

For an Agonistic Public Sphere

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My aim in this presentation is to offer some reflections concerning the kind of public sphere that a vibrant democratic society requires, an issue particularly relevant to the type of questions raised by Documenta11 and this symposium. In particular, I want to scrutinize the dominant discourse which announces the “end of the adversarial model of politics” and insists on the need to go beyond left and right toward a consensual politics of the center. The thesis that I want to put forward is that, contrary to what its defenders argue, this type of discourse has very negative consequences for democratic politics. Indeed, it has contributed to the weakening of the “democratic political public sphere” and has led to the increasing dominance of a juridical and moral discourse, a dominance that I take to be inimical to democracy. I submit that the increasing moralization and juridification of politics, far from being a progressive step in the development of democracy, should be seen as a threat to its future existence.

I

There are many reasons for the weakening of the democratic political public sphere, some having to do with the predominance of a neoliberal regime of globalization, others with the type of individualistic consumer culture that now pervades most advanced industrial societies. From a strictly political perspective, it is clear that the collapse of communism and the disappearance of the political frontiers that structured the political imaginary during most of the 20th century have led to the crumbling of the political markers of society. The blurring of frontiers between right and left that we have witnessed in Western countries constitutes, in my view, one of the main reasons for the growing irrelevance of the democratic political public sphere.

Elsewhere, I have shown how the current celebration of centrism and the lack of effective democratic alternatives to the present order has strengthened the appeal of right-wing populist parties. When passions cannot be mobilized by democratic parties because these parties privilege a “consensus at the center”, those passions tend to find other outlets, in diverse fundamentalist movements, around particularistic demands or nonnegotiable moral issues. When a society lacks a dynamic democratic life with genuine confrontation among a diversity of democratic political identities, the groundwork is laid for other forms of identification to take their place, identifications of an ethnic, religious, or nationalist nature that generate antagonisms which cannot be managed by the democratic process.

Here I will focus on the reasons and consequences of the decline of a properly political discourse and its replacement by a moral, and even in many cases, a moralistic one. I see this phenomenon as signaling the triumph of a moralizing liberalism which pretends that antagonisms have been eradicated and that society can now be ruled through rational moral procedures and remaining conflicts resolved through impartial tribunals. Hence the privileged role of the judiciary and the fact that it is the legal system which is seen as being responsible for organizing human coexistence and for regulating social relations. Since the problems of society can no longer be envisioned in political terms, there is a marked tendency to privilege the juridical and to expect the law to provide solutions to all types of conflict.

As a political theorist, I am particularly troubled by the pernicious influence of political theory in this displacement of politics by morality and law. Indeed, in the theoretical approach that, under the name of „deliberative democracy“, is rapidly colonizing the discursive terrain, one of the main tenets is that political questions are of a moral nature and therefore susceptible to rational treatment. The objective of a democratic society is, according to such a view, the creation of a rational consensus reached through appropriate deliberative procedures whose aim is to produce decisions that represent an impartial standpoint equally in the interests of all. All those who put into question the very possibility of such a rational consensus and who affirm that the political is a domain in which one should always rationally expect to find discord are accused of undermining the very possibility of democracy. Habermas, for instance, asserts: “If questions of justice cannot transcend the ethical selfunderstanding of competing forms of life, and existentially relevant value conflicts and oppositions must penetrate all controversial questions, then in the final analysis we will end up with something resembling Carl Schmitt’s understanding of politics”.¹

This theoretical tendency to conflate politics with morality, understood in, rationalistic and universalistic terms, has very negative consequences for democratic politics because it erases the dimension of antagonism which I take to be ineradicable in politics. It has contributed to the current retreat of the political and to its replacement by the juridical and the moral, which are perceived as ideal terrains for reaching impartial decisions. There is therefore a strong link between this kind of political theory and the demise of the political. In fact, the current situation can be viewed as the fulfillment of a tendency which is inscribed at the very core of liberalism, which, because of its constitutive incapacity to think in truly political terms, must always resort to another type of discourse: economic, moral, or juridical.

This perspective is exemplified in the work of John Rawls, who extols the US Supreme Court as a model of what he calls the „free exercise of public reason“, in his view the essence of democratic deliberation. Another example can be found in the work of Ronald Dworkin, who gives primacy to the independent judiciary, seen as the interpreter of the political morality of a community. According to Dworkin, all the fundamental questions facing a political community in the arenas of employment, education, censorship, freedom of association, etc., are best resolved by judges, providing that they interpret the Constitution by reference to the principle of political equality. There is very little left for the political arena.

Even pragmatists like Richard Rorty, despite carrying out a far-reaching and important critique of the rationalist approach, fail to provide a forceful alternative. Indeed, the problem with Rorty is that, albeit in a different way, he also ends up privileging consensus and missing the political dimension. To be sure, the consensus that he advocates is to be reached through persuasion and „sentimental education“, not rational argumentation, but he nevertheless believes in the possibility of an all-encompassing consensus and therefore in the elimination of antagonism.

But this is to miss a crucial point, not only on the primary reality of strife in social life and the impossibility of finding rational, impartial solutions to political issues, but also about the integrative role that conflict plays in modern democracy. A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation of democratic political positions. Absent this, there is always the danger, as I pointed out earlier, that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a battle between nonnegotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identification. Too much emphasis on consensus, together with an aversion to confrontation, engenders apathy and disaffection with political participation. This is why a democratic society requires debate about possible alternatives. In other words, while consensus is necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent. Consensus is needed on the institutions that are constitutive of democracy and on the ethico-political values that should inform political association, but there will

always be disagreement concerning the meaning and methods of implementing those values. In a pluralist democracy, such disagreements should be considered legitimate and indeed welcome. They provide different forms of citizenship identification and are the stuff of democratic politics.

II

In order to defend and deepen the democratic project, what is urgently needed is an alternative to the dominant approach in democratic political theory, one that would help revitalize the democratic public sphere by stimulating awareness of the need for political forms of identification around clearly differentiated democratic positions and the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. This is why, against the two existing models of democratic politics, the aggregative and the deliberative, I have argued for a model of “agonistic pluralism”, which acknowledges the role of power relations in society and the ever present possibility of antagonism. According to such a view, the aim of democratic institutions is not to establish a rational consensus in the public sphere but to defuse the potential of hostility that exists in human societies by providing the possibility for antagonism to be transformed into „agonism“. By which I mean that in democratic societies, while conflict cannot and should not be eradicated, neither should it take the form of a struggle between enemies (antagonism), but rather between adversaries (agonism).

This is why, in my view, the central category of democratic politics is the category of the „adversary“, the opponent with whom we share a common allegiance to the democratic principles of „liberty and equality for all“ while disagreeing about their interpretation. Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation to become hegemonic, but they do not question the legitimacy of their opponents’ right to fight for their position. This confrontation between adversaries constitutes the „agonistic struggle“, which I take to be the very condition of a vibrant democracy.²

The specificity of this approach is that it is a way of envisioning democracy which — contrary to other conceptions — recognizes the dimension of what I have proposed to call „the political“, that is, the potential antagonism inherent in social relations, antagonism which can take many forms and which can never be absolutely eradicated. I have distinguished this notion of „the political“ from that of „politics“, which refers to the ensemble of discourses, institutions, and practices whose objective is to establish an order, to organize human coexistence in a context which is always conflictual because of the presence of „the political“. The aim of democratic politics, as I have already indicated, is to create the institutions through which this potential antagonism can be transformed into “agonism”, that is, a situation defined by a confrontation between adversaries, not the relation “friend/enemy”.

Let me stress that this notion of the adversary needs to be sharply distinguished from the understanding of that term found in liberal discourse. According to my conception of „adversary“, and contrary to the liberal view, the presence of antagonism is not eliminated but „tamed“, so to speak. What liberals call an “adversary” is actually a “competitor”. They envision the field of politics as a neutral terrain in which different groups compete for positions of power, that is, their objective is to dislodge others in order to occupy their place, without challenging the dominant hegemony and attempting to transform the existing relations of power. This is merely a competition among elites. In my case’ however, the antagonistic dimension is always present since what is at stake is the struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally — one of them must be defeated. It is a genuine confrontation but one that is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries.

Of course, such a view would be anathema to the advocates of deliberative democracy and promoters of the Third Way, who will no doubt condemn it as „Schmittian“. But I submit that this is the condition for revitalizing democratic politics and for reversing the dangerous trend of disaffection with democratic institutions that we are witnessing today. This would indeed provide a way in which passions could be mobilized toward democratic designs.

III

So far, I have concentrated on the shortcomings of current theories of democratic politics in order to show how they contribute to shaping the end-of-politics zeitgeist which prevails today and which prevents us from envisioning a properly democratic public sphere. Now I would like to examine a different but related trend, the fashionable thesis put forward by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens that we have entered a new phase of „reflexive modernity“ in which the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete. I intend to highlight the consequences of such a perspective and its strong connection with the current dominance of a moralistic discourse. Those who announce the death of the adversarial model claim that the friend/enemy relation in politics is characteristic of classical industrial modernity, the „first modernity“, but that we now live in a different, „second“ modernity, a „reflexive“ one, in which the emphasis should be placed on „sub-politics“, the issues of „life and death“. For Beck, these are “All the things that are considered loss, danger, waste and decay in the left-right framework of bourgeois politics, things like concern with the self, the questions: who am I? what do I want? where am I headed?, in short all the original sins of individualism, lead to a different type of identity of the political: life and death politics”.³

In the same vein, Giddens distinguishes between old-fashioned „emancipative politics“ and „life politics“, which he defines in the following way: “Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing tendencies intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies”.⁴

As in the case of deliberative democracy, at the basis of this conception of reflexive modernity is the possibility of elimination of the political in its antagonistic dimension and the belief that relations of friend/enemy have been eradicated. The claim is that in post-traditional societies, we no longer find collective identities constructed in terms of us/them, which means that political frontiers have evaporated and that politics must therefore be „reinvented“, to use Beck’s expression. Indeed, Beck assumes that the generalized skepticism and doubt prevalent today preclude the emergence of antagonistic relations, since the latter depend on strong commitments to notions of the truth, impossible in an era of ambivalence. Any attempt to speak in terms of right and left or to organize collective identities on the basis of common objectives and to define an adversary is thereby discredited as being „archaic“ or „Old Labour“ (to speak like Tony Blair).

Discourses like deliberative democracy or reflexive modernity are usually presented as the truly progressive ones, or, at least, better suited to the present stage of democracy. In fact, the chief consequence of envisioning our societies in such a „postpolitical“ manner is an inability to articulate any alternative to the current hegemonic order. These approaches render us incapable of thinking in a political way, of asking political questions and proposing political answers.

We should also be aware of the fact that this incapacity is reinforced by the centrality of human rights discourse, which has displaced all other discourses. Indeed, the discourse of human rights currently serves as a substitute for the sociopolitical discourses which have been discredited. As Marcel Gauchet has argued,⁵ it has become the organizing norm of collective consciousness and the standard of public action. The problem, as he indicates, is that such a discourse is not interested in — nor does it allow us to grasp — why things are as they are and how they could be changed. In fact, the insistence on human rights in many cases tends to disqualify the very idea of searching for explanations, because to try to understand is seen as excusing what is deemed „unacceptable“. This is why, very often, the ideology of human rights thrives on denunciation. It commands a politics of intentions that is indifferent to the consequence of its actions, a politics of virtuous sentiment that is therefore not vulnerable to criticism.

IV

Putting together all these different elements, the ideological framework in which the dominant consensus is inscribed becomes visible. Such a consensus has two faces, neoliberalism on one side, human rights on the other. Do not misunderstand my point. I am not saying that the discourse of human rights is simply an ideological cover for neoliberalism. I do believe that human rights represent a constitutive component of modern democracy and that they should be valued and fought for. The problem arises when they become a substitute for a truly political discourse and when democracy is reduced to the defense of human rights at the expense of its other dimension, that of popular sovereignty. Such a move impedes a grasp of the nature of modern democracy, which consists in the articulation of two different traditions: the liberal tradition of rule of law and individual liberty with the democratic tradition of equality and popular sovereignty. The tendency to privilege exclusively the liberal component and to treat the democratic element as obsolete has serious political consequences. It is the source of the growing success of right-wing populist parties, which pretend to reestablish popular sovereignty against elites.

It is also in the context of the current hegemony of liberalism that we can make sense of the now-dominant moralistic discourse which has displaced any real political argumentation. Such a displacement is seen as the proof that democracy has entered into a new, more mature phase in which morality has replaced outmoded confrontational politics. However, if we examine the question closely, it is immediately evident that this is far from being the case. Politics, with its supposedly old-fashioned antagonisms, has not been superseded by a higher stage of moral concerns. Politics, with its antagonisms, is still very much alive, except that it is now played out in the moral register. Indeed, frontiers between us and them, far from having disappeared, are continually reinscribed, but since the „them“ can no longer be defined in political terms — given that the adversarial model has supposedly been overcome — these frontiers are drawn in moral categories, between „us the good“ and „them the evil ones“.

Put another way: the consensus at the center, which ostensibly includes everyone in our so-called post-traditional societies, cannot exist without the establishment of a frontier because no consensus — or common identity, for that matter — can exist without drawing a frontier. There cannot be an „us“ without a „them“ and the very identity of any group depends on the existence of a „constitutive outside“. So the „us of all the good democrats“ must be secured by the definition of a „them“. However, since the „them“ cannot be defined as a political adversary, it can only be defined as a moral enemy, as the „evil them“. In most cases, it is, of course, the „extreme right“ that provides the „evil them“ required by the very existence of the good democrats. This reference to the „extreme right“ is not very helpful, however, because it has become a nebulous category in which many

different movements — from skinheads to right-wing populist parties — are lumped together indiscriminately. This blurs their differences and specific characteristics, and hinders the development of effective strategies for fighting them politically. But, of course, from the point of view of the „good democrats“, such differences are irrelevant. What is at stake for them is not a political analysis but the delimitation of a „them“ which will provide the conditions of possibility for the „us“.

This type of politics played out in the moral register is not conducive to the creation of the „agonistic public sphere“ which I have argued is necessary for a robust democratic life. When the opponent is defined in moral rather than political terms, he cannot be envisioned as an adversary but only as an enemy. With the „evil them“, no agonistic debate is possible — they must simply be eradicated. They are usually conceived as the expression of a moral plague, therefore it is not necessary to try to understand the reasons for their existence. This is why moral condemnation often replaces a proper political analysis, and solutions are limited to the building of a „cordon sanitaire“ to quarantine the affected sectors.

It is ironic that, in the end, the political theory that claims the friend/enemy model of politics has been superseded contributes to the revitalization of the antagonistic model of politics, but this time in a way not amenable to a transformation of antagonism into agonism. Rather than helping to construct a vibrant agonistic public sphere, thanks to which democracy can be kept alive and deepened, all those who proclaim the end of antagonism and the arrival of a consensual society might in fact be jeopardizing democracy by creating the conditions for the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be contained by democratic institutions.

V

I will end by addressing another issue that also concerns the way we should envision the conditions of a democratic public sphere. It is clear that we are today confronted with a set of problems that cannot be tackled at the level of the nation-state but only in a wider context. If we accept the theoretical perspective that I have been delineating here, however, it is evident that this wider context cannot be coextensive with the whole planet. Democratic governance requires the existence of units, *demos*, where popular sovereignty can be exercised, and this entails boundaries. It is in my view a dangerous illusion to imagine the possibility of a cosmopolitan citizenship that would be based exclusively on an abstract idea of humanity. To establish the conditions for effective democratic self-governance, citizens need to belong to a *demos* where they can exercise their rights of citizenship and this would not be available to a cosmopolitan citizen. Of course, this does not mean that political units must be identical with the nation-state. There are very good reasons to argue in favor of the coexistence of smaller and larger units, according to diverse forms of belonging and the kinds of issues that need to be decided. So, globalization could be structured in terms of a „double regionalization“: on one level, the formation of a number of regional unions of diverse nation-states like the European Union which would themselves be composed of subregions made up of parts of various nation-states. This would create the conditions for a new form of pluralism that would greatly enhance the capacities for popular participation at different levels.

In this respect, I find the diverse attempts to elaborate a new form of federalism particularly interesting. Here I have in mind several proposals made by Massimo Cacciari, the former mayor of Venice, who calls for a Copernican revolution that would radically deconstruct the centralist-authoritarian-bureaucratic apparatus of the traditional nation-state.⁶ According to Cacciari, the modern state is being torn apart as a consequence of two movements, one micro-national, the other supranational: on the one hand, from the inside, under the pressure of regionalist or tribalist movements; on the

other hand, from the outside, as a consequence of the growth of supranational powers and institutions and of the increasing power of world finance and transnational corporations. Cacciari proposes federalism as the answer to such a situation. But his is a very special type of federalism which he calls federalism „from the bottom“, as opposed to federalism „from the top“, the type proposed as a model for the European Union. This federalism from the bottom would recognize the specific identity of different regions, of different cities, not to isolate them, to separate them from each other, but, on the contrary, in order to establish the conditions of an autonomy conceived and organized on the basis of multiple relations of exchange between those regions and those cities. Such a federalism would combine solidarity and competition, it would constitute a form of autonomy exercised in systems that are integrated in a conflictual mode.

Such ideas, of course, require further development, but I find them very suggestive. If our project is to contest the imposition of a single, homogenizing model of society and the parallel decline of democratic institutions — both consequences of neoliberal globalization — it is urgent that we imagine new forms of association in which pluralism would flourish and where the capacities for democratic decision making would be enhanced. Against the antipolitical illusions of a cosmopolitan world-governance, and against the sterile and doomed fixation on the nation-state, I believe that the type of federalism advocated by Cacciari provides promising insights. By allowing us to envision new forms of solidarity based on recognized interdependence, it might constitute one of the central ideas around which democratic forces could organize in a plurality of democratic public spheres. This would breathe life into the agonistic struggle which, as I have argued, is the defining characteristic of democratic politics. Moreover, this new federalism should not be seen as being specific to Europe — it could stimulate the development of other regional units with their specific identities, units in which the global and the local could be articulated in many different ways and in which diverse types of links could be established within a context that respects differences. This would allow us, not to finish the democratic process — which by nature must remain open and therefore „unfinished“ — but to keep it alive and to envision how it could be deepened in a radical democratic direction.

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References

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- 2 For a development of this argument, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).
- 3 Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 45.
- 4 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 214.
- 5 Marcel Gauchet, „Quand les droits de l’homme deviennent une politique,” *Le Débat*, no. 110 (May—August 2000), pp. 258-288.
- 6 Some of these ideas can be found in an interview with Massimo Cacciari, „The Philosopher Politician of Venice,” *Soundings*, no. 17 (Spring 2001).