

**Active Citizenship:  
Reviving and Extending Democratic Practices**

**Navin Ajay Nayak**

Supervisor: Ilan Kapoor

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Faculty of Environmental Studies  
York University  
Toronto, Ontario  
M3J 1P3

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## **Abstract**

Contending that our current liberal understanding of politics is exclusive and unresponsive, this paper explores the possibilities for reviving and extending democratic practices through a renewed understanding of citizenship. In direct opposition to the passive and individualistic theory of citizenship presented in the work of John Rawls, a theory of *active citizenship* is retrieved through a critical synthesis of the unique works of Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe. Active citizenship is presented as a *practice* that is anti-foundational, anti-essentialist, conditioned by pluralism and antagonism, and necessarily active. This paper was initially part of a larger project that explored how *active citizenship* would necessarily call into question our practice of environmental politics, particularly interrogating environmentalism's reliance on ecology and the ontological and epistemological privileges granted to Western science, arguing that democratizing environmentalism requires constructing it primarily as an ethical-political dilemma rather than a managerial-technological one.

## Active Citizenship: Reviving and Extending Democratic Practices

"The way we define citizenship is intimately linked to the kind of society and political community we want" (Mouffe, 1993:60).

The last few decades, particularly in the Western world, have been characterized by a peculiar and often neglected political contradiction: at the very moment when democracy enjoys its widest support democratic institutions are being thoroughly undermined and criticized. This political crisis, which is manifest by a substantial increase in protests and social movements, lower voter turnouts, and a palpable distrust of and dissatisfaction with public institutions, can be most clearly understood as a crisis of liberal democracy. It is rarely democracy itself that is critiqued, rather our current practice and institutionalization of it. While it is certain that liberal democracy has gone a long way to securing particular rights for an increasing number of citizens, it has concurrently excluded citizens from genuinely exercising those very rights (and others). For example, while citizens today purportedly enjoy a greater degree of freedom, there exists simultaneously a heightened sense of powerlessness due to their systematic exclusion from the decisions that most strongly structure society. Yet not only is the process of democracy being undermined, but its scope is concerningly narrow such that democratic interrogation and participation is limited to particular spheres. This predicament can be directly attributed to liberal democracy's impoverished understanding of politics and of citizenship.

Predicated on the understanding that the citizenry and the political community exist in a co-constitutive relationship, this paper proposes that a transformation in our current political practice and institutions will necessitate reconceiving the idea of citizenship. In opposition to the passive and limited conception of citizenship presented in liberalism, I attempt to (re)establish citizenship as a political *practice* that is integral to the articulation and disclosure of our identities and to the collective structuring of our societies.

I begin by exploring and critiquing the work of John Rawls, an important proponent of a liberal conception of citizenship. Rawls' work has in many ways single-handedly revived the liberal political tradition in North America and is therefore an appropriate entry

point into citizenship discourses. His theory however is an exemplary illustration of the displacement of politics and the withdrawal of citizenship. My interpretation of Rawls reveals a vacuous politics reduced to the mere brokering of various self-interested claims made by citizens. Citizenship itself is conceived primarily as a legal status-as leverage-through which citizens pursue their own good.

I then utilize the critique of Rawls as a point of departure, in search of more active theories of citizenship. I begin this exploration in the work of Hannah Arendt, who in my eyes remains one of the most inspiring and innovative political thinkers of this century and whose theory of citizenship is crafted in direct response to the deficient and oppressive political theories that dominated this century. I then explore the work of Chantal Mouffe, whose theory of citizenship is developed specifically in response to the failures of the traditional Left and the emergence of 'new' social movements, and is therefore tailored to the current democratic terrain. I end by briefly<sup>1</sup> comparing and contrasting their work with the intention of teasing out a theory of active citizenship.

While I utilize the term active citizenship to denote the theory I am espousing, it is not solely delineated by participation. In addition to political participation, active citizenship represents a practice of politics that is anti-foundational, anti-essentialist, pluralist and antagonistic. It is a practice of citizenship that recognizes that politics does not constitute the (final) resolution of conflict, but rather is the continual discovery and articulation of conflicting perspectives and identities. Active citizens strive for commonality without erasing differences, and therefore understand that the struggle of creating truly democratic societies is an interminable goal.

Thus, politics for the active citizen does not represent an end, but a beginning.

### **Justice as Fairness: Justifying the Social Order**

To properly situate Rawls it is important to note that liberalism, since the time of Jeremy Bentham, has been dominated by a utilitarian moral philosophy. Concerned with maximizing the overall good in society utilitarianism prioritizes the good over the right, which Rawls argues provides an unstable justification for political liberties, as it is conceivable that an individual's rights be curtailed for the good of society. In addition, Rawls maintains that in a democratic society conditioned by various competing and

contradictory conceptions of the good, utilitarianism will prove deficient on issues of justice. Thus begins Rawls' problematic: "how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?" (Rawls, 1993:4) At stake are the issues of social justice and unity. Rawls contends that social unity in a modern democratic society cannot reside in a shared conception of the good and therefore must be secured by an overlapping consensus of a political conception of justice. Rawls' task is to devise and justify such a political conception of justice in order to achieve a well-ordered society. The notion of a well-ordered society implies that the principles of justice are publicly and mutually recognized, and that citizens themselves act in accordance with these principles. A well-ordered society represents an arrangement in which disputes, concerning issues of freedom and equality, among citizens and between citizens and the State are reconciled. To achieve this reconciliation Rawls introduces the notion of the original position.

The original position serves as a heuristic device that represents the initial moment of contracting between the various parties. In this position, individuals agree to the principles of justice that will regulate the "basic structure"<sup>2</sup> of society from henceforth. Note, that the principles are deemed fair by virtue of the process by which they are chosen: "there is no independent criterion for the right result; instead there is a correct or fair procedure such that the outcome is likewise correct and fair" (Rawls, 1973: 136). Securing a fair procedure requires introducing several constraints, the most notable being the "veil of ignorance," which restricts the parties' knowledge of their empirical identities and social location. In this position-with no insight into one's natural abilities or social status-Rawls argues that all citizens would recognize that they need the same primary goods (liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect) to pursue their own conception of the good. Thereby, all citizens in the original position would agree to the two principles of Justice as Fairness, which state that:

- a) Each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; and in this scheme the equal political liberties, and only those liberties, are to be guaranteed their fair value.

- b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. (Rawls, 1993: 5-6)

Justice as Fairness, Rawls contends, would secure a stable society over time as it would ensure citizens' political liberties, justify the social order, and promote tolerance and reciprocity between citizens.

### **Reconciliation and the Closure of Politics**

Rawls acknowledges that democratic societies are conditioned by pluralism and that such a "fact" could only be eradicated by an authoritarian State. However, he is also concerned that pluralism could result in social fragmentation and risk the necessary unity within society. Since Rawls turns to the political to establish social unity, and concurrently views pluralism as a threat to such unity, he elects to displace pluralism from the political realm into the private. This manoeuvre is founded on the assumption that no positive connection exists between pluralism and politics; pluralism is a "fact"-something to be accepted- not valued or deepened, and is therefore unwelcome in the public realm. In constraining pluralism to the private realm, Rawls effectively rids politics of any discussion of the good and establishes an absolute priority of the right. It is this attempt to determine the right-the principles of justice-independent of any conception of the good that has provoked critiques:

[I]t is only in a specific type of society, with certain institutions, that an individual with rights can exist, and that it is only through our participation in a community which defines the good in a certain way that we can acquire a sense of the right and a conception of justice. (Mouffe, 1993:46)

Rawls fails to recognize that the rights he so eagerly seeks to defend are themselves a good within the context of a democratic society. The assertion of an absolute priority of the right is therefore erroneous, as it presumes a universal priority of the right irrespective of any historical or social context.

In response to these critiques, Rawls has subsequently modified his position, suggesting that his theory is devised particularly for a modern constitutional democracy, rather than being universally valid. However, as Mouffe points out, Rawls continues to articulate the political through moral philosophy and as such he does not construct politics as a realm of commonality, but as a common realm of individuality; not as a space conditioned by pluralism, but by social cooperation, where citizens seek to maximize their prosperity in accord with certain moral principles. Consider Hannah Pitkin's suggestion that:

Moral discourse is personal dialogue; political discourse concerns a public, a community, and takes place among the members generally. Thus it requires a plurality of viewpoints from which to begin; and the interaction of these varied perspectives. (Pitkin, in Mouffe, 1993:50)

By constructing citizens as moral persons-with a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of the good-Rawls strips citizenship of its political character; the only 'political' concerns of such citizens are to ensure that their liberties are protected and that they are justly treated in instances of social cooperation. Thus all conflict is resolved in the attempt to reconcile citizens, which in effect represents the *end* of Rawls' politics.

Rawls' goal of achieving a conclusive agreement on the principles of justice is akin to the closure of politics because he fails to comprehend that while the task of politics is to create unity, it cannot be achieved at the expense of difference, particularly in a democratic society marked by competing conceptions of the good-both moral and political. Conflict is an indispensable character of politics in democratic societies, and hence the end of conflict would result in the end of pluralism-both in the public and private realm. It is in part the advent of conflict in the private realm that brings an issue into the political, and it is precisely such a possibility that Rawls denies. As Bonnie Honig suggests:

Rawls imagines a private realm in which different forms of life coexist as lifestyles; there is no context among them. None feels threatened by the existence of the other. None maintains itself at the cost of other's existence. (Honig, 1993:130)

Rawls' society is one in which any new identities that emerge will themselves be reconciled to the principles of justice, and since the principles of justice are considered

conclusive and fixed, a society in which no new perspectives on justice are expected to arise. Any new ideas that emerge in this society will not belong to the political realm, but to the private; thus (political) History-as a shared yet contested story-is put to rest.

Ultimately, Rawls suggests that citizenship entails pursuing one's own good in accord with the principles of justice. As such, citizens are reduced to mere consumers of and competitors over the State's goods. Moreover, the quintessential political moment, as represented through the original position, lacks any notion of a political citizen. Each individual, through a personal reflection arrives at a decision and since all participants will arrive at the same decision regardless, there is no need to engage in a common discussion. Individuals in the original position base their decisions on their own self-interest; there is no attempt to consider the political common good. Parties in the original position feel no tension between their interests as individuals and their 'interests' as citizens, since the public interest is constructed as the aggregate of each individuals' private interest.

Perhaps the greatest affirmation of Rawls' understanding of the citizens' role in a democracy is the manner in which they participate in the original position. Citizens do not construct the principles of justice, or even amend them through a common discussion; rather, the original position represents the definitive enactment of one's freedom of choice. It is precisely this faculty which defines Rawls' citizens: they are considered free to the extent that they can make moral choices in accord with their own rational self-interest. Freedom is presented as a personal freedom not a public one; it entails a freedom to choose one's lifestyle and to have that choice secured by the state; it does not imply a freedom to participate in the construction of a common space conditioned by shared principles. Instead of aspiring to a politics that must continually create a commonality in the context of difference, Rawls desires reconciliation. It is precisely a (final) reconciliation that he erects, and like a dam inhibiting the movement of a river, reconciliation impedes citizens from politics, relegating them to the perpetual stagnancy of a social reservoir.

### **Activating Citizenship**

Rawls' theory clearly demonstrates that the devaluation of politics necessarily implies the devaluation of citizenship. In diminishing politics primarily to the matter of distribution,

citizens are constructed merely as passive consumers rather than as active participants of a political community. Thus any attempt at revitalizing politics, beyond mere interest brokering and bureaucratic managerialism, necessitates reconceiving our concept of citizenship. It is precisely such a task which follows. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe, I attempt to retrieve a reverence for the practice of citizenship as the act of creating a commonality in the context of difference, of overcoming our personal interests and deliberating on common concerns, and of preserving an openness and an uncertainty which allow for the possibility of recreating ourselves and the world anew. To present their concepts of citizenship, I explore each theorist's understanding of politics separately, attending specifically to the character of the public realm and the role and identity of the citizen within it. I allocate considerable amount of space to this task as it forms the basis from which I draw the notion of active citizenship.

### **Hannah Arendt**

Arendt spent much of her early academic years engaged in a task of retrieval-of correcting a historical wrong in the trajectory of political philosophy-and appropriating it to modern times. Arendt's hope lay with the pre-Socratic Greeks; she understood in them a practice of and reverence for politics that have never been equalled. Yet, if Arendt's interpretation of the Greeks makes her one of the more inspiring and innovative political theorists of this century, it is also the source of her enigmatic and often unsettling stance.<sup>3</sup> I take up the more contentious issues of Arendt's philosophy later, and begin now with an exploration of her politics and her notion of citizenship.

### **Liberating Freedom**

The fateful turn responsible for the rift between philosophy and politics, which Arendt is intent on confronting, occurred at the trial of Socrates. Arendt believes that it was Socrates' execution that brought Plato to condemn the polis and thereby demean its value, glorifying in its place the philosopher. The polis came to be conceived simply as a means to securing the philosopher's life and this hierarchy eventually led to the subordination of the *vita activa* (in all its facets) to the *vita contemplativa*.<sup>4</sup> *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt's major political treatise, is precisely an attempt to return

particular aspects of the *vita activa* to their former glory-not above but alongside of the *vita contemplativa*. Her rejection of the hierarchy between the two emerges from a concern that a life devoted solely to the *vita contemplativa* would be lacking in one of the fundamental human capacities: freedom.

It may seem terribly misguided that Arendt turns to the pre-Socratic Greeks as the model of freedom, but freedom for the Greeks carried a very different meaning than has generally been attributed to it throughout history, and it is that quality which Arendt seeks to retrieve. Freedom is not a faculty of the mind, as in the freedom to think; nor a faculty of the will, as in the freedom of choice; rather, freedom is the capacity to act-to begin something anew-and can only be experienced in the presence of others. "Neither freedom nor its opposite is experienced in the dialogue between me and myself" (Arendt, 1961:145). Thus freedom is a worldly experience, not an inner 'feeling' nor metaphysical musings, and can only be manifest in the public realm. Arendt argues that Plato's rejection of the polis in order to be 'free' to contemplate eternal truths initiated a historical development which culminated in the modern assertion that freedom implies a freedom from politics. Such an association is a complete perversion of freedom (and politics) to Arendt and fails to recognize that "man (sic) would know nothing of inner freedom if he had not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality" (Arendt, 1961:148). Freedom for the Greeks, therefore, was only conceivable in the public sphere and would be incoherent if articulated in relation to the private realm; in fact, freedom implied that one was liberated from the burdens of necessity characteristic of the private. Though Arendt does not suggest a return to a Grecian social order, she is intent on recovering their understanding and practice of freedom. Such a practice of freedom is precisely what Arendt inscribes in her understanding of politics and citizenship.

### **Politics *In Action***

Politics, for Arendt, is the quintessence of freedom-its "raison d'être." As the practice of freedom, politics can only be experienced through action; it is the only activity that is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, thereby congruent with freedom. Arendt investigates three activities within the *vita activa*: labour, work and action. Labor corresponds to the biological needs of the body and thereby fulfills the necessities of human life; it involves

those activities that all animals undertake to sustain and reproduce themselves. Work, on the other hand, entails the production of things and corresponds to the human condition of worldliness; it "provides an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings" (Arendt, 1958: 7). Action, as distinguished from work and labor, corresponds to the human condition of plurality as it is "the only activity that goes on directly between men (sic) without the intermediary of things or matter" (Arendt, 1958:7). Though Arendt views all three activities as necessary for a complete life, she clearly holds action to be the greatest activity, as it harbours the potential for us to realize our highest human capacities: freedom, plurality and individuality.

As the defining condition of the political realm, plurality does not refer to the presence of multiple conceptions of the good, but to the simultaneity of sameness and difference; to the fact that "we are all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt, 1958:8). The manifestation of plurality, however, requires a realm that is capable of conferring both equality and diversity. Arendt therefore delineates the public realm by two characteristics. First it implies "that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (Arendt, 1958:50). As a space of appearances, the public realm is able to constitute a common reality. Reality, for Arendt, is a worldly matter, not a transcendental notion, hence politics for her is not concerned with metaphysical truths, but *present* experiences.<sup>5</sup> Thus creating new beginnings and disclosing oneself requires a common reality that all participants share. Secondly, politics for Arendt concerns the world-in-common that humans create in appearing together beyond their private concerns and individual interests. Thus it is only within a public realm that allows citizens to appear for each other and deliberate on issues of common concern that action is possible; action necessitates a realm of plurality that both equalizes and differentiates. Equality is conferred by the fact that 'the world'-upon which we all have equal claims-is at stake, as distinguished from our private lives; and difference emerges as a result of our unique identities which disclose our particular perspectives on the world. Only within such a context-under the conditions of plurality-can citizens act.

Arendt's insistence on the specificity of the public realm supposes the exclusion of everything 'private' (realm of necessity), which threatens the potential for action. When the matter of politics regresses to such issues as our personal needs and wants, the possibility of freedom, as opposed to liberation, is lost; politics is transformed into another means, subordinated to the most fashionable or pressing ends. Therefore, in an attempt to preserve the conditions for action, Arendt juxtaposes the public realm of equality, commonality, openness, individuality/distinction and freedom, against a private realm characterized by hierarchy, separateness, closure, sameness and necessity. While Arendt certainly privileges the public realm for the potentials it harbours, she simultaneously recognizes the importance of a private realm distinct from the realm of action. For Arendt, it is only in the public realm, through action and speech that one can disclose oneself. In the utterance and performance of words and deeds, within the public realm, individuals disclose 'who' they are, as opposed to 'what' they are. The latter refers to one's qualities, gifts, talents, shortcomings-traits that all humans share, while the former "is implicit in everything somebody says and does" (Arendt, 1958: 179). In acting/speaking we do not reveal those characteristics that are common to many or all but we discover that which is uniquely 'ours'. However, it is important to note that this process of publicization is not simply a matter of sharing what is known, but of creating and discovering 'who' is possible. Thus Arendt's emphasis on the *performativity* of action as the moment in which we disrupt the 'what' to discover a 'who'. The individual, for Arendt, is not prior to action but rather a product of it: the action precedes the actor. However, action's unpredictability prevents us from knowing the outcome *a priori* or of ever fully comprehending its consequences; it is the character of action to transcend all intentions, motives, or goals. Thus, while politics can potentially act as a means, it can never only do so; to reduce politics simply to a means is to foreshadow the closure of the political realm and the end of action.

Therefore, while Arendt maintains that citizens must continually appear in the public realm to debate issues of common concern and to disclose 'who' they are, she argues that the 'who' that we discover is not even 'ours', for its control eludes us and its manifestation requires a public that shares in the performance. Hence even within the public realm we cannot be considered autonomous, for our 'presence' depends upon the appearance of

others. Arendt's rejection of autonomy is significant, as it forestalls the closure of the political: "institutions and individuals are always incomplete, forever calling for augmentation and amendment" (Honig, 1993: 115). Thus our identities, for Arendt, are never considered complete or fixed, but rather are always contingent on the continual utterance and performance of words and deeds. Not only does this openness secure the continual possibility for action, but it also delineates a political realm characterized by inter-subjectivity. Because individuals are never complete-even when they act-they are always receptive to and transformed by the performances of others. Arendt envisions an agonal public, wherein citizens are challenged and judged, and through this process reconsider their perspectives, thereby transforming their identities. The rejection of both the sovereignty of the individual and the political community suggests that Arendt's public is always divided in their commonality, as the notion of the sovereign supposes that the will of the people and of the individual are unified. Thus to secure the possibility of freedom-of bringing forth the unexpected-the *polis* can never appear as a unified autonomous entity.

Integral to this notion of an agonal and incomplete public is an assertion that politics does not concern Truth, but rather our opinions on the world. Arendt, however, evades the incommensurability of 'opinions'-the assumption that each has their own opinion independent and irrespective of others-in constructing an inter-subjective public. She rejects the notion that opinions can be fixed prior to deliberating, for it is precisely through politics that citizens construct their perspectives. The presumption of Truth within the political realm would eliminate pluralism by making all perspectives redundant; moreover, it would reduce politics to a means in the task of finding *the* answer. Yet, for Arendt, politics is not about "getting it right"; as Honig suggests in reference to Arendt:

She banishes rational, foundational truths from the public realm for fear that their irresistible compulsion will shut down the agon whose security, maintenance, and perpetuity she seeks...The mark of true politics is irresistibility and a perpetual openness to the possibility of re-founding. (Honig, 1993: 9, 116)

Hence the foundational moment in Arendt represents the complete antithesis of the Rawlsian one; whereas he seeks closure, harmony, withdrawal, and reconciliation of the political, she secures openness, uncertainty, pluralism, agonism and an interminable

politics. For Arendt, the conflict of politics is never decisively resolved, for each citizen harbours the "promise of beginning," of recreating themselves and the world anew. Such a dynamic politics is repeatedly inscribed by Arendt, both in her notion of the citizen and in her determined commitment to action.

### **Amending Arendt**

It is now necessary to briefly address the more contentious aspect of Arendt's philosophy: her strict distinction between the public and the private. Admittedly this task requires a certain departure from Arendt's vision of citizenship, but such amendments are in keeping with her notion of politics (Honig 1992, 1993). That Arendt's account of citizenship is incomplete and in need of continual revision is, for me, its allure and promise. It is precisely this promise—a continual commitment to openness—that I attempt to maintain in amending Arendt's work to befit the concept of *active citizenship*.

In an attempt to preserve the possibility of action, Arendt draws a rigid boundary around the public, excluding beforehand certain subject-matter. She contends that laboring and working, which foster a behaving mentality and concern means and ends, hinder the potential for action. She therefore specifies and constrains the content within which action can emerge. Yet as Honig (1993) has argued, if one remains committed to Arendt's notion of action and its performative character, then its content cannot be predetermined; such a constative delineation is precisely that which action resists. As Arendt (1958:190) herself claims:

Action no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.

Thus even the boundaries that Arendt draws cannot be considered fixed but are themselves susceptible to the unpredictability and boundlessness of action. While action must always be particular to a public, we cannot predict beforehand the content around which commonality and plurality will emerge. As Cate Sandilands (1999:158-159) suggests:

There can be no inherent content to politics because politics itself is the process through which the common is contested and constituted; thus, to predefine an appropriate realm of discussion closes off the possibility of action itself.

Hence, what can be retrieved from Arendt is a particular character to politics rather than a specific content. As Hannah Pitkin suggests: "[p]erhaps, then, it is not a particular subject-matter, nor a particular class of people, but a particular *attitude* against which the public realm must be guarded" (Pitkin in Sandilands, 1999:161, italics in original). This suggests that private matters can potentially emerge as public issues so long as they are consistent with the conditions and character of politics. This does not imply that the public/private distinction is dissolved (Arendt was correct in asserting the importance of two distinct realms) but that its appearance is continually shifting; politics is in part the act of defining a public, of creating a commonality-a "we"-when faced with a decision. This "we" cannot be constituted *a priori*, but as Arendt herself recognized, emerges whenever people come together to act and speak in concert to beget something new into the world.

### **Chantal Mouffe**

The articulation of a 'radical democracy' takes many forms and emerges in the work of several theorists, though none perhaps quite as controversial and, in my view, as promising as Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's. While the presentation of their argument was first situated within a Marxist tradition (though oriented towards a post-Marxist politics) they maintained that its articulation could emerge from several perspectives. In light of this Chantal Mouffe published *The Return of the Political* (1993), a collection of essays that attempts to further the argument developed with Ernesto Laclau though located more particularly in the political debates between liberals and communitarians. It is precisely from these essays (and others authored alone) which I draw my reading of Mouffe's understanding of citizenship and politics. In the following sections I explore the particular landmarks of her notion of 'radical democracy' that delineate her understanding of citizenship.

### ***Defining the Political***

As mentioned earlier, one of Mouffe's most notable critiques of liberalism concerns its failure to construct an adequate concept of the political. In critiquing liberalism's evasion of the political, Mouffe relies heavily upon the work of Carl Schmitt, one of liberalism's most

articulate and critical opponents. It is worthwhile to briefly explore Schmitt's argument, particularly since Mouffe adopts his notion of the political.

Carl Schmitt's opposition to liberalism is revealed in his assertion that it denies democracy and similarly that democracy denies liberalism. Democracy for Schmitt is "a logic of identity between government and governed, between the law and the popular will" (Mouffe, 1993:121) as such, it implies a homogeneity among the people. The ability to constitute this needed homogeneity resides in the power of the political, whereby an "us" is created that supersedes or erases all internal differences. The distinction which is key to Schmitt's thought is the claim that the creation of an "us" necessarily implies the exclusion of a "them"; thus politics for Schmitt is precisely the decision to construct the friend/enemy division. He contends that democracies have always excluded that which threatened their homogeneity, and the power to enact and construct this unity resides in the political. He argues that liberalism's commitment to individualism and pluralism precludes this possibility. In prioritizing the rights of the individual, liberalism construes politics as an instrumental practice that is incapable of creating collective identities. Moreover, Schmitt maintains that the protection of pluralism results in a 'neutral state' that is unqualified to create a homogeneity or enact the political moment. Thus modern democracy, for Schmitt, is constituted on a contradiction that articulates liberal individualism with the democratic logic of identity, and thus liberalism's inability to capture the political necessitates its displacement.

While Mouffe does not accept Schmitt's entire argument, she is sympathetic to his notion of the political. Recognizing that politics entails the creation of a "we", she realizes with Schmitt that such a constitutive moment necessitates a "them", against which "we" are formed. Similarly, she grants this ability to draw the friend/enemy distinction to the political, and therefore bestows upon it a priority that supersedes all other divisions. Thus the political moment, for Mouffe, is the act of defining the line between "us" and "them", of constituting an antagonism of the friend/enemy variety. And while she recognizes that other forms of antagonism arise-are in fact necessary-within the political community, she relies upon the friend/enemy distinction to order them-to create an overriding homogeneity. However, while she agrees with Schmitt that politics is the realm wherein the social is ordered, she objects to the creation of social homogeneity. Therefore, while

Mouffe heeds Schmitt's critique of liberalism and appropriates his notion of the political, she rejects his concept of democracy.

Mouffe maintains that Schmitt's conception of democracy, as the constitution of homogeneity, fails to grasp the specificity of modern democracy. She attributes this failure to his tendency to theorize modernity simply as the secularization of theological concepts, and argues that he neglects the emergence of an entirely new form of political legitimacy and social order. Mouffe contends that the advent of the democratic revolution shifted the terrain upon which we stand and ushered in a new mode of instituting the social. Her understanding of the democratic revolution is informed by Claude Lefort's analysis, and therefore a brief exploration of his work is necessary to delimit certain particularities of this new terrain.

### **Democracy's Division**

Lefort maintains that democracy is not simply a form of government but that it is a symbolic regime that concerns the ordering of social relations. He contends that the particularities of this order are revealed when one grasps the transformations that occurred with the demise of the monarchic regime and the advent of modern democracy. The king, whose position was legitimated by a transcendental authority, represented the place of power in society. The kingdom (or society) itself was conceptualized as a body that was represented in the king, who thus signified the united will of the people. As a representative of God, he was a symbol of sovereign justice and reason and thus signified the unity of power, knowledge and law. In the person of the king these faculties were given a determinacy and a certainty that modern democracy shattered. Lefort argues that in displacing the monarchic regime, the democratic revolution instituted a new form of social order where power occupies an "empty place" and is dissociated from law and knowledge. In such a society, the will of the people can no longer be unified or represented as such.<sup>6</sup> The absence of power forestalls the possibility of a definitive legitimacy and exposes power, law and knowledge to a "radical indeterminacy":

[N]o law which can be fixed, whose dictates are not subject to contest, or whose foundations cannot be called into question; in sum, no representation of a centre of society: unity is no longer able to erase social division. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:187)

Thus democracy institutes divisions within the social order, which to Mouffe implies that society can no longer be conceived as an organic whole organized around a substantive idea of the common good. Pluralism, as the proliferation of social meanings and of conceptions of the good, is therefore necessary to maintain the symbolic order of democracy. The social for Mouffe can never be unified, but must be constituted by conflict, division, and antagonisms. Therefore, while Mouffe agrees with Schmitt that homogeneity is necessary at the level of the political, she maintains that its constitution at the level of the social is to be resisted. Mouffe relies on Schmitt's concept of the political to avoid the uncontrollable proliferation of pluralism; homogeneity at the level of the political limits pluralism and legitimizes the political order. Thus for Mouffe everything is open to (radical) questioning and reconstitution except for democracy, whose legitimacy must remain unassailable. Her notion of radical democracy resides in the tension between Lefort's assertion of the importance of social division (plurality) and Schmitt's argument for an antagonistic political moment. Mouffe's theory exists in the productive tension between division and homogeneity, between pluralism and antagonism; indeed, it is this tension that Mouffe applies to liberal democracy in search of a 'radical and plural democracy'.

### **Radicalizing Liberal Democracy**

Mouffe maintains that liberalism's latent promise has been historically repressed, and that it harbours the potential for a more radical articulation. She contends that liberalism's articulation with democracy is compatible with the symbolic order of modern democracy, as it is a regime that secures the presence of pluralism. Mouffe therefore believes that liberalism's protection of individual freedom must be an integral dimension of any political theory that aspires to the pluralism required for modern democracy. Secondly, Mouffe contends that liberalism's political principles of liberty and equality, which were constitutive of modern democracy, maintain a needed tension in securing the "radical indeterminacy" of democracy. That liberty and equality can never be conclusively reconciled represents for Mouffe the principal value of liberal democracy, as it assures an incompleteness, openness and in(de)terminability that are necessary for the continued realization of modern democracy. However, while these two dimensions allow liberalism to achieve a

certain congruency with democracy, Mouffe contends that their potentials are sorely repressed and in need of being re-articulated in more radical forms.

Mouffe argues that liberalism fails to grasp pluralism's full importance by remaining oblivious to the significance of pluralism at the symbolic level-the fact that power and knowledge can never be unified-and that it regards pluralism merely as an empiricism. Understandably, this is a critique that Mouffe levels at Rawls, who speaks of the "fact of pluralism" as an occurrence that is to be accepted and reconciled. Contrary to Rawls, Mouffe contends that pluralism is something to be valued and fostered, as its presence resists the unification of society and the closure of politics.

Avoiding such a closure requires not only a recognition of pluralism at the symbolic level, but necessitates simultaneously renouncing any attempt to unify the social. Of particular concern with regards to liberalism is its desire to achieve a rational consensus on the meaning of liberty and equality. Such an appeal to rationality, Mouffe argues, is flawed on several accounts. Mouffe maintains that the political sphere in a democracy cannot be conditioned by a universal claim to 'rationality' as this would be predicated upon the (often violent) exclusion of certain members. Rather than masking these exclusions, which liberalism is prone to do, Mouffe argues that liberalism ought to renounce all claims to or desire for universality and foster instead a pluralistic public. Mouffe contends that to secure a public sphere that is open to diverse meanings and ways of knowing, we need not renounce rationality, simply its claim to universalism. Thus in politics, all claims to truth must be forsaken and we must recognize instead that we are in the realm of opinion. However in renouncing such rational foundations, Mouffe does not adopt the relativist position that all views are equal, but argues that whilst located within a tradition we still maintain the ability to enact judgements. Her argument, which is consonant with several streams of post-modernism and post-structuralism, is that "there is no point of view external to all tradition from which one can offer a universal judgement" (Mouffe, 1993:15). Mouffe contends that within a liberal tradition rooted on the terrain of the democratic revolution, our judgements will be based upon the principles of liberty and equality; the irresolvable tension of these principles forestalls any attempt at proclaiming a final judgement.

Mouffe also inscribes an interminable and agonistic politics through her understanding of the self. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, Mouffe argues that the subject cannot be conceived as a unified entity constituted by a homogeneous centre, but rather is always multiple, decentered and detotalized. The subject is constituted by a multiplicity of 'subject positions' which can never be organized into a coherent, unified whole. However, what is particularly important in this configuration, is that the fragments themselves—the multiple identities which constitute this incomplete subject—do not acquire a completeness. The basis of this constitutive lack resides in the fact that no identity when articulated alone can attain a coherence; its meaning is necessarily relational and requires the 'other' against which it is affirmed. Though it is not simply a matter of two homogeneous identities fronting each other (as in 'man'/'woman'), but as Mouffe explains:

It is because [each identity] has inscribed in its very being something other than itself and that as a result, everything is constructed as difference, that its being cannot be conceived as 'pure presence' or 'objectivity'. Since the 'constitutive outside' exists within the inside as an always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent. (Mouffe, 1992:228)

Thus not only can there not be an essence to any identity, but precisely because each identity is contingent and non-fixed its presence depends upon its articulation; in other words, there can be no identity prior to articulation. Because there is no centre from which the subject can draw, nor any fixed positions, articulation is precisely the act of constituting an identity. What this notion of the subject also implies is that since every identity is relational and non-fixed there exists the possibility of challenging their configurations, of contesting their meanings, particularly those constructed as relations of oppression.<sup>7</sup> In short, there can be no 'true' identity that evades democratic interrogation. This understanding of the subject also shifts the locus of politics, as there can be no pre-determined sites of antagonism. Since antagonisms can emerge with respect to any relation of subordination, we can never know *a priori* in what context they will arise. This implies that the political cannot be confined to any sphere or to particular institutions, but that its appearance can emerge anywhere. Mouffe does not suggest that the public/private distinction is forfeited; rather, she views it as always shifting. The 'public' emerges through the articulation of an antagonistic relation, which can arise from any sphere. Mouffe suggests that extending the democratic imaginary resides in the ability of radical

democratic citizens to actively extend liberty and equality into various spheres. This process of radicalizing democracy necessitates a citizen that is actively engaged in the multiple spaces of the political community. Deepening democracy requires that citizens challenge the various relations of subordination and are committed to continually re-interrogating them. Yet in constructing antagonism as definitive of our ontological condition, Mouffe suggests that the radical democratic project is an interminable one. Citizens can never hope for the end of conflict, or of division, for this in effect would represent the end of democracy.

### **Active Citizenship: The Birth of Politics Anew**

"What counts most is not the arrival at a final destination, but movement, and the direction in which it takes place. What is decisive is whether people act in such a way as to create and foster citizenship." (van Gunsteren, 1998:12)

To conclude, I outline a theory of *active citizenship* predicated on the work of Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe. Despite the divergences in their theories (which I only address briefly), I contend that in many important ways Arendt and Mouffe construct a similar understanding of citizenship, one that carries with it the promise of re-invigorating our political communities through a renewed practice of politics.

I begin by highlighting the fact that citizenship for both Arendt and Mouffe is constructed independent of one's race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, etc. For Mouffe, to propose that citizenship be constituted by a particular identity is predicated on the exclusion of others, and therefore ought to be rejected. Arendt, on the other hand, renounces an identity-based politics because of her rigid distinction between the private and public. However, in amending this we can read a more inclusive public realm into Arendt's politics. What I retrieve from Arendt is a recognition that one's *presence* as a citizen is independent of one's 'private' identity; citizenship resides in a shared world, not a shared identity. Thus, both Arendt and Mouffe argue that citizenship be founded on a commonality exterior to one's personal interests. Their consonant rejection of an identity-based politics is also grounded on the assertion that the practice of citizenship does not concern predetermined identities, but rather is itself the act of constituting an identity. Both posit the moment of publicity as the constitution of an identity, which itself is not fixed but

subject to continual interrogation and re-articulation through repeated performances/articulations.

The idea that citizens must enter the public realm to discover and disclose their identities highlights the importance of action for both Arendt and Mouffe. For Arendt, action constitutes the practice of citizenship, as there can be no understanding of citizenship or of politics exterior to action. Citizenship is precisely the experience of freedom that arises when one participates in a political community. While Mouffe maintains that individual liberty must be secured, she simultaneously argues that the liberal construction of citizenship merely as a legal status devalues the practice of politics. The crucial similarity between both theorists is that neither views the practice of citizenship merely as an end. Mouffe is adamant about the fact that our participation in the political realm is not simply a means to acquiring rights, rather citizens participate in the political community because they are committed to the political values of liberty and equality-for all. Therefore citizenship, for both, can never be considered only as a status one holds *against* the public realm, but necessarily implies an exercise one undertakes within it. What is also particularly significant is that the locus of politics is not fixed; the exercise of citizenship can emerge anywhere. Thus, both restore a reverence to the practice of citizenship as the act of creating commonality and addressing common concerns. Without this dimension to citizenship, politics is reduced to a managerial process of negotiating different personal needs and wants. In preserving action as central to citizenship, Arendt and Mouffe also secure the continual openness of the political realm. If politics were about achieving an attainable end, the possibilities for action-for transforming ourselves and the conditions in which we live-would be lost. However, action necessitates the presence of pluralism and antagonism from preventing it from becoming meaningless or tyrannical; only within the context of a "we" does action make sense, and only within a "we" that is divided does it secure a continual commitment to openness. Thus, *active citizenship* must be practiced in the productive tension between pluralism and antagonism.

For Arendt, pluralism is the condition of the political, which implies foremost, that citizenship is not an individual exercise. However, she simultaneously suggests that without conflict the political is never brought into being; if there is no dispute there is no need for political discussion. For Mouffe, antagonism is an ontological condition that

emerges from the relational aspect of every identity, while pluralism is a product of the social division instituted by democracy. Though the differences are important, I retrieve from both the idea that politics is in part the creation of a commonality—a "we"—but that this "we" always remains divided. Thus, neither theorist supposes an undifferentiated political realm. Both recognize that the individuality of the citizen is not to be sacrificed through the practice of politics. In opposition to the individualism—the self-interested nature—that characterizes the liberal citizen, active citizens promote the political plurality that emerges from individuality. Moreover, in securing a realm conditioned by both pluralism and antagonism, Arendt and Mouffe affirm that politics is concerned with one's opinions rather than the presentation of the Truth. As such, active citizens are never beyond reproach in the political realm, and they can never presume that their positions or perspectives are absolutely 'right', for this in essence would signal the closure of politics.

In fact, it is precisely the closure of politics that *active citizens* resist. This commitment to openness and uncertainty implies that democracy is an interminable process; the desire for liberty and equality for all is not an attainable end but the horizon towards which citizens must struggle. We must recognize that no spheres and no identities can evade democratic interrogation if they perpetuate oppression relations; the democratic imaginary is potentially boundless. Thus, politics for the *active citizen* appears as a never-ending adventure that one must be continually committed to embarking upon.

## Notes

- 1 This paper represents a considerably shorter version of the first chapter of my Masters thesis. I have shortened the final section that compares and contrasts the work of Arendt and Mouffe, believing that this discussion is somewhat evident on account of the thorough reading given to each theorist's work in this paper.
- 2 To ensure wider support for the principles of justice Rawls restricts the scope of the principles to the "basic structure" of society: the political constitution, the judiciary, forms of property, and the general structure of the economy. The principles do not apply to voluntary associations, universities, churches, households, and corporations.

- 3 It is important to note that Arendt offers a particular reading of the Greeks, one that differs markedly from Bernard Manin's (1997).
- 4 The *vita activa* denotes a life committed to activities (labor, work, action); the *vita contemplativa* refers to a life devoted to contemplation, thought..
- 5 By reclaiming appearances as a character of the public realm, Arendt attempt to reverse Plato's allegory of the cave.
- 6 Lefort (1986) understands totalitarianism as precisely an attempt to represent a unified will-to totalize the social.
- 7 Laclau and Mouffe distinguish relations of subordination from relations of oppression. The former are not necessarily political unless articulated as a relation of oppression.

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