The affects of democracy

Chantal Mouffe
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The absence in liberal democracies of an agonistic confrontation between different political projects has led to a crisis of representation, argues Chantal Mouffe. Demonization of the ‘enemies’ of the bipartisan consensus might be morally comforting, but it is politically disempowering. We need a progressive populism that can mobilize common affects towards a defence of equality and social justice.

Emotions and affects have recently become a fashionable topic among philosophers and people working in social sciences and the humanities and there is a growing literature on what has been called the ‘affective turn’. It designates a very heterogeneous body of works among which it is not easy to find ‘family resemblances’, because the theorists who are sometimes put under this umbrella come from a variety of approaches that are difficult to reconcile. They disagree on the very meaning of the terms ‘affects’ and ‘emotions’, not to speak of their relation. Some of them are influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, others by the neurosciences, others by a variety of constructivist schools. I have for a long time in my work put a special emphasis on the role of ‘passions’ in politics, and I would like here to clarify what I understand by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics.

In fact, I have often been asked why I speak of passions instead of emotions. This is why I want to stress that, from the perspective that I advocate, it is essential to distinguish between ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’. It is with regard to the political domain that my approach has been elaborated; one of its central tenets is that, in that field, we are always dealing with collective identities – something that the term ‘emotions’ does not adequately convey because emotions are usually attached to individuals. To be sure, ‘passions’ can also be of an individual nature, but I have chosen to use that term, with its more violent connotations, because it allows me to underline the dimension of conflict and to suggest a confrontation between collective political identities, two aspects that I take to be constitutive of politics. I contend that, without understanding the crucial role played by common affects in the constitution of political forms of identification, it is not possible to envisage what is at stake in democratic politics. After presenting the main tenets of my theoretical approach, I will show how this approach is particularly suited to grasping the nature of the populist moment that characterizes our present conjuncture and of how to answer the challenge that it represents.
Antagonism and hegemony

To understand what I mean by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics requires acquaintance with the theoretical framework that informs my approach. This approach has been first elaborated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, written with Ernesto Laclau, in which we argued that two fundamental concepts are needed to elaborate a theory of the political: antagonism and hegemony. [1] The concept of antagonism is central because it postulates the existence of a radical negativity that impedes the totalization of society and forecloses the possibility of society beyond division and power. It is linked to the concept of hegemony. To assert the ineradicability of antagonism requires acknowledging the impossibility of reaching a final ground, and instead recognizing the dimension of undecidability and of contingency that pervades every order. It is precisely this dimension to which the category of hegemony refers, as it indicates that every society is the product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency. In this view, the social is constituted by sedimented hegemonic practices; that is, practices that appear to proceed from a natural order, concealing the originary acts of their contingent political institution. This perspective reveals that every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Every order is the expression of a particular structure of power relations and it is always established through the exclusion of other possibilities, hence its political character.

I later suggested distinguishing between the political, to refer to the dimension of radical negativity, of antagonism – one that can emerge within a large variety of social relations – and politics, which deals with the ontic manifestations of this ontological dimension. Politics aims at establishing an order and organizing human coexistence under conditions that are traversed by the political, and are thus always conflictual. We find this distinction between the political and politics in other theories, though not always with the same signification. We can in fact distinguish two opposing ways of characterizing the political. There are those for whom the political refers to a space of liberty and common action, while others see the political as a site of conflict and antagonism. This second approach is the one that I advocate, and the thesis I defend is that it is only when the ineradicable character of division and antagonism is recognized that it is possible to think in a properly political manner and to grasp the challenge confronting democratic politics.

Taking account of the dimension of the political signifies acknowledging the existence of conflicts that cannot have a rational solution – this is precisely what is meant by ‘antagonism’. To be sure, not all conflicts are of an antagonistic nature, but properly political ones are, because they always involve decisions that require a choice between alternatives that are undecidable from a strictly rational point of view. Political life will never be able to dispense with antagonism, for it concerns public action and the formation of collective identities. It aims at constituting a ‘we’ in a context of diversity and conflict. Yet, in order to constitute a ‘we’, one must distinguish it from a ‘they’, and there is always the possibility that, under certain conditions, this we/they takes the form of an antagonistic friend/enemy confrontation. This is why I have argued that the crucial question for democratic politics is not to reach a consensus without exclusion – which
would amount to creating a ‘we’ without a corresponding ‘they’ – but to construct the we/they discrimination in a mode which is compatible with pluralist democratic institutions.

This is something that most liberal-democratic theorists have to elude, due to the inadequate way they envisage pluralism. While recognizing that we live in a world where a multiplicity of perspectives and values coexist, and that it is impossible that each of us would adopt them all, those theorists imagine that, brought together, these perspectives and values constitute a harmonious and non-Conflictual ensemble. This type of thought is therefore incapable of accounting for the necessarily conflictual nature of pluralism, which stems from the impossibility of reconciling all points of view, and this is why it is bound to negate the political in its antagonistic dimension. To be sure, liberal pluralists acknowledge that, in democracy, ‘the people’ can no longer be considered as ‘one’, but they see it as being ‘multiple’, while according to the hegemonic perspective it should be understood as ‘divided’.

After writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, while scrutinizing the discussion among liberal-democratic theorists, I realized that neither the aggregative nor the deliberative models allowed us to visualize the possibility of a democratic hegemonic politics. To account for the ineradicability of antagonism and the hegemonic nature of politics, a different approach was needed – an approach able to address the following questions: How might a democratic order acknowledge and manage the existence of conflicts that do not have a rational solution? How to conceive democracy in a way that allows in its midst a confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects? My answer to this question is the agonistic model of democracy, which I see as providing the analytic framework necessary to visualize the possibility of a democratic confrontation between hegemonic projects.

According to the ‘agonistic’ model, to conceive pluralist democracy in a way that does not deny the antagonistic dimension supposes envisaging two possible modes of manifestation of the antagonistic dimension: as a friend/enemy confrontation or as a confrontation among adversaries. It is the latter that I have proposed to call ‘agonistic’. The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour, but her right to defend them will never be questioned.

Asserting the constitutive character of social division and the impossibility of a final reconciliation, the agonistic perspective recognizes the necessary partisan character of democratic politics. By envisaging this confrontation in terms of adversaries, and not on a friend/enemy mode that might lead to civil war, it allows such a confrontation to take place within democratic institutions. What is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the very configuration of power relations that structure a social order and the type of hegemony they construct. It is a confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects that can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is therefore always present, but it is enacted by means of a confrontation whose procedures are accepted by the adversaries. Such an agonistic perspective takes account of the fact that every social order is politically instituted and that the ground on which hegemonic interventions occur is never neutral, for it is always the product of previous hegemonic practices. It sees the
public sphere as the battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility of a final reconciliation.

The distinction between antagonism (friend/enemy relation) and agonism (relation between adversaries) permits us to understand why, contrary to what many democratic theorists believe, it is not necessary to negate the ineradicability of antagonism in order to visualize the establishment of a democratic order. The agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is in reality the very condition of its existence. To be sure, democracy cannot survive without a certain form of consensus, a ‘conflictual consensus’ referring to allegiance to the ethico-political values that constitute its principles of legitimacy, and to the institutions in which these are inscribed. But it must also enable the availability of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of those shared ethico-political values, in order for citizens to genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives.

In On the Political (2005) and in Agonistics (2013), examining the current state of European democracies, I argued that we are witnessing a crisis of representation which is due to the lack of an agonistic framework. [2] It is the consequence of what I call the ‘post-political’ consensus at the centre that has been established between parties of the centre-right and the centre-left. This consensus, which is based on the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalization, serves to entrench the existing hegemony. By not providing the possibility of an agonistic confrontation between different political projects, it deprives the citizens of a voice in the elections. As the Indignados in Spain claimed, ‘we have a vote but we do not have a voice’.

By postulating that we now live in societies where collective identities have disappeared, and where the opposition between left and right has become obsolete, the post-political perspective refuses to acknowledge that politics always consists in establishing a political frontier between we and they. Proclaiming that the adversarial model has been overcome, it curtails the agonistic dynamics and impedes the crystallization of collective forms of identifications around democratic political objectives. This is what explains the multiplication of other forms of collective identities of a moral, religious or ethnic nature. It is also at the origin – and I will come back to this point later – of the increasing success of rightwing populist parties, which are often the only ones to claim that there is an alternative and that they will give back to the people the power that the elites have taken away from them.

But in order to address the question of populism, I need to tackle the issue of ‘passions’ in the field of politics. As I have already indicated, by using the term ‘passions’ I want to distinguish my reflection from the issue of individual ‘emotions’. By ‘passions’ I designate a certain type of common affects, those that are mobilized in the political domain in the formation of the we/they forms of identification. My aim is to challenge the rationalist view dominant in democratic political theory, underlining both the collective and the partisan character of political action, bringing to light the crucial role played by affects in the construction of political identities. One of my key criticisms of liberal democratic theories is their incapacity to acknowledge this affective dimension, an incapacity which I take to be the consequence of their picture of the individual, who as an actor in the field of politics is presented as being moved either by the pursuit of her interests or by moral concerns. This precludes recognition of the collective nature of political actors and
prevents us asking one of the key questions for politics: how are collective forms of identification created and what is the part played by affects in this process?

Affects

Remember that I am posing this question within the post-foundationalist ontological framework that I have outlined earlier. Crucial to this framework is the assertion of the discursive nature of the social and the thesis that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification. What is at stake in politics is the construction of political identities; this always entails an affective dimension, what Freud calls a libidinal investment.

Freud is central for my reflection. Besides asserting the general thesis that the social link is a libidinal link, he brought to the fore the crucial role played by affective libidinal bounds in processes of collective identification. As he stated in ‘Group psychology and the analysis of the ego’: ‘a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world’. [3] For Freud, affects are the qualitative expression of the quantity of libidinal energy of the instincts. This libidinal energy is malleable and can be oriented in multiple directions, producing different affects. The point is that it is important to realize that different forms of politics can foster different affective libidinal attachments. This helps us to refute the essentialist view that attributes given affects to specific social agents.

To explain this point, I want to bring in insights from Spinoza’s conception of affects, namely his distinction between affection (*affectio*) and affect (*affectus*). [4] Like Freud, Spinoza believes that it is desire that moves human beings to act, and he notes that what makes them act in one direction rather than in another are the affects. An affection, for him, is the state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body. When affected by something exterior, the ‘conatus’ (the general striving to persevere in our being) will experience affects that will move it to desire something and to act accordingly. I find this dynamics of *affectio*/*affectus* helpful in order to envisage the process of production of common affects, and I propose employing this dynamics to examine the modes of construction of political identities, seeing ‘affections’ as the space where the discursive and the affective are articulated in specific practices.

On the importance of practices, I take my inspiration from Wittgenstein, who taught us that it is by their inscription in ‘language games’, what we call discursive practices, that social agents form specific beliefs and desires and acquire their subjectivity (let me stress here that by ‘discursive’ I am not referring to practices concerned exclusively with speech or writing, but to signifying practices in which signification and action cannot be separated). In this view, allegiance to democracy is something based not on rationality, but on participation in specific forms of life. As Richard Rorty often pointed out, a Wittgensteinian perspective makes us realize that allegiance to democracy and the belief in the value of its institutions does not depend on giving them an intellectual foundation. Allegiance to democratic values is a question of identification; it is created not through rational argumentation but through an ensemble of language games that construct democratic forms of individuality. Wittgenstein clearly acknowledges the affective dimension of this allegiance, which he likens to ‘a passionate commitment to a system of
Bringing together Spinoza, Freud and Wittgenstein, I propose seeing inscription in
discursive practices as providing the affections which, for Spinoza, bring about the
affects that spur desire and lead to specific action. This recognizes that affects and desire
play a crucial role in the constitution of collective forms of identification, and that they
are the motivating forces of political action. I submit that this recognition of the crucial
role of the affects and of the way they can be mobilized is decisive for envisaging
democratic politics. And I am going to argue in the second part of my presentation that
such a theoretical perspective is necessary to comprehend the nature of the populist
moment that we are currently witnessing, and to envisage how to face the challenge that
it represents.

**Populism**

To adequately address the question of populism, it is first necessary to discard the
simplistic vision of populism as mere demagogy, and to adopt an analytical perspective. I
follow Ernesto Laclau, who defines populism as a way to construct the we/they political
frontier by appealing to the mobilization of the ‘underdog’ against ‘those in power’. It
emerges when one aims at building a new subject of collective action – the people –
capable of reconfiguring a social order lived as unfair. Populism, Laclau insists, is not an
ideology or a political regime, and it does not have a specific programmatic content. It is
a way of doing politics, a strategy, which can take various forms, depending on periods
and the places, and it is compatible with different forms of government.

Some populisms have led to fascist regimes, but there are many other forms. It is a
mistake to affirm that all of them are incompatible with the existence of liberal-
democratic institutions. Indeed, this type of mobilization can have democratizing results.
This was, for instance, the case with the populist movement in the United States in the
nineteenth century, which was able to redistribute political power in favour of the
majority without calling into question the whole democratic system. In fact, populism
constitutes an important dimension of democracy, since it refers to the dimension of
popular sovereignty and to the construction of a demos that is constitutive of democracy.

Scrutinizing the growth of a populist type of politics in Europe, we can ascertain that it is
due to the convergence of several phenomena that, in recent years, have affected the
conditions in which democracy is exercised. The first phenomenon, which I have already
mentioned and that I call ‘post-politics’, refers to the blurring of political frontiers
between right and left. As we have seen, it is the result of the consensus established
between the parties of the centre-right and centre-left on the idea that there is no
alternative to neoliberal globalization. Under the pretext of ‘modernization’ imposed by
globalization, social-democratic parties have accepted the diktats of financial capitalism
and the limits they have imposed to state intervention and their redistributive policies.
The role of parliaments and other institutions that allow citizens to influence political
decisions has been drastically reduced. Elections no longer offer any opportunity to
decide on real alternatives through the traditional parties of ‘government’, and citizens
have been deprived of the possibility of exercising their democratic rights. Popular
sovereignty, the notion that constitutes the very heart of the democratic ideal – the power
of people – has been declared obsolete, and democracy has been reduced to its liberal
component. Politics has become a mere technical issue of managing the established order, a domain reserved for experts. The only thing that post-politics allows is a bipartisan alternation of power between the centre-right and centre-left parties. All those who oppose this ‘consensus in the centre’ are disqualified as ‘populists’ and accused of being ‘extremists’.

These changes at the political level have taken place within the context of a ‘neoliberal’ hegemonic formulation, characterized by a form of regulation of capitalism in which the role of financial capital is central. We have seen an exponential increase in inequality affecting not only the working class but also a great part of the middle classes, who have entered a process of pauperization and precarization. We are clearly witnessing a process of ‘oligarchization’ of western societies. Centre-left parties have abandoned the struggle for equality and their main slogans are now about ‘choice’ and ‘fairness’. The two democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty have been relinquished and it can be said that now we live in ‘post-democratic’ societies. To be sure, ‘democracy’ is still spoken of, but only to indicate universal suffrage and respect of the majority rule.

This evolution, far from being a progress towards a more mature society, as is sometimes claimed, undermines the very foundations of our western model of democracy, usually designated as ‘liberal democracy’. As C.B. MacPherson has shown, that model was the result of the articulation between two traditions. [7] The first one is the liberal tradition of the rule of law, separation of powers, and the affirmation of individual freedom; the second one is the democratic tradition of equality and popular sovereignty. No doubt, these two political logics are ultimately irreconcilable; there will always be a tension between the principles of freedom and equality. But, as I argued in The Democratic Paradox, that tension is constitutive of our democratic model, because it provides the space for an agonistic confrontation and guarantees pluralism. [8] Throughout European history, this tension has been negotiated through an ‘agonistic’ struggle between the ‘right’, which favours liberty, and the ‘left’, which emphasizes equality. In recent years, with the hegemony of neoliberalism, the left/right frontier has been blurred and the space has disappeared where that agonistic confrontation between adversaries could take place. A characteristic of our post-democratic conditions is that democratic aspirations can no longer find channels of expression within the traditional political framework. The passion for equality, which, according to Tocqueville, is the democratic passion par excellence, does not find a political terrain where it can be channelled towards emancipatory goals.

It is in such a context that various populist movements have emerged, rejecting post-politics and post-democracy. They claim to give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated by the elites. Regardless of the problematic forms that some of these movements do take, it is important to recognize that they are the expression of legitimate democratic aspirations, which unfortunately are expressed in a xenophobic vocabulary. This possibility for democratic demands to be constructed in a xenophobic way is something that most parties are unable to comprehend due to their essentialist approach. This is why I submit that, without adopting an anti-essentialist discursive approach, it is not possible to grasp the nature of the populist challenge. This challenge requires acknowledging that the ‘people’, as a political category, can be constructed in very different ways and that not all of them are of a progressive orientation. Indeed, in several European countries, the aspiration for recovering the democratic ideals of equality and
popular sovereignty, discarded under post-democracy, has been captured by rightwing populist parties. They have successfully mobilized common affects in constructing a people whose voice calls for a democracy aimed at defending the interests of ‘true nationals’. They construct the people through an ethno-nationalist discourse that excludes immigrants, considered as a threat to national identity and prosperity.

Towards a progressive populism

It is urgent to realize that it is the absence of a narrative offering a different vocabulary for formulating these democratic demands that explains the success of rightwing populism in a growing number of social sectors. What is needed is another narrative embodied in an ensemble of practices providing the discursive inscriptions able to foster other forms of identifications. Disqualifying those parties as ‘extreme-right’ or ‘neo-fascist’ is an easy way to dismiss their demands, since it refuses to acknowledge the democratic dimension of many of them. Attributing their appeal to lack of education or to the influence of atavistic factors is, of course, especially convenient for the forces of the centre. It permits them to avoid recognizing their own responsibility in the emergence of those parties. Their answer is to protect the ‘good democrats’ against the danger of ‘irrational’ passions, by establishing a ‘moral’ frontier so as to exclude the ‘extremists’ from the democratic debate. This demonization of the ‘enemies’ of the bipartisan consensus might be morally comforting, but it is politically disempowering.

Instead of denigrating those demands, the task is to formulate them in a progressive way, defining the adversary as the configuration of forces that strengthen and promote the neoliberal project. The strategy for combatting rightwing populism should consist in promoting a progressive populist movement, a leftwing populism that is receptive to those democratic aspirations, and that through the construction of another people will mobilize common affects towards a defence of equality and social justice. Because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed.

Facing the challenge that the populist moment represents for the future of democracy requires the articulation of a collective will that establishes a synergy between the multiplicity of social movements and political forces whose objective is to recover and deepen democracy. Given that numerous social sectors suffer the effects of financialized capitalism, there is a potential for this collective will to have a transversal character that exceeds the left/right distinction as traditionally configured. Conceived in a progressive way, populism, far from being a perversion of democracy, constitutes in today’s Europe the most adequate political force to defend it.

The main obstacle to such a politics is that most leftwing parties do not understand the crucial role played by common affects in the constitution of political identities and the importance of mobilizing passions in a democratic direction. They are influenced by the view dominant in democratic political theory, according to which passions should be excluded from democratic politics, which should limit itself to rational arguments and deliberative procedures. This is no doubt one of the reasons for liberal democratic hostility to populism, and this is why liberal democrats are unable to answer the challenges posed by the rise of rightwing populist movements. Such movements understand that politics is always partisan and that it requires the creation of a we/they
relation. They are well aware of the need to mobilize affects to construct collective political identities.

I am convinced that, in the next few years, the central axis of the political conflict will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism. It is imperative that progressive sectors understand the importance of involving themselves in that struggle. The best way to fight against those parties is not by accusing them of ‘populism’, condemning their appeal to affects. It is only through the construction of another people, a collective will based on the mobilization of the passions in defence of equality and social justice, that it will be possible to combat the xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism.

In recreating political frontiers, the ‘populist moment’ we are witnessing in Europe points to a ‘return of the political’. A return that may open the way for authoritarian solutions – through regimes that weaken liberal-democratic institutions – but which can also lead to a reaffirmation and deepening of democratic values. Everything will depend on the kind of populism that emerges victorious from the struggle against post-politics and post-democracy.

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Footnotes


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