cannot dismantle solely the redistribution of political liberties, and if she makes that as an argument against us, then I'm really puzzled because I agree with that. I don't think that we ever argued that it was only a question of political liberties. The deepening of the democratic revolution through the extension of equality and liberty is not at all simply a question of the redistribution of
political liberties. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* makes quite clear that a very important component is the question of the extension of liberty and equality in the sphere of the economy. Unfortunately, this is not the only person who has not been able to understand that; we are often accused of having abandoned the economy or of having abandoned the question of class. But I really can't understand why people can read the book and say something like that because a very important part of hegemony is the question of the economy. Obviously, this is absolutely central. It's not only a question of political liberties. The question of democratizing the economy is very much part and parcel of the process of radical democracy.

For me it's absolutely evident—in fact, so evident that some liberals sometimes accuse us of being obsolete traditional Marxists because of the emphasis we are putting on the economy. We are also attacked for putting *too much* emphasis on the economy and for being unreconstituted Marxists, so it really depends on what you want to hear in our work. Also, the idea of liberal socialism is precisely where we are trying to make a plea that the question of the economy is central. This is probably more developed in my recent work where I engage with the work of Norberto Bobbio. Bobbio has been one of the very few who for a long time have been arguing that the socialist goals—in terms of the transformation of the economy—could be realized, and he also argues that they can only be legitimately realized within the framework of a liberal democratic regime. I agree very much with that position. In fact, this is what we are arguing in terms of the radicalization of the democratic project, that there is room within the framework of a liberal democratic regime—understanding that a certain symbolic ordering of social relations according to the principle of liberty and equality for all—for a radical transformation of the economic system. Or to put it another way, what we are arguing is that there is no necessary link between what is called political liberalism (what I prefer to call ethical-political liberalism) and economic liberalism or capitalism. Of course, many liberals argue that the two necessarily go together. But people like Bobbio and other liberals—in fact, even John Rawls, for that matter—argue that private ownership of the means of production is not a necessary condition for a liberal political system.
So I think it's very important to realize that there's been an historical articulation here, but it's contingent and it's perfectly imaginable that we could have a liberal democratic state (which would be liberal in the sense of pluralist and in the sense of defending the ideas of liberty and equality for all) that is not capitalist. That's also the kind of argument that Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have been making in the United States, for instance—the way in which you can radicalize liberal democratic ideas, extending them to the economy. After all, I think that it's important to realize that we could not find a more radical principle to fight for than the one of liberty and equality for all. So the problem with liberal democratic societies—really existing liberal democracies—is not their ideals; their ideals are wonderful. The problem is that those ideals are not put into practice in those societies. So the question that I think radical democracy is very much about is how to force those societies to take those ideals seriously, to put them into practice. That, of course, will mean establishing some form of liberal socialism, and this means a democratization of the economy. So I don't see how we could be accused of not taking that dimension into account.

Q. In The Return of the Political, you are clearly working against any conception of politics that is rationalist, universalist, and individualist. At one point, you write, “The rationalist longing for an undistorted rational communication and for a social unity based on rational consensus is profoundly antipolitical because it ignores the crucial place of passions and affects in politics.” A number of feminists, including feminists of color, as well as other left-progressive scholars have attempted to theorize what might be called “political emotions,” or those emotions that are discursively produced to perpetuate relations of subordination or which may lead to a struggle to end such relations. Anger and outrage as well as empathy and sympathy are key emotions that feminists have explored in their efforts to build multicultural coalitions. In your own work on the articulation of political identities, do you see a role for political emotions?

A. I'm very sympathetic to this emphasis on political emotions because this is really part of my main struggle at the level of theory against a rationalist conception of politics, which takes two different forms. One is the traditional liberal one which believes that in the field of politics, people are basically moved by their
interests; they are trying to maximize their interests. There are many different forms of that, the latest one being rational choice. But it's basically an argument proposing that what moves people to act is a calculus of interests. In reaction to this, we have been witnessing in recent decades the development of a new model of democracy called "deliberative democracy," which in different ways both John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas belong to. They are saying that it is not really interests but reason and rationality that should guide the democratic citizen. Democratic citizens are not going to act simply to try to maximize their interests, but they are going to act according to reason and rationality. What both models completely leave aside is the whole notion of what I call "passion" in politics because I think that is what moves people to act in politics. It's not that reason and interests have no place, but I think that these are not the main motives for people to act. It's what I call "passion." Outrage, anger, empathy, sympathy, and those kinds of emotions are part of the same family in criticizing the rationalist model. But once that's said, what I'm trying to say with this question of passion is different. I consciously use "passion" not "emotion."

Richard Rorty once said to me, "This is the Gallic form. We Americans speak about 'emotion'; you Gallics speak about 'passion,' but in fact we are speaking of the same thing." I say that we are not speaking about the same thing. Certainly, for Rorty emotion is a bit too soft; the whole dimension of antagonism is not present. As he says, for him democratic politics is about people being "nicer" to each other. I think that's a bit too simple a way to think about democratic politics. Emotions, of course, are important, but I want to insist on the notion of passion to reintroduce the adversarial "we/them" relation, the possibility of agonism.

I'm also particularly interested in thinking the whole of collective identity. In fact, this term passion is a kind of placeholder for many things. It's a placeholder in part for some emotions certainly, but also for desire and for the collective form of identification. That's where I think that my understanding of passion is very close to the Freudian notion of identification, but in the sense of "collective" identification. What makes people crystallize into a "we," a "we" that is going to act politically? I think that rationality is not going to allow this, and it's not the
search for the maximization of your self-interests. That’s why liberals are so bad at understanding the phenomenon of political masses. When suddenly there is an eruption of those collective forms, they see it as some form of archaism or irrationality because they feel that modern citizens should not act in that way. Well, I think that this is a dimension of the field of collective action that is basically what politics is about; it’s central. We need to understand the dynamics of those passions in order to realize that it’s very important not to try to erase those passions or, as some would say, to try to relegate them to the field of the private. The real issue for democratic politics is how we can mobilize those passions toward democratic designs.

To come back to the position of the extreme right, I think that they are very much aware of the importance of passion and are trying to mobilize those passions toward non-democratic designs. The way to fight them is not by appealing to reason, as if people should act rationally. No, it’s trying to see how you can intervene in that field and mobilize those passions. The only way to impede those efforts by the right is to try to offer another outlet for those passions toward democratic designs. So it’s not the same thing as political emotion, even though I think there is a certain common ground between what I’m trying to do and the insistence of those feminists about the whole notion of political emotion.

Q. In “Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics,” you suggest that the objective of many feminist struggles is to make sexual difference irrelevant in the social relations in which it operates. Although you seem to agree with this objective, you also state that you are not in favor of the total disappearance of sexual difference as a valid distinction. As you know, a number of feminists on both sides of the Atlantic have argued that sexual difference cannot become irrelevant in any social relation until the institution that creates sexual difference and which makes it relevant—the institution of compulsory heterosexuality—is destroyed. What do you think about this view?

A. In order to answer this adequately, I think we would need to take much more time than we can here. I personally do not believe that the institution that creates sexual difference is compulsory heterosexuality. Of course, it’s one of the forms in which it is created, but I think there are many many different ways in which sexual
difference is made pertinent and relevant, and this is only one of them. I've been interested—particularly during the time that I was associated with the journal *m/f*—in insisting on feminism's need to recognize the multiplicity of forms in which sexual difference is discursively constructed and established. This can be through the discourse of the economy, of the law, of religion; there are many different forms through which sexual difference is created.

Also, and this will probably take us to the more general issue, I certainly don't believe that the aim of the feminist struggle is to abolish sexual difference; even if that were the aim, I don't think it's possible. If we take psychoanalysis seriously, I think this is what psychoanalytic theory tells us. It's not a question of abolishing difference. What I think we as feminists need to do is to fight against those forms of sexual difference which are constructed as forms of subordination, because obviously many of the forms of sexual difference are constructed that way. I don't think that sexual difference in itself necessarily implies a relation of subordination, but of course in our type of societies many forms of sexual difference are constructed as relations of subordination. That should be the aim of feminists. In some cases, the strategy is just to make sexual difference irrelevant. For instance, in the field of politics, certainly in the field of citizenship, I don't think that it should be relevant—in the same way that it should not be relevant if you are black or white or blue-eyed or blonde or gray. It's not a question, as Carole Pateman would have it, of having a feminine concept of citizenship as opposed to a masculine one. It just should not make any difference.

In many cases, equality comes by making this distinction absolutely irrelevant. In other cases, it would be in constructing sexual difference in a way that is equalitarian but not by abolishing it, not by making it not pertinent. This, again, is a struggle which we can't have a blueprint for. I think that clearly feminists' aim should be to fight against forms of sexual difference that are constructed on the basis of relations of subordination. Of course, this links to the question of compulsory heterosexuality, but I don't think that there is any particular privilege to this. One can perfectly well imagine a society where there would not be compulsory heterosexuality and in which we would have many forms of sexual differences that are very negative for women and
that are constructed on the basis of relations of subordination. So I definitely do not believe that there is some privilege there.

Q. Some of your work has been quite controversial and had led to various critiques and, perhaps, misunderstandings. Are there any specific misunderstandings of your work that you’d like to address at this time?

A. There have been so many; let me just mention three. One we have already dealt with, which is the question of the economy. That’s clearly a widespread misunderstanding—that we are abandoning the question of class, abandoning the question of economy. All our development of hegemony has been to say that we need to articulate the struggle around issues of class with struggles against sexism and racism. So the economy is very much present in our work. That’s basically why we define ourselves as post-Marxists. We think that there is something from the teaching of Marx that we want to keep because it’s very important and we can’t abandon. The second point—which again I find difficult to see how people cannot understand, particularly after the explanation we gave in “Post-Marxism Without Apologies”—is the question of our discourse being idealistic. We’ve tried often and repeatedly to insist that by “discourse” we don’t just mean something related to speech and writing but something similar to what Wittgenstein meant by language games. It’s something composed of practices, institutions, discourse; it is something that is very very material. But apparently people can’t take the point, and they go on saying that this is an idealistic view. They want to say it’s not materialist and that we don’t take into account something like reality. Again, this is a basic misunderstanding that is the origin of many criticisms.

The third one, which I also find difficult to understand because I’ve so often been arguing precisely the contrary, concerns the question of pluralism. We’ve been accused of defending some kind of total pluralism. We are presented as defending some kind of extreme postmodernism for which there’s no way of thinking about any kind of structure. In many papers and conferences I’ve said that I want to distinguish our form of pluralism both from the liberal view of interest group pluralism and also from what I call some extreme forms of postmodernism. I’ve been arguing that we need to be able to distinguish between differences that do exist but should not exist. We should fight
against them because those differences are based on relations of subordination; and there are differences that do not exist but should exist because it's precisely by the nonrecognition of those differences that relations of subordination are created. But of course it means that not all differences are to be valued and it's not a total pluralism. I've made this argument in very many places. Nevertheless, I quite often see critiques that say I'm defending some kind of extreme pluralism. Those are probably the three more common misunderstandings. I can think of many others, but these probably are the more important ones to consider because they are saying exactly the contrary to what I think.

Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1998 was awarded to Arabella Lyon for *Intentions: Negotiated, Contested, and Ignored*.

Honorable Mention was awarded to Hepzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald for *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Teaching of Writing*.

The 1997 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Deborah Mutnick for *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. Professor Winterowd presented the 1998 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Atlanta.

Send nominations for the 1999 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Gary A. Olson; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, Florida; 33620.