



the possible limits of this linkage, and propose that power might involve a fourth dimension in capitalist societies.

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### **On the Political**

Chantal Mouffe

*Routledge, London, 2005, 168pp.*

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Over the past 20 years, Chantal Mouffe has established her own distinctive interpretation of late modern politics. With her emphasis on the ineradicable problem of ‘antagonism’, Mouffe has addressed the challenges that threaten to destabilize the political ‘community’ with a frankness that is seldom found in contemporary political thought. Her (ultimately ‘realist’) defence of value pluralism is especially resonant in a world marked by a rising tide of conflict, post 9/11. *On the Political* maintains and further develops these characteristically Mouffeian themes. The book is lucid, interesting, and provocative: it will be of value both to those who are familiar with her writings, and to those who come to Mouffe’s work for the first time.

Mouffe restates the fundamentals of her understanding of politics in Chapter 2. The post-structuralist insight that every identity is relational (and involves the construction of a ‘we/they’) is combined with Carl Schmitt’s account of the ‘friend/enemy’ relation, in a conception of ‘the political’ understood as the ‘ever present’ possibility of violent conflict or ‘antagonism’ (pp. 15–16). This is distinguished from ‘politics’ interpreted as the practices by which order is created in this (ultimately ineradicable) sphere of conflict (p. 9). This is not cause for pessimism, because the challenge of democratic politics is to establish the ‘we/they’ relation in such a way that ‘antagonism’ is transformed into ‘agonism’: the presence of antagonism (or ‘the political’) is not ‘eliminated’ but ‘sublimated’, as a plurality of ideological conflicts are given legitimate forms of expression within a shared symbolic space (p. 20). Mouffe emphasizes the value of the Left/Right distinction in mobilizing people’s passions, she accentuates the positive role of the parliamentary system in facilitating partisan conflict, and she invokes Freud and Žižek to emphasize the role of ‘libidinal investment’ and collective ‘identification’ in partisan conflicts. Those who are unfamiliar with Mouffe’s work will find this chapter especially useful; it is her most succinct account of her interpretation of politics and the political.

In Chapter 3, Mouffe develops a critique of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Her position reiterates arguments she has advanced elsewhere against



thinkers such as Rawls and Habermas. She says, with their emphasis on consensus and a world 'beyond left and right' the theorists of the 'risk society' advocate an 'anti-political vision' that cannot account for the 'adversarial' dimension of the political (p. 50). In Chapter 4, she shows how the Third Way 'consensus at the centre' actually exacerbates the antagonism existing in society: as voters are denied a real choice between significantly different policies, disaffection with political parties sets in and we witness the emergence of collective identities around nationalist, religious, and ethnic forms of identification. Mouffe argues convincingly that the rise of right-wing populism across continental Europe is a consequence of this 'blurring of...frontiers between left and right', and the lack of vibrant partisan debate. Similarly, in international politics there is a correlation between the resurgence of terrorism and the 'moralization of politics' (manifest, for example, in George Bush's 'crusade' against the 'axis of evil'): as legitimate forms of conflict are foreclosed in a uni-polar 'moral' world order centered on US hegemony (pp. 76–82).

This anticipates the analysis of international relations and the challenges of globalization elaborated in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion. This is a venture into new territory for Mouffe, and represents the real innovation of *On the Political*. Mouffe examines two prominent theories of globalization and finds them wanting. First, she engages with contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism. Whether (like Richard Falk) they focus on 'global civil-society' or (like David Held) the implementation of global justice through institutional reform of the UN, these theories fail to acknowledge that the accomplishment of a 'cosmopolitan order' would really be the imposition of a western conception of justice and human rights on a deeply pluralistic world, further exacerbating current tensions, for example, between the West and the Islamic world. Mouffe then notes points of convergence between these approaches and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's analysis of globalization: their theory of the global 'multitude' is the radical 'apocalyptic' counterpart to the reformism of the cosmopolitan social democrats; they both underestimate the centrality of US hegemony and envisage the *possibility* of a unified world order without 'antagonism' (pp. 107). Mouffe demonstrates some of the deficiencies of these approaches. However, the alternative that she puts forward left me unconvinced. In order to ensure pluralism in global politics, Mouffe insists that we must abandon all 'pseudo-universalisms', and recognize that the 'new world order needs to be a multi-polar one' constructed around 'autonomous regional blocks', characterized by a diversity of culturally specific 'human rights' discourses, and 'different versions of human dignity' (pp. 117–118). Mouffe is surely right to insist on the continued importance of local, national and regional sites of struggle against neo-liberal globalization. However, it is an illegitimate short circuit to move from this insight to a wholesale abandonment of the idea of 'global' justice (as being *intrinsically* synonymous with western imperialism). This is not the place to develop a detailed critique, but it is important



to note that this is a — post-Marxist — theory of globalization that explicitly denies the possibility of counter-hegemony at the global level.

In summary, this is a thought-provoking new publication: it will be widely read and debated. For me, the book raised more questions than it answered. For example, is it sufficient to iterate, in a climate of domestic consensus, the continued importance of the Left/Right distinction as a means of facilitating constructive partisan conflict? Or does this need to be accompanied by a more spirited defense of the emancipatory aims of the Left? Similarly, is the transformation of ‘antagonism’ into ‘agonism’ an end in itself as Mouffe suggests? Or is this really a strategic question, that is, an appropriate objective in some contexts but (perhaps) not in others (such as the exploited and impoverished areas of the global south)? It is a virtue of this book to invoke these sorts of reflections.

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### **Books for Burning**

Antonio Negri

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This book brings together a number of Antonio Negri’s controversial essays from the 1970s. The title of this book is somewhat misleading, as the essays collected here are not primarily about either democracy or civil war. Rather, they attempt to derive a strategy for social transformation (conceived in orthodox Marxist terms) from an analysis of economic changes in what might be called the transition to postmodern capitalism. The texts (along with others by the likes of Raniero Panzieri and Sergio Bologna) served as the theoretical underpinnings for *autonomia*, a Marxist current heavily involved in the social upheavals in 1970s Italy. Not for the faint-hearted either theoretically or politically, these essays offer an uncompromisingly radical (if at times somewhat Leninist) political perspective enmeshed within an erudite and conceptually dense discourse of continental philosophy and theoretical Marxism.

One major strength of these essays is that they recognize and theorize tendencies in contemporary capitalism ahead of their time. The descriptions of the functioning of capitalism are in many ways profound, even prophetic; Negri discusses changes in the world economy which it took the rest of academia another 20 years to recognize — as for instance when he writes of the rise of transnational corporations and the resultant crisis of the nation-state