

THE PLURALISM OF AGONISTIC PLURALISM

Mouffe in discussion with Erman, Dryzek and Knops

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ABSTRACT

The question of political pluralism is an important one, given that liberal democracies must give it its due place without letting it tear apart the social fabric. One of the dominant theories within political philosophy on political pluralism is deliberative democratic theory, which advocates a rational consensus. By insisting on rational conditions for political argument and consensus, it believes that it is possible to both legitimize political power and ensure freedom and equality for all. Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is a critical response to this rationalistic framework. She maintains that instead of enabling political pluralism, deliberative democracy precludes it. In her view, rationality is not some kind of objective parameter, but a hegemonic expression of power. Inspired by Schmitt, Wittgenstein and Derrida, Mouffe argues that political pluralism requires a conflictual consensus, one in which adversaries battle over the conceptions of the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy, i.e. freedom and equality. To see which framework can better accommodate political pluralism, I will be discussing both Mouffe's critique of deliberative democratic theory and deliberative democratic theory's critique of Mouffe. Although Mouffe (necessarily) cannot give a conclusive argument in favour of agonistic pluralism, her deliberative democratic critics do not succeed in dispelling it.

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INTRODUCTION

Are political consensus and pluralism wholly compatible or fundamentally at odds with one another? It was John Rawls who put this question prominently on the political philosopher's agenda, by basing his famous principles of justice on the notion of an 'overlapping consensus'.¹ Rawls contended that all rational members of society would endorse these principles for governing the public sphere, apart from any private interests they may have. By grounding these principles in an overlapping consensus, however, the question arose how this consensus would then exactly come about. It is here where we encounter Habermas and Mouffe, the protagonists of this thesis.

The most elaborate political theory of consensus and political legitimacy is deliberative democracy, championed by Jürgen Habermas.² Deliberative democratic theory revolves around the notion of rational deliberation: if the conditions under which rational citizens deliberate are rational (an "ideal speech situation"³), the outcome will be a rational consensus. While this rational consensus grants political legitimacy on the one hand, the same consensus can again always be challenged rationally on the other. Political legitimacy is not a given and needs to rationally account for itself, thus ensuring space for political pluralism: all can challenge the rational consensus on its procedures and political agenda on the same rational grounds. The

¹ Rawls's original expression of these principles can be found in *A Theory of Justice* (1974): "the first requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, while the second holds that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society" (14/15). According to Rawls, rational citizens would choose these principles for governing society's institutions in the 'original position of equality'. In this original position, "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like" (12). While Rawls first understood this original position to be a "purely hypothetical situation", later in his career he situated it as an 'overlapping consensus', "a consensus in which it [a regulative political conception of justice] is affirmed by the opposing religious, philosophical and moral doctrines likely to thrive over generations in a more or less just constitutional democracy, where the criterion of justice is that political conception itself" (Rawls 1974: 12, Rawls 1987: 1).

² The following outline of the central tenets of Habermasian deliberative democracy is based on Martí (2017).

³ Extensively discussed by Habermas in "Wahrheitstheorien" (1973). In his more recent work, however, he talks about "pragmatic presuppositions", highlighting their non-ideal character. See *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion* (2005).

only thing that cannot be challenged are the rational conditions themselves.⁴ It is precisely this preponderance of rationality that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is a response to. In her view, Rawls and Habermas effectively silence pluralism under the veil of rationality (Mouffe 1999: 745).

Instead of being an impartial parameter, Mouffe maintains that Rawls and Habermas's notions of rationality are exclusionary and self-fulfilling, as they require political argument to be rational: Rawls and Habermas would equate rational with 'liberal' or 'deliberative', thus disqualifying all other political expressions as 'irrational'. Instead of accommodating pluralism within a liberal democratic setup, their respective political theories would preclude it. Mouffe's own political theory, agonistic pluralism, is intended as a pluralist alternative to liberal and deliberative democratic theory. According to Mouffe, we should accept that any kind of societal consensus is always political and necessarily a hegemonic expression of power. Although she thinks this rules out the possibility of achieving a fully inclusive political consensus, she does believe any kind of consensus within the bounds of liberal democracy should be contestable, even on a concept like rationality. Arguing against deliberative democratic theory, Mouffe maintains that political arguments following an established criterion constitute an unwarranted violation of pluralism. Given that there is no intellectual high ground to decide whether an utterance is rationally valid, in principle any contestation goes.

There have been numerous deliberative democratic responses to counter Mouffe's critique, most notably from Eva Erman, John Dryzek and Andrew Knops.⁵ These critics have

⁴ For Habermas's most thorough discussion of rationality, see *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1.: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (1984). Habermas's political theory is much more complex than I can possibly convey in these few sentences. For the purpose of this thesis, I will confine myself to those aspects of his political theory most relevant to Mouffe's critique. A particularly clear and concise presentation of how deliberative democrats' ideal speech conditions should be precisely envisaged, can be found in Seyla Benhabib's *Democracy and Difference* (1996). In the next chapter, I will draw extensively on Benhabib, as Mouffe herself does too.

⁵ See Erman, 'What is wrong with agonistic pluralism?' (2009); Dryzek, 'Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies' (2005); Knops, 'Agonism as Deliberation – On Mouffe's Theory of Democracy' (2007).

not only tried to defend deliberative democratic theory, but have questioned the conceptual soundness of Mouffe's own agonistic pluralism too. Their respective criticisms form the backbone of this thesis. By finding out whether Mouffe's agonistic pluralism withstands the critique of her deliberative democratic opponents, I will try to find an answer to the question whether agonistic pluralism is truly a more pluralist alternative to deliberative democratic theory. Hence the main question of this thesis is as follows:

Can agonistic pluralism better accommodate political pluralism than deliberative democratic theory?

I will argue that it can, *if* we accept Mouffe's conceptual dimension of 'the political' and the concomitant distinction between antagonism and agonism. If we agree with her that any societal consensus is political and that the principles of liberal democracy cannot be subjected to the criterion of rationality, then the kind of rational consensus proposed by the likes of Rawls and Habermas can indeed be said to threaten political pluralism. I will argue that whether we accept Mouffe's conceptual distinctions, however, ultimately is a matter of conviction. Mouffe's political theory is not a rational alternative to deliberative democratic theory in the deliberative democratic sense of the word; it is foremost an attempt to change our understanding of the nature of political pluralism itself.

In chapter 1, I will situate the debate between Habermasian 'consensual' deliberative democratic theory⁶ and Mouffe's 'emancipatory' agonistic pluralism⁷ by giving an overview of the central tenets of both positions. The main question of the first chapter is whether the conceptions of pluralism offered by Habermas and Mouffe are incommensurable. If this proves to be the case, they might be difficult to compare. In chapter 2, however, we will see that Erman,

⁶ Martí (2017) spells out the difference between 'consensual' deliberative democrats on the one hand, and 'plural' deliberative democrats on the other. Habermas falls within the former category.

⁷ 'Emancipatory' agonistic pluralism is a term coined by Fossen (2008), in order to distinguish Mouffe's brand of agonistic pluralism from that of 'perfectionist' agonistic pluralism, most prominently advocated by Owen. See footnote 18.

Dryzek and Knops have attempted to counter Mouffe's agonistic critique or accommodate her agonistic pluralism within deliberative democratic theory. The central question of the second chapter is whether agonistic pluralism can be subsumed under deliberative democratic theory. Although we will see that all three point out conceptual difficulties for Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, they do not succeed in subsuming her agonistic pluralism under deliberative democratic theory; rather, their challenges to the conceptual clarity and coherence of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism constitute a serious test to her political theory. These will therefore be at the heart of chapter 3. The main question this chapter tries to answer is whether Mouffe's agonistic pluralism can be considered conceptually coherent. By buttressing Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism and by understanding that her political commitments do not fundamentally compromise her political theory, we will see that it can.

As we will soon see, Mouffe's pluralism ends up much closer to Habermas's deliberative democratic position despite their initial seeming differences. Although agonistic pluralism makes some conceptual assumptions that deliberative democratic theory does not, both consider pluralism vital to a well-functioning liberal democracy. Mouffe mainly shifts the balance between consensus and pluralism. While Habermas and his followers underline the importance of a rational consensus within a pluralist society, Mouffe argues that any consensus is always exclusionary, suppressing 'difference' and causing violations. Instead of conceiving modern liberal society as one that needs it, Mouffe suggests we would do better to think of political consensus as the outcome of an agonistic struggle over the conceptions of what she calls the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Only then would liberal democracy's innate pluralist character be rightly honoured.

CHAPTER I

HABERMAS AND MOUFFE

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the main points of contention between consensual deliberative democracy and emancipatory agonistic pluralism. First, I will discuss the central tenets of Habermasian deliberative democracy. Second, I will discuss Mouffe's agonistic critique of its premises and goals. The central question of this chapter is as follows: are the conceptions of pluralism offered by deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism incommensurable with one another? Let us turn to Habermas and Mouffe now.

1.1 CONSENSUALIST DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Consensualist deliberative democrats are sometimes called classic or traditional deliberative democrats (Martí 2017: 556). Like other deliberative democrats, they maintain that the “participants in deliberative processes should aim to rationally convince others about the rightness of their beliefs”, which is “the essence of deliberation: a free exchange of arguments to convince others on the basis of reason” (560). What sets consensual deliberative democrats like Habermas apart from plural deliberative democrats, however, is that they “praise the value of political consensus as the aim to which democratic deliberation should ideally aspire” (560). Hence the label ‘consensualist’. Martí even speaks of the conceptual necessity for these kind of deliberative democrats to reach a collective consensus, as the deliberative process continues until rational agreement is found (560). Politically, this amounts to the idea that an agreement is legitimate when “produced by an ideal process of democratic deliberation and unanimously agreed upon by free and equal citizens” (560). We should not take this to mean that the conditions for democratic deliberation should always be ideal for political decisions to be legitimate; instead, these conditions should be perceived as “a regulative ideal” (560). It is

important to notice that consensualist deliberative democracy accordingly “adopts a meta-ethical, if minimal, commitment with some degree of objectivity”, since without any at least partially independent “standards of correctness supported by reasons”, it would be impossible to ascertain that the agreement reached through deliberation were rational (560). In the following, I want to clarify how deliberative democrats envisage the ideal process of democratic deliberation.

In *Democracy and Difference*, Seyla Benhabib, a prominent follower of Habermas, gives a clear and succinct impression of what an ideal process of democratic deliberation for deliberative democrats looks like:

1. Participation in such deliberation is governed by the norms of equality and symmetry; all have the same chance to initiate speech acts, to question, interrogate, and to open debate;
2. All have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation;
3. All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out. There are no *prima facie* rules limiting the agenda or the conversation, nor the identity of the participants, as long as each excluded person or group can justifiably show that they are relevantly affected by the proposed norm under question (Benhabib 1996: 70).

To understand the premises of this ideal process, we first need to grasp the central importance of legitimacy within deliberative democratic theory. For deliberative democrats, the legitimacy of political decisions comes from within, meaning that it comes from the free and equal individuals participating in the process of collective deliberation themselves (Martí 2017: 560). However, legitimacy is needed at a procedural level as well. The collective deliberation of the free and equal citizens can only be ascertained to be indeed legitimate, if the arguments put forward by them are legitimate, i.e. ‘rational’ and ‘free’. This constitutes the heart of what Habermas calls ‘critical reflection’: free and rational political life is only possible on the basis of agreement, which itself needs to be free and rational again (Habermas 1984: 17; Tully 1989:

174). When we look at the ideal conditions for democratic deliberation put forward by Benhabib, we can see how these conditions revolve around political legitimacy. While 1) refers to the free and equal citizens, 2) and 3) are deliberative democratic elaborations of 1): 2) substantive and 3) procedural. Whereas 1) just states that all have the right to participate in deliberation in equal measure, 2) maintains that even if there is some consensus on the topics of conversation, this may be questioned again. Condition 3) goes a step further; it follows that the free and equal citizen may even question the legitimacy of the discourse procedure itself. While 2) empowers citizens to make substantial changes to the topics for deliberation, 3) allows them to question the way in which these topics are discussed at all. These ideal conditions thus ensure both political pluralism, by giving all free and equal citizens the chance to induce substantive and procedural change, as well as a rational consensus, by letting the “unforced force of the better argument” triumph (Habermas 1996: 306).

Although we have a better understanding of the ideal conditions of democratic deliberation now, it is still not clear what exactly qualifies as the better, more rational argument. Since they play such a fundamental role within the deliberative democratic model, this notion merits closer inspection. Habermas believes rationality to be inherent to speech in the form of *validity claims*.⁸ He gives a clear account of what he means by this in his seminal *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Habermas states that

It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that he perform [sic] a speech act that is *right* in respect to the given normative context, so that between him and the hearer an intersubjective relation will come about which is recognized as legitimate; (b) that he makes a *true* statement (or correct existential presuppositions), so that the hearer will accept and share the knowledge of the speaker; and (c) that he expresses *truthfully* his beliefs, intentions, feelings, desires, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to what is said (Habermas 1986: 307, 308).

⁸ The following section is inspired by Tully (1989).

As we can infer from the citation above, a successful speech act needs to be *right* and *true* and the speaker has to express his or her beliefs *truthfully*. When we combine the ideal process of deliberative democratic deliberation with the validity claims for speech acts, the following picture emerges: deliberative democracy is about free and equal citizens deliberating under conditions in which all free and equal citizens can participate, question the agenda and ask for justifications for the discourse procedures. The arguments put forward within this deliberation are further to be evaluated by their fulfilment of validity claims, which Habermas sees as “satisfying the conditions of a rationality that is inherent in communicative action” (Habermas 1984: 397). While we can appreciate the central tenets of the deliberative democratic model at this point, one important question has not yet been addressed: that of the value of consensus. From the idea that ideal conditions and the fulfilment of validity claims are prerequisites for a rational consensus, it still does not follow that such a consensus should be the aim of politics. Habermas, however, maintains that “the telos of reaching understanding is inherent in the concept of speech” (Habermas 1984: 287). In other words, reaching (an) agreement lies within language. The ideal speech conditions would, in that light, be an elaboration of a core rationality already present in speech. Martí further notes that “in the absence of disagreement, politics – and therefore, democracy and much less deliberative democracy – would be unnecessary” (Martí 2017: 559). By giving free and equal citizens the possibility to question the agenda and the discourse procedures, and by judging the weight of arguments on the basis of rational validity claims, deliberative democracy claims to be able to accommodate pluralism, legitimize power and direct liberal democracy towards agreement. If disagreement is the status quo, deliberative democracy offers us a model for reaching rational consensus.

The relative value of agreement and disagreement is of great interest for the discussion between deliberative democrats and pluralistic agonists. While the deliberative democrats’ consensus is informed by the need to arrive at political agreement and legitimacy

notwithstanding disagreement, Mouffe places disagreement in the form of ‘the political’ at the heart of her political theory. Instead of trying to cover up disagreement by envisaging politics as deliberative consensus, we should understand disagreement as the condition that makes liberal democracy possible at all. In the following section, I will first discuss Mouffe’s Schmitt-based analysis of liberal democracy. Following this discussion, I will elaborate on the concept of ‘the political’, which is the conceptual underpinning of Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism. Her analysis of liberal democracy and her Schmitt-inspired distinction between ‘the political’ and politics leads her to conclude that any kind of consensus is inherently ‘hegemonic’, which is contestable by nature due to its political character. We will see that the question of rationally grounded legitimacy lies at the heart of the debate between deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism: can a political consensus be rendered rationally legitimate (as deliberative democrats maintain), or does it always represent some form of hegemonic power, legitimized simply because it ‘is’?

1.2 MOUFFE’S CRITIQUE OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

In order to properly grasp Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy, we have to start from her understanding of liberal democracy.⁹ Mouffe sees this form of political organisation as a “contingent historical articulation” of two traditions, i.e. the liberal and the democratic one (Mouffe 2000: 2, 3). She stresses that the values of individual liberty and human rights, which are two of the central tenets of the liberal tradition, “do not have their origin in the democratic discourse”, which she believes to be contrarily rooted in equality and popular sovereignty (2).

⁹ For a thorough analysis of the historical development of Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, see Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation*, especially Chapter 5: “Agonism and the problem of antagonism: Chantal Mouffe” (2013). For reasons of clarity and conciseness, I will confine myself mostly to Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy here and only flesh out those aspects of agonistic pluralism fundamental to understanding her deliberative democratic critique.

The fact that liberal democracy should be seen as the articulation of two distinct traditions has important implications for Mouffe, since she thinks it leads to a paradox. While “the very legitimacy of liberal democracy is based on the idea of popular sovereignty”, liberal democracy always puts limits on the exercise of the sovereignty of the people (4). According to Mouffe, “the idea that it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty” cannot itself be contested within a liberal democracy (4). She further maintains that the two traditions out of which liberal democracy has emanated are ultimately incompatible and irreconcilable (5). By not acknowledging this tension at the heart of liberal democracy, “‘deliberative democracy’ [...] is unable to grasp the dynamics of modern democratic politics which lies in the confrontation between the two components of the liberal democratic articulation” (8). Instead of searching for an unattainable rational consensus, modern democratic politics should strive for an “‘agonistic confrontation’ between conflicting interpretations of the constitutive liberal democratic values” (9). It is here where her agonistic pluralism takes off.

The conceptual framework informing Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism stems from Carl Schmitt, whose political theory revolved around ‘the political’ and the ‘friend/enemy distinction’. Schmitt held that liberalism cannot properly grasp ‘the political’, which “can only be understood in the context of the friend/enemy grouping” (Schmitt 1996: 26; Mouffe 2005: 11). Mouffe paraphrases Schmitt when she writes ‘the political’ is about the formation of a ‘we’ in opposition to a ‘they’ and “always concerned with collective forms of identification” (11). Since liberal thought is ultimately concerned with the individual, it accordingly cannot grasp “the nature of collective identities” (11). Although Schmitt himself thought that this conceptual incommensurability precluded the possibility of liberal democracy altogether, conversely Mouffe contends that it is precisely through ‘the political’ and the friend/enemy distinction that the merits of liberal democracy become clear (Mouffe 2000: 11). The liberal discourse of

human rights for example constantly challenges “the relations of inclusion-exclusion implied by the political constitution of ‘the people’”, while “it is only thanks to the democratic logics of equivalence that frontiers can be created and a demos established without which no real exercise of rights could be possible” (10). Although her use of the concept of ‘the political’ thus originates from Schmitt, understanding Mouffe’s liberal democratic reworking of it is fundamental to evaluating her proposed agonistic pluralism.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe stresses that we should make a distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’. Still following Schmitt, she writes that

By ‘the political’ I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonisms that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. ‘Politics’, on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’ (101).

While ‘the political’ denotes an ineradicable antagonistic dimension inherent in human relations, Mouffe understands ‘politics’ as the political organization of society. The reason why it is so important for her to make such a distinction is that she wants to argue that antagonism is ineradicably part of a democratic set-up. Antagonism is however a kind of friend/enemy distinction that, although necessary for collective identity formation, undermines the functioning of liberal democracy (13). It is here that Mouffe deviates from Schmitt. Mouffe contends that instead of antagonism, the friend/enemy opposition can also manifest itself within liberal democracy as ‘agonism’, a relation not between enemies but between adversaries (Mouffe 1999: 755). Mouffe sees this category of the adversary as instrumental to modern pluralist democratic politics and places it at the very centre of her understanding of liberal democracy as agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2000: 14). Although antagonism is both ineradicable *from* and detrimental *to* liberal democracy, it becomes compatible with it in the form of agonism. Agonistic adversaries are bound together by their adherence to “the ethico-political

principles of democracy”, but can contest the way in which these principles get their political form (Mouffe 1999: 755). Mouffe moreover stresses that disagreement about the meaning and the implementation of these principles cannot be settled “through deliberation and rational discussion”, hence antagonism will always remain part of the adversarial relation (755). Consequently, consensus is not the rational outcome of ideal deliberation, but the political outcome of a never-ending power struggle between political adversaries: “since [the] ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations, [...] a consensus is bound to be a ‘conflictual consensus’” (756). For Mouffe, any political consensus is always the expression of power of a certain *hegemony*.

To start with, Mouffe believes that any “social objectivity is constituted through acts of power” (752). This has important ramifications, since it implies that “any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show the traces of exclusion that governs its constitution” (752). To clarify what she means by this, she refers to Derrida’s ‘constitutive outside’:

Because every object has inscribed in its very being something other than itself and, as a result, everything is constructed as ‘difference’, its being cannot be conceived as pure ‘presence’ or pure ‘objectivity’. Since the constitutive outside is present within the inside, as its always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent (Mouffe 1994: 1536).

Given the presence of the constitutive outside, it is impossible to establish conditions in which agreement between citizens would be free and rational, since those conditions would always be established through power and exclusion. In other words, there is no objective ‘objectivity’; all identities are based on contingent power relations. Mouffe calls this convergence (“or rather mutual collapse”) between objectivity and power *hegemony* (Mouffe 1999:752, 753). The concept of hegemony directly touches upon the relative merit of consensus and it is important to understand her here. Mouffe is not against political consensus per se, but believes a political consensus “not [...] based on any form of exclusion” to be conceptually impossible, since it is necessarily “the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations” (Mouffe

2000: 32, 49). As “the frontier that it [the political consensus] establishes between what is and what is not legitimate is a political one, [...] it should remain contestable” (49). Accordingly, Mouffe does not see an “unbridgeable gap between power and legitimacy” (Mouffe 1999: 753). Within her theoretical framework, political legitimacy cannot be grounded on rational agreement, nor needs it to be. The hegemonic consensus simply defines what is politically legitimate. Since any social objectivity is always political, however, this consensus is by definition contestable. In contrast, she believes the deliberative rational consensus to be a *depoliticisation* of its innately political character. By presenting rational procedural agreement as the political ideal, deliberative democrats are actually proposing “to find procedures to deal with differences whose objective is actually to make those differences irrelevant and to relegate pluralism to the sphere of the private” (Mouffe 2000: 19). In order to fully grasp Mouffe’s critique on deliberative democratic theory’s notion of rationality, we need to turn to Wittgenstein.

According to Mouffe, “one of the most contentious issues among political theorists in recent years” is whether “liberal democracy should be envisaged as the rational solution to the political question of how to organize human coexistence” (Mouffe 2000: 62). Mouffe believes this question to be at the heart between ‘rational-universalists’, like the early Rawls and Habermas, and contextualists, like herself. While the former supposedly argue that “the aim of political theory is to establish universal truths, valid for all independently of the historico-cultural context”, the latter “deny the availability of a point of view that could be situated outside the practices and the institutions of a given culture and from where universal, ‘context-independent’ judgements could be made” (63). Following Mouffe, Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language shows that concepts cannot possibly have a single determined referent for all users. There are two Wittgensteinian concepts of particular importance to her: ‘language games’ and ‘forms of life’. Against Rawls and Habermas, Mouffe argues that liberal democratic institutions

“must be seen as defining one possible ‘language game’ among others” (64). According to Mouffe, they are hence always context-dependent and do not embody *the* rational solution to human coexistence, which makes it impossible to ground them on universal rationality (64). The fact that the meaning of a concept like rationality is always part of a language game moreover precludes the possibility of finding a universally valid rational justification for liberal democracy itself. Following Mouffe, “liberal democratic principles can only be defended as being constitutive of our form of life [...]” (65).

In addition to showing that neither liberal democratic institutions nor its principles can be justified with reference to some sort of universal rationality, Mouffe thinks Wittgenstein’s concepts of ‘language games’ and ‘forms of life’ serve to criticize deliberative democracy’s distinction between practice and procedure too. Mouffe refers to §241 of the *Philosophical Investigations* when she writes that there need to be many (tacit) “‘agreements in judgements’ in a society before a given set of procedures can work” (68). Since these agreements in judgments are grounded in practices, this would show that “procedures only exist as complex ensembles of practices” (68). Mouffe accordingly believes that the very possibility of allegiance to certain procedures hinges on practices, which constitute certain forms of identity and individuality (68). The upshot of her Wittgensteinian discussion of the relation between practice and procedure is that there cannot be a clear separation between procedural and substantial: procedures presuppose substantial commitments to certain practices, “the acceptance of certain values” (68). Given the importance of identity and practice for our allegiance to procedures, Mouffe concludes that “procedures involve substantial ethical commitments” (69). Democratic procedures are thus not sustained by rationality and deliberation, but through “*identification* with democratic values” (70).

Based on her discussion of ‘language games’ and ‘forms of life’, Mouffe furthermore contends that there is no one best, ‘rational’ way to play the democratic game. Instead, we

should foster “a plurality of forms of being a democratic citizen and [create] institutions that would make it possible to follow the democratic rules in a plurality of ways” (73). Linking her discussion of Wittgenstein with her notions of ‘the political’ and the antagonism/agonism distinction, Mouffe states that

Democratic citizenship can take many forms and such a diversity, far from being a danger for democracy, is in fact its very condition of existence. This will, of course, create conflict and it would be a mistake to expect all those different understandings to coexist without clashing. But this struggle will not be one between ‘enemies’ but among ‘adversaries’, since all participants will recognize the positions of the others in the contest as legitimate ones. Such an understanding of democratic politics, which is precisely what I call ‘agonistic pluralism’, is unthinkable within a rationalistic problematic [sic] which, by necessity, tends to erase diversity (73).

By problematizing the universalist notion of rationality and positing agreement in form of life before agreement in opinion, Wittgenstein thus provides Mouffe with a conceptual apparatus to criticize both deliberative democracy’s core concept of rationality and develop her own political theory of agonistic pluralism.

In summary, we have seen that Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism hinges on the notion of ‘the political’ and its friend/enemy distinction, which Mouffe considers essential to the formation of collective identities and ineradicably ‘present’. By turning antagonism into agonism, the conflict at the heart of liberal democracy can however be rendered democratically productive. Given that all social objectivities are power laden, it is furthermore unwarranted and impossible to use rationality as a criterion for consensus. Based on Derrida’s notion of the constitutive outside, Mouffe redefines the link between rationality and impartiality: rationality is not an impartial parameter for judging speech acts, but an expression of identity-forming contingent power. Moreover, with the use of a conceptual apparatus provided by Wittgenstein, Mouffe argues that the whole deliberative democratic undertaking of trying to ground liberal democracy’s institutions, principles and procedures ‘rationally’, is doomed to fail. Since rationality would always be context dependent and defined by the (irrational) practices in which

it is grounded, she believes it impossible to establish rational procedures; instead, in order for liberal democracy to flourish we should concentrate on the citizens' democratic ethos. The prime task of democratic politics is consequently not the creation of a rational consensus, but "to mobilise [...] passions towards the promotion of democratic designs", for which collective identification plays a key role (Mouffe 1999: 755, 756).

1.3 PLURALISM BETWEEN DELIBERATION AND AGONISM

At this point, we should return to our discussion of the central tenets of consensual deliberative democracy, as we now have Mouffe's agonistic pluralism's critique in full view. Consensualist deliberative democracy emphasized the possibility of rational consensus based on the inherent rationality within speech. The ideal speech conditions can be seen as an extension of this inherent rationality, which ensures that the consensus reached under these conditions is a rational one. That the political consensus reached is rational is so important to deliberative democrats, as political legitimacy rests on democratic deliberation, which can only be ascertained rationally (Habermas 2011: 24). Free and equal citizens can moreover both substantively and procedurally question the deliberation, which, in addition to the innate rationality of speech, legitimizes the reached agreement and renders the consensus rational. Within Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, on the other hand, disagreement is ineradicably present as 'the political'. Mouffe sees 'antagonism' as fundamental to understanding collective identities, while at the same time acknowledging that it endangers the proper workings of liberal democracy. In her view, liberal democracy should hence be directed towards rendering the antagonistic dimension of 'the political' democratically productive by turning antagonism into agonism, with adversaries who acknowledge each other as legitimate political opponents. For Mouffe, the central issue of liberal democracy is accordingly not to reach (hegemonic) consensus, but to create democratic individuals by fostering "identification with democratic

values” (Mouffe 2000: 96).

Although Habermas’s consensualist deliberative democracy and Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism are contrasting theoretical frameworks, pluralism plays a fundamental role in both; deliberative democracy’s ‘ideal deliberative conditions’ are a reply to ‘the fact of pluralism’¹⁰, while within Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism it is an emancipatory force for questioning divisions of inclusion/exclusion. Although Mouffe does not elaborate much on it, it seems that she does not value political pluralism in itself. When she explains how her political theory differs from extreme pluralism, she is explicit about her ethical commitments: “I consider that, despite its claim to be more democratic, such a perspective prevents us from recognizing how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination and should therefore be challenged by a radical democratic politics” (20). That is the reason why Mouffe places such emphasis on the fact that agonists subscribe to the ethico-political principles of ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’. Both deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism thus explicitly endorse the same liberal democratic value of pluralism, but differ in their respective valuations of its relation to ‘conflict’.

For Mouffe, political pluralism within deliberative democratic theory’s ideal speech conditions is conceptually impossible:

By postulating the possibility of [a] public sphere where power and antagonism would have been eliminated and where a rational consensus would have been realized, this model [deliberative democracy] of democratic politics denies the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities (Mouffe 1999: 752).

Since any social objectivity is an expression of power, claiming a rational consensus to be the aim of democratic politics effectively amounts to precluding pluralism. As Mouffe does not believe in innate rationality within speech, what is perceived to be rational would always be the

¹⁰ Notion coined by Rawls in “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus” (1987), pp. 1.

expression of a certain hegemonic power. Rational consensus conceals the fact that such a consensus is always political: “it establishes what is and what is not [politically] legitimate [...] and for that reason it should remain contestable” (Mouffe 2000: 49). By branding it as rational, we “naturalize what should be perceived as a contingent and temporary hegemonic articulation of ‘the people’ through a particular regime of inclusion-exclusion” (49). Mouffe wants to convince us that any consensus is always a political choice, with political ramifications. Only by realizing that inclusion/exclusion in the form of ‘the political’ lies at the heart of human relations can we address relations of subordination inherent to *any* consensus.

In response to Mouffe’s critique, deliberative democrats have generally pursued one of the following strategies: either they question the validity of Mouffe’s premises, i.e. ‘the political’ and its concomitant friend/enemy distinction, or they claim to be able to accommodate Mouffe’s pluralistic worries within a deliberative democratic framework. Habermas himself has pursued the first path. Although he has not (yet) directly responded to Mouffe, in *The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology* he has however addressed Schmitt’s notion of ‘the political’. Habermas seems to think this concept can be appropriated by deliberative democratic theory in an updated version relevant to modern democracy by asking why “*the political* [shouldn’t] find an impersonal embodiment in the normative dimension of a democratic constitution” (Habermas 2011: 21). After an exegesis of its religious roots, he argues that even if we accept a secularized version of ‘the political’, liberal democratic political power always requires democratic legitimacy, the only kind of political legitimacy being left in the modern world (24). Habermas believes he has thus rebuked the challenge of ‘the political’: if state power requires democratic legitimacy, deliberative democracy points the way (24).

Mouffe would certainly disagree. Since she believes ‘the political’ to be ineradicably part of human relations, it would not make sense to her to think of it as finding ‘an impersonal

embodiment' within a democratic constitution. It seems that we have reached an impasse here. Whether we find Mouffe's notion of 'the political' convincing seems to be decided by our political inclinations, as she does not give many 'rational'¹¹ reasons to accept her view. Nor can she, as this would be self-defeating: if 'the political' were defensible by a deliberative democratic kind of rational argument, it could be wholly incorporated within deliberative democratic theory. Since Mouffe's notion of pluralism is moreover defined by her particular analysis of 'the political', it seems that Habermas's and Mouffe's views on pluralism are ultimately incommensurable. Deliberative democrats other than Habermas have nonetheless tried to criticize Mouffe's most fundamental theoretical assumptions deliberatively. By pointing out incongruities within her premises and by underlining the overlap between the political goals of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism, Erman, Dryzek and Knops have sought different ways in which to discredit agonistic pluralism or subsume it under deliberative democratic theory. Whether they have succeeded in doing so, will be the central question of the next chapter.

¹¹ In the deliberative democratic sense of the word as presented in this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC CRITIQUES

In this chapter, I will be discussing the deliberative democratic criticisms of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism by Erman, Dryzek and Knops. As these three authors offer different kinds of criticisms of agonistic pluralism, I will discuss them separately. By understanding how deliberative democrats have criticized Mouffe's agonistic pluralism and by evaluating the strength of their critique, we will get a better view of what is at stake within the deliberation/agonism debate. Each subchapter will have the same outline: first, I will discuss the author's criticism of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, after which I will give a response from Mouffe's agonistic point of view. The central question of this chapter is as follows: can agonistic pluralism be subsumed under deliberative democratic theory?

2.1 NO CONFLICT IN AGONISTIC PLURALISM: EVA ERMAN

In 'What is wrong with agonistic pluralism?' Erman takes aim at Mouffe's idea that ethical disagreements are in principle irreconcilable (Erman 2009: 1040). She believes this *idée fixe* to have important repercussions for what democratic institutions are desirable:

If ethical conflicts can never be eradicated they must be dealt with through certain kinds of devised institutional arrangements. If they are not irreconcilable, we should bet on institutions that implement mechanisms and procedures for promoting cross-cultural dialogue and interethical understanding (1040).

According to Erman, in order to know whether ethical disagreements are really in principle irreconcilable, we would have to investigate "the notion of conflict in democratic theory" (1040). It is Erman's intention to show that "deliberation is constitutive of conflict, where deliberation is defined as speech-acts oriented performatively towards validity-claims" (1041).

This has important implications for Mouffe's notion of antagonism, which Erman believes to become untenable, "because it does not embrace the idea that deliberation is constitutive of conflict" (1045). In order to show how Mouffe's antagonism precludes consensus, Erman hones in on Mouffe's Lacan-inspired notion of a 'common symbolic space', which for Mouffe denotes the difference between antagonism and agonism: antagonists purportedly do not share such a common symbolic space, while agonists do, as 'friendly enemies' who argue over its organization (Mouffe 2000: 13). Erman notes, however, that conflict presupposes common presumptions: "[S]ome kind of consensus is [...] needed to even understand this 'against'" (1046). Since conflict "is dependent on some shared idea of what is at stake", this requires antagonists to share some sort of common symbolic space too. Erman subsequently equates this common symbolic space with deliberation, "speech-acts oriented performatively towards validity claims" (1047).

In other words, it is impossible to speak of conflict without presupposing a shared understanding of what the conflict is about. Mouffe's notion of ineradicable antagonistic conflict can for Erman only be coherent if there is already some kind of understanding between the different parties, which comes about deliberately. Concerning the manner in which antagonism turns into agonism, Erman further wonders whether Mouffe's distinction between antagonism and agonism holds. If some common symbolic framework is presupposed all along, it seems impossible to know when antagonism turns into agonism (1048). Erman concludes that agonistic pluralism requires a common symbolic framework not just "to identify antagonism as such, but also to be able to become adversaries (i.e. legitimate enemies) and to know what it means to comply with some ethico-political principles" (1048, 1049). She contends that Mouffe however seems to suggest that "the transformation from antagonism to agonism is a moral choice that can be neither explained nor grounded" and that the ethico-political principles agonists have to adhere to are to be reached through introspection (1049). Erman believes that

Mouffe holds that agonistic conflicts are *interpersonal*, while the *intrapersonal* structure for moral choices were already there (1049). Against such a Kantian view of autonomy and conflict, Erman points to deliberation.

Since deliberative democratic theory acknowledges “that human interaction involves both an interpersonal and intrapersonal dimension”, we cannot presuppose that identity is a premise of agency (1050). Instead, we should think of identity as an offspring of agency, which “is something that must be achieved through deliberation” (1050). Erman proceeds by defining what she means by agency; she thinks that it is not only “an exercise of (interpersonal) self-determination, but at the same time a cognitive exercise of (intrapersonal) self-interpretation” (1050). She links this deliberative view on agency directly to conflict. From a deliberative democratic point of view, it does not make sense to claim that a conflict is ineradicable, as we could not know beforehand what possible conflicts may arise (1050). We *do* know how conflicts come about, however, i.e. deliberatively: “through an interplay between an interpersonal and intrapersonal dimension, conflicts (*within* and *between* people) both emerge and transform” (1051). Conflicts between adversaries should thus not be seen as fixed, but as transformative and ever changing. What they presuppose is a shared understanding. Here the Habermasian validity claims come in. What is needed for a shared understanding is a shared acquaintance of the reasons for the validity of an utterance (1051). In order to understand those reasons, we have to be able to evaluate their validity. It is in this sense that Habermas’s communicative action “demands interpretations that are *rational*”, according to Erman (1052). She maintains that Habermas henceforth gives a pragmatic account of rationality, and not a metaphysical one, as Mouffe contends.

2.11 AGONISTIC RESPONSE

If Erman is right in maintaining that conflict presupposes consensus, this seems to pose a real problem to Mouffe's conceptual framework, as her analysis of conflict and consensus and her antagonism/agonism distinction would become untenable. There is, however, a problem with Erman's argumentation, which has to do with the fact that she does not make distinctions between different types of consensus. Erman rightly believes that poststructuralists like Mouffe claim that ethical conflicts are by nature irreconcilable, but wrongly infers from this view that Mouffe "regards social consensus as a dangerously utopian idea" (1040). This is not what Mouffe is claiming. In order to understand Mouffe's criticism of consensus, we have to make a distinction between *political* consensus and consensus *per se*. Mouffe does not need to reject Erman's thesis that consensus is needed for conflict, just that a political consensus would be the outcome of a *rational* consensus. It is Mouffe herself, nevertheless, who engenders this confusion. By suggesting that antagonists do not share a common symbolic space, she seems to be suggesting that there is no consensus possible between them. What is lacking in her qualification of a common symbolic space is the political: antagonists do not share a common *political* symbolic space. What sets antagonists apart from agonists, is that agonists hold completely different political values, which may go against the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. While Erman believes that Mouffe cannot intend this, a conflict between antagonists may indeed turn violent (as in a civil war for example), while an agonistic one always presupposes mutual respect for the other as an adversary and adherence to shared ethico-political principles. For antagonism to turn into agonism, the different parties involved need to at least agree on the importance of those ethico-political principles. In other words, agonistic pluralism does presuppose consensus, just like deliberative democratic theory.

The problem of consensus rears its head again, however, when scrutinizing those ethico-political principles. Erman points out that Mouffe is vague on "the contents of these normative

principles, although she specifies *equality* and *liberty* as important ingredients” (1044). Since these normative principles are so important for her antagonism/agonism distinction, it seems reasonable to ask Mouffe to be more specific on how she precisely envisages them. This is of course exactly what she does *not* want to do: Mouffe wants to keep these principles as general and vague as she can, in order to let her agonists do all the substantive work. Moreover, it not only unclear what these principles should look like, but how consensus is reached on them too. At first glance, Mouffe seems to maintain that consensus is needed on these principles, without explaining how antagonists come to adopt them. Deliberative democratic theory appears to be much better equipped to explain such common ground. Erman, for example, goes to great lengths to argue that identity is shaped interpersonally and intrapersonally and that political consensus can only be thought of as emanating from deliberative processes. Mouffe, however, grounds consensus along different lines. Instead of pointing to deliberative practices, she stresses the importance of political identification through collective passions. She believes that we ultimately do not become liberal democrats because of rational argument, but because we identify as such (Mouffe 2000: 96). Consensus on the ethico-political principles should accordingly not be envisaged as the outcome of some rational argument, but as a ‘passionate identification’ with those principles. Moreover, Mouffe does not just think collective passions and collective identification are needed for subjects to become democratic, but also essential to a liberal democracy:

A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions. If this is missing there is the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation among other forms of collective identification, as is the case with identity politics. Too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation. Worse still, the result can be the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility (Mouffe 2000: 104).

Following Mouffe, the consensus needed at the heart of liberal democracy should be based on collective passions and collective identifications, lest democracy turns into an apolitical confrontation between antagonisms. While Erman believes that consensus can only be reached on the basis of deliberative practices, Mouffe argues precisely the opposite. By eliminating “passions from the sphere of the public”, deliberative democrats actually endanger the democratic functioning they are purported to bolster with their deliberative practices (103).

In summary, we can now see that both deliberative democrats and agonistic pluralism presuppose consensus. Erman’s critique that Mouffe is radically against consensus is thus unwarranted. We should make a distinction between two types of consensus within agonistic pluralism however: consensus on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and consensus on the meaning of those principles. While the first consists of agreement on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy through collective passions and collective identification, the second is always necessarily hegemonic for Mouffe, in which a certain conception of these principles is dominant. By making a clear distinction between a concept and its conception, Rawls offers us a conceptual framework to understand the different kinds of consensus Mouffe refers to: while agonists have to agree on the importance of the concepts of liberty and equality, the *conception* of these concepts is always the outcome of a political power struggle, which results in a certain hegemonic conception of the concept.¹² Instead of pointing to a so-called *telos* or reaching understanding inherent in speech, as Habermas and Erman do, Mouffe seems to believe that consensus on the ethico-political principles is attainable through passionate collective identification. This assertion, however, begs the question of how passionate identification exactly leads to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. This question will have to wait until the next chapter. For now, the upshot of our discussion of Erman’s critique on Mouffe is that Mouffe actually does accord an important role to consensus

¹² *A Theory of Justice* (1971), pp. 5/6. Rawls himself would not use the qualification ‘hegemonic’; this is Mouffe’s addition.

within agonistic pluralism and that her reference to identification superficially explains how this consensus comes about.

2.2 DRYZEK AND DEEP DEMOCRACY

In order to get a clear idea of Dryzek's critique of Mouffe and his deliberative alternative, I will draw on Dryzek's article 'Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: *Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia*', in which he directly targets Mouffe. Dryzek wants to argue against agonistic pluralism in general, but against Mouffe in particular "because she explicitly advocates agonism against deliberative democracy in plural societies" (Dryzek 2005: 220). Against agonistic pluralism, he argues for what he calls "a discursive democracy that can handle deep difference" (220). With deep difference, he refers to "deep moral disagreements", the ones that Mouffe says cannot be resolved through deliberation, "committed as it is to rationalistic denial of passion and the pursuit of consensus that in practice both masks and serves power" (220). Dryzek agrees with Mouffe on the idea that turning antagonism into agonism is the central issue for democratic politics in divided societies, but says he disagrees with her agonistic theory on three different grounds (221). First of all, he criticizes Mouffe's proposed "content of critical interchange", which he describes as "energized by core identities", without which passion would be lacking (221). For Dryzek, this is however contradictory to the idea that identities have to be fluid as to make a thorough conversion from antagonism to agonism possible (221). Second, he thinks Mouffe is mistaken to conceptualize deliberation dispassionately. Dryzek believes it to be possible "to formulate an account of discursive democracy that is more contestatory than this image, so more robust in the face of deep difference" (221). Third, he challenges Mouffe's critique of consensus. He thinks that Mouffe "scorns consensus as a cover for power", while consensus is needed in order to make decisions (221). Against Mouffe, Dryzek maintains that we have to differentiate between "the ways

politics can be conducted in different sites” (221). At some sites this might be done agonistically, but this need not be the case for all political sites.

In contrast to Mouffe, Dryzek believes that “[d]eliberative democracy can process contentious issues in a politics of engagement in the public sphere, even if it has problems doing so when it comes to deliberation within the institutions of the state” (223). In order to support this claim, he invokes the notion of ‘discourse’. According to Dryzek, “[A] discourse can be understood as a shared way of making sense of the world embedded in language” (223). For him, this means that “any given discourse will be defined by assumptions, judgments, contentions, dispositions, and capabilities, which enables “subscribers to a given discourse to recognize and convert sensory inputs into coherent accounts of situations” (223). Subsequently, “these accounts can then be shared in an intersubjectively meaningful fashion” (223). As examples of such discourses, he lists ‘market liberalism’ and ‘sustainable development’. He puts so much emphasis on these discourses because he believes that the “[T]he content of collective decisions depends strongly (but not exclusively) on the relative weight of competing discourses in a domain” (223). From the above, we can infer that Dryzek has a different notion of discourse than Foucault. He believes them to be less totalizing and constraining, as these discourses can be said to be democratic “to the degree they are under dispersed influence of competent actors, as opposed to manipulation by propagandists, spin doctors, and corporate advisers” (224). Furthermore, he thinks that “discourses must be amenable to reflection” and that the required communication in doing so “is deliberation not agonism because it is oriented to persuasion rather than conversion, and it retains some connection (however loose) to collective decision” (224).

Against Mouffe’s portrayal of deliberation, Dryzek maintains that “the engagement of discourses can accommodate many kinds of communication beyond reasoned argument, including rhetoric, testimony, performance, gossip, and jokes” (224). He adds, however, that

communication must fulfil three separate conditions in order to enable intersubjective understanding, which are very much reminiscent of the Habermassian validity claims. First of all, communication has to be capable of inducing reflection. As we have seen in the above, discourses are malleable through reflection for Dryzek. Communication accordingly has to cater to such reflection. Second, it has to be non-coercive. Although he does not explicitly name them, Dryzek seems to allude to the ‘free and equal’ citizens here. He appears to be claiming that intersubjective understanding is only possible when subjects understand one another on non-coercive grounds. Third, Dryzek thinks that communication has to be “capable of linking the particular experience of an individual or group with some general point or principle” (224). He believes this third requirement to be of particular importance concerning identity politics. He holds that “[i]dentities are bound up with discourses” and that the central question of democratic politics is how “reflective engagement across discourses” can construct relationships between different groups in society (225).

2.22 AGONISTIC RESPONSE

Before discussing Dryzek’s notion of discourse and his communicative conditions for intersubjective understanding, I will address the different criticisms he levels at Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism first. As we have seen, Dryzek believes Mouffe’s critical interchange “to be energized by core identities”, without which passion would be missing. Dryzek is however misrepresenting Mouffe here. She does not endorse (collective) passions per se, but deems a passionate identification with the principles of the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy to be necessary for it to flourish at all. The denominator of ‘core identities’ is furthermore a misnomer for the way in which Mouffe thinks of identity formation. Identities for Mouffe precisely do not contain some kind of core, but are purely contingent, as we have seen in the first chapter. Instead of being static, identities are malleable by nature. When the

rapport changes between two different groups, their identities change accordingly. This is precisely what happens when antagonism turns into agonism. What this agonistic identity precisely entails, is up for political contestation however. That is why Mouffe is so wary of political consensus. She does not “scorn consensus as a cover for power”, as Dryzek maintains, but simply believes that any political consensus is always the expression of a hegemonic power. This does not mean that Mouffe believes there should be no consensus, quite the contrary. Since no consensus on the conception of the ethico-political principles can be fully inclusionary, however, she stresses the importance of being able to contest any kind of consensus, including deliberative democracy’s ideal speech conditions and validity claims.

Dryzek’s most important critique of pluralistic agonism lies however with ‘deep difference’. If Dryzek is right that deliberative democracy can deal with divisive issues, such as profound ethical differences, this would undermine Mouffe’s agonistic critique of deliberative democracy and diminish its allure significantly. Yet, when carefully analysing Dryzek’s position, it shows that his deliberative democratic model simply leads to a deliberative kind of pluralism, which might render differences democratically productive, but does not explain how it processes deep difference, for which Mouffe precisely criticizes it.¹³ Returning to Dryzek’s ‘competing discourses’, we see that the examples Dryzek gives in order to describe what he means by discourse are ‘market liberalism’ and ‘sustainable development’, of which the former can be said to be divisive, but the latter certainly not. They are in any case clearly not deep regarding the conception of the central tenets of liberal democracy, which is agonistic pluralism’s focal point. By further claiming that the “provisional outcomes” of competing discourses can be said to be democratic to the extent “they are under dispersed influence of competent actors”, he reiterates a deliberative view on pluralism: discourses may run rampant

¹³ Mouffe thinks that the “main forms of liberal pluralism” suppress difference with their insistence on rationality and deliberation: “[it] proceeds to find procedures to deal with differences the object of which is actually to make those differences irrelevant [...]” (Mouffe 1995: 1535).

as long as they are democratically kept in check by these competent actors, although it remains vague in what way these actors would exactly have to be competent (224). He further does not explain why these competent actors precisely render the provisional outcome of discourse struggles democratically legitimate. The same goes for the three criteria he mentions for securing intersubjective understanding. It is unclear why precisely these three criteria form a prerequisite to such understanding. Reflection-inducing communication in any case does not seem an obvious requirement. A similar vagueness surrounds the criteria of non-coerciveness and the capability of linking the individual experience to that of the group. Dryzek may well consider these as ideal criteria for understanding, but it is by no means clear that they are required as such. His criteria ultimately seem not so much directed towards intersubjective understanding, as to ensure the ideal conditions for rational deliberation. While these criteria might serve as guidelines for securing common ground between disparate groups in society, presenting them as criteria for intersubjective understanding seems to be an overstatement, at least from an agonistic perspective.

Based on our discussion of Dryzek's criticism of Mouffe, we have to conclude that his critique is wanting. By misrepresenting the central tenets of agonistic pluralism as well as being unclear about his deliberative democratic alternative, his argument does not dispel emancipatory agonistic pluralism's reservations about deliberative democratic theory. Moreover, after reading 'Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies', we still do not know whether deliberative democracy can process the kind of deep political difference Mouffe is concerned about.¹⁴ In the following section we will therefore turn to Andrew Knops. He

¹⁴ This is a delicate question for Mouffe's agonistic pluralism too. While conceptually speaking her agonistic pluralism may be able to account for deep difference, it is not clear how it can *institutionally*. Mouffe does not say much about the way in which her agonistic concepts translate into an institutional framework for liberal democracy. See footnote 21.

believes that Mouffe makes unwarranted claims and that her agonistic pluralism can be subsumed under deliberative democratic theory.

2.3 DELIBERATIVE AGONISTIC PLURALISM? ANDREW KNOPS

Like Erman and Dryzek, Knops criticizes Mouffe head-on. In his article ‘Debate: Agonism as Deliberation – On Mouffe’s Theory of Democracy’ he argues that Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism is not at all at odds with deliberative democratic theory. Before delving into the reasons why, he first wants to make a general point about Mouffe’s notion of ‘the political’. According to Knops, Mouffe’s universal characterization of ‘the political’ is a universal claim, which she moreover defends “by giving reasons” (Knops 2007: 115). Knops maintains that this shows that Mouffe actually does believe that it is possible “to establish such a universal model of politics through rational argument” (116). Since this is precisely what she criticizes deliberative democrats for, she would hereby undermine her own critique: Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, just like deliberative democracy, seeks “rational acceptance” (116). After having made this preliminary point, Knops arrives at the heart of his critique, which is centred on consensus. Like Erman, he wants to show that agonistic pluralism relies on consensus. He will pursue however a different path in trying to prove so. Knops hones in on the requirements of agonists concerning the ethico-political principles they have to subscribe to. Following Knops, the kind of consensus Mouffe requires is not only vague, but favours a deliberative democratic kind of deliberation (117).

Since Mouffe does not endorse some extreme pluralism but requires the ethico-political principles to warrant “respect for belief and opposition to subordination”, Knops believes she implicitly endorses an “open fair exchange of reasons between equals”, which is precisely what deliberative democrats stand for (117). Moreover, if Mouffe is looking for a consensus that is not exclusionary in any sense, he finds it difficult to see how this could be established without

a rational discussion (117). This last point is of crucial importance to Knops's argument. If Mouffe's democratic theory requires the possibility of a rational consensus "on the substance or outputs" of democratic exchange, then agonistic pluralism is not substantially different from deliberative democracy and a rational consensus would then be just as much part of agonistic pluralism as it is of deliberative democracy (117). He accordingly concludes that "Mouffe's own agonistic alternative to deliberative democracy, designed to counter the impossibility of rational consensus, is itself reliant on that very notion" (118). After having thus established that a rational consensus underlies Mouffe's consensus on the ethico-political principles, he also wants to show that Mouffe's critique does not prove a rational consensus to be conceptually impossible (118). He will do so by scrutinizing Mouffe's discussion of Wittgenstein and Derrida.

Regarding Wittgenstein, Knops argues that "Habermas sees 'normal' language use as taking place against a backdrop of conventionally shared meanings or understandings" and that it is "only when this assumption breaks down, when the response differs from what was expected, that deliberation is required" (Knops 2007: 122). According to Knops, "[t]he process that Habermas calls 'deliberation' and Wittgenstein calls 'explanation'", would therefore be basically the same (122). With reference to Tully, Knops qualifies Wittgenstein's concept of language as "inherently dialogical" (122). His description of what according to a Wittgensteinian theory of language would happen when two interlocutors have a different view of the use of language is as follows:

This leads to the use of a word eliciting a response that was not expected – a rejection. The rejection requires the reappraisal and refinement of our understanding of the word, based on the new information given to us about it by the unexpected reaction. Based on this adjusted understanding we use word again to try to achieve our goal. Through this process of trial and error we build up a shared vocabulary, restoring the assumption that we use these words in the same way, and in the process we understand the other's form of life that gave rise to their unexpected use. The very process of developing that understanding is the process of deliberation. Indeed, in this sense deliberation – explanation or the

clarification of usage across different forms of life – can itself be seen as the process of development of language use (122).

Knops adds that our development of a shared understanding will always be partial in this way, that it may always be fallible. Nevertheless, “the process of explanation, or understanding through deliberation” makes it possible for us to understand each other in language, which can be seen as “an understanding developed through reason, though partial, fallible and grounded in practice” (123). He accordingly concludes that deliberative democracy and a Wittgensteinian theory of language are compatible with one another and reprimands Mouffe for making two errors that made her think that it is not. First, Mouffe mistakenly assumes that “because language is ultimately grounded in practice, rather than reason, it cannot be used to reach a rational consensus” (123). Knops however argues that, when understanding deliberative theories as “mobilising a form of rationality aimed at intersubjective explanation and mutual understanding, we can see that the two accounts are perfectly compatible” (123). Second, Mouffe would be wrong to think that the whole variety of language games “rule out any possibility of reasoned communication” (123). Following Knops, we need to understand that “Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘forms of life’ refers to regularities in practice that underpin language. While these do not take the form of prescriptive rules, they can still be *discovered* through language and the process of explanation” (123). In other words, if Knops is right, instead of being at odds with it, deliberation is an integral part of Wittgenstein’s theory of language.

Furthermore, Knops believes that Derrida’s constitutive other does not preclude the possibility of rational consensus either. Based on his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s ‘explanation’ as ‘deliberation’, he believes there is, conceptually speaking, no reason to presume that a rational consensus could be attained; the only way to find out is through argument (124). Moreover, Knops stresses that it is precisely through the process of deliberation

that we become more aware of difference: “[w]ithout this attempt, we may never become aware of these different forms of meaning, or their associated forms of life” (124). In addition, he highlights the fact that deliberative democracy is very much aware of the fallible nature of the rationally reached consensus, which leaves it “open to question” (124). According to Knops, this safeguards deliberative democracy’s rational consensus against Mouffe’s charge of hegemony.

2.32 AGONISTIC RESPONSE

As we have seen above, Knops’s critique revolves around the notion of rational consensus. By demonstrating that Mouffe’s portrayal of the political and her ethico-political principles require such a consensus, he claims to have refuted agonistic pluralism’s critique of deliberative democracy and to have shown that “the two processes of deliberative and agonistic democracy – one grounded in critical theory and the other in postmodernism, are in fact *mutually dependent* aspects of a solution to the same problem” (125). As Knops himself does too, I will discuss his analysis of ‘the political’ and the consensus on ethico-political principles separately. Regarding the former, he maintains that Mouffe gives reasons for this universal claim and thus implicitly believes it is possible to establish her theory through rational argument. Interestingly enough though, Mouffe actually gives very few reasons to accept her dimension of ‘the political’, if any at all. She simply says that deliberative democracy cannot properly understand democracy’s predicament as it has neglected it. The same goes for the concomitant antagonism/agonism distinction: Mouffe gives very few ‘rational’¹⁵ reasons to accept this distinction. Although her critique of deliberative democratic theory’s rationality paves the way for accepting her conceptual framework, it does not amount to a fully developed argument for her conceptual

¹⁵ In a deliberative democratic sense as presented in this thesis.

distinctions by itself. Thus she does not try to convince us of her fundamental values through conventional rational argument, but makes a more radical attempt to change our perspective on liberal democracy as a whole. By showing that the rationalistic framework of deliberative democratic theory cannot account for democracy's challenges, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism purportedly offers us a better understanding of the nature of these challenges. Instead of proving that Mouffe thinks that the fundamental values of her political framework can be grounded in rational argument, her discussion of 'the political' conversely seems to show that she indeed thinks this is not possible. Having thus discredited Knops's criticism of Mouffe's notion of 'the political', I will turn to his critique on the consensus on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy.

Knops rightly points out that Mouffe requires *substantive* commitments from agonists besides their commitment to the ethico-political principles of 'liberty' and 'equality'. The requirement of consensus on the ethico-political principles so that relations of subordination and domination can be challenged is however a *sine qua non* of antagonism-turned-agonism (Mouffe 2000: 20). What sets the agonistic relation apart from the antagonistic one is precisely this respect for the other as someone who subscribes to the same political principles. Relations of subordination or domination should be abolished as much as possible within an agonistic framework, lest it collapses into antagonism again, which, according to Mouffe, is always present anyway as 'the political'. Conversely, although she does not make this very explicit, this also implies that those who do not subscribe to these principles can legitimately be considered enemies. Thus, when Mouffe writes that agonists have respect for each other's beliefs and the right to defend them, this does not mean that any kind of belief is defensible whatsoever. Only the beliefs that fit in with the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality merit agonistic respect. The kind of consensus needed is therefore not rational per se, not based on an "open fair exchange of reasons between equals" (Knops 2007: 117). According to

Mouffe, subscribing to the political values of liberty and equality is ultimately a matter of identification and conviction.

What may have led Knops to think that a rational consensus is inescapable for Mouffe's political project, is his assertion that Mouffe is trying to ground a consensus that is "not [...] biased against a particular group in society" (117). He conflates two different kinds of consensus here, however: the agreement on the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality and the hegemonic consensus on their respective conceptions. Knops seems to believe that Mouffe wants to make sure that this backdrop agreement between antagonists does not exclude anyone, but at that point exclusion constitutes for Mouffe the very possibility of (consensual) inclusion. Exclusion becomes a pressing issue for Mouffe only after this first agreement on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. She accordingly defines the ensuing agonistic consensus as 'conflictual': "[the] ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations [...]" (103). Mouffe adds to this that agonistic confrontation is "ideally staged around the diverse conceptions of citizenship which correspond to the different interpretations of the ethico-political principles: liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical-democratic, and so on" (104). Knops's criticism falls flat if rational consensus is not a prerequisite for consensus on the ethico-political principles, which, as I have argued, is not the case.

While his critique on Mouffe's notion of consensus thus does not succeed, nor does his Wittgensteinian defence of deliberative democratic theory. Knops's assertion that deliberation is only required when 'normal' understanding breaks down seems to radically undermine the whole *raison d'être* of deliberative democratic theory, lest Knops think that we would all have the same ideas if we would just properly understand each other. In addition, it seems highly doubtful whether Wittgenstein would agree that giving an explanation (or 'deliberation', in Knops's words) would suffice for creating a shared vocabulary and understanding each other's

form of life.¹⁶ It seems that Knops does not sufficiently heed Wittgenstein's assertion here that agreement in opinion or judgement precedes agreement in language, which his Wittgensteinian account of deliberative democratic theory does not account for. His two criticisms of Mouffe's interpretation of Wittgenstein are equally flawed. First, Mouffe specifically criticizes a universalist rational consensus, which from a Wittgensteinian perspective would indeed be problematic. Unless there would only be a single form of life, 'rationality' will likely have many different meanings, depending on the form of life. While a universal rational consensus may theoretically not be wholly excluded, it is highly unlikely from a Wittgensteinian perspective, given rationality's dependence on practice and context. Second, Knops's claim that it would be possible from a Wittgensteinian perspective to discover forms of life through explanation is dubious. Again, if understanding a practice underlies understanding, it is questionable whether we can truly understand one another just through language. Language may help, but is not enough by itself. Given that Knops's Wittgensteinian defence of deliberation proves to be flawed, his critique of Mouffe's use of Derrida's concept of the 'constitutive other' fails too. If deliberation alone cannot bridge the gap between different forms of life, a deliberatively reached rational consensus cannot be guaranteed to respect 'difference', as it would not be fully able to recognize it.

2.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have analysed and evaluated Erman, Dryzek and Knops's critiques of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. Though offering varying critiques, we have seen that they all hold that

¹⁶ In "Wittgenstein and the Utility of Disagreement" (2016), Pearson notes the difficulty of defining Wittgenstein's notion of 'understanding' as developed in *Philosophical Investigations*. He however maintains that it could at least be minimally defined as "the state of being able, or the process of coming to be able, to legitimately say "now I can go on." This means being able to employ and engage with the rules involved in a particular practice" (4).

deliberative democratic theory has a reply to agonistic pluralism's objections. In order to show this to be the case, they critiqued the underlying conceptual premises of agonistic pluralism and offered an interpretation of deliberative democratic theory that is kinder to agonistic pluralism's preoccupations. These two argumentative strategies are interlinked: if agonistic pluralism's conceptual premises are flawed, it cannot be considered a viable alternative to deliberative democratic theory. Deliberative democrats might still have to make some changes to their deliberative framework, but that would then settle the debate. We have seen, however, that the deliberative democratic critique of agonistic pluralism's conceptual premises does not wholly succeed and that Erman, Dryzek and Knops accordingly have not shown that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism can be subsumed under deliberative democratic theory.

While Erman is right to point out that the antagonistic relationship requires a common symbolic framework, this does not prove that it requires a deliberative kind of consensus. Instead of deliberation, Mouffe points to identification: she believes people ultimately become liberal democrats through conversion, not argument. Regarding Dryzek, we have seen that he misunderstands some of the central tenets of agonistic pluralism. Mouffe, for example, does not scorn consensus for power, nor believes identities to be fixed. Moreover, while Dryzek maintains that his deliberative democratic theory can process 'deep difference', he does not make clear how it can. Dryzek needs to be more specific regarding his competent actors and specify in what way the three conditions for intersubjective understanding are precisely fundamental to successful communication. Concerning Knops, we have seen how he conflates the agreement between antagonists on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and the conflictual consensus of agonists over their conception. While the agreement between antagonists is necessarily based on exclusion, Mouffe requires the consensus between agonists to be as inclusive as possible (yet still necessarily exclusive). Exclusion and subordination only become problematic on the agonistic level, not the antagonistic one. Moreover, his

Wittgensteinian defence of deliberative democratic theory proved to be flawed, just as his appropriation of Derrida's 'constitutive other'.

Although the deliberative democratic critique offered by Erman, Dryzek and Knops thus does not fully deliver on its promise, it does point out two major themes that have been underdeveloped within Mouffe's conceptual framework. First, there is the question of how antagonists come to accept the same ethico-political principles. If this is based on passionate identification with those principles, what is the nature of this passionate identification exactly? Or does Mouffe simply accept these principles as a given and is her conceptual framework only valid for places that have already embraced her ethico-political principles of liberal democracy? These questions touch upon one of Mouffe's most important conceptual distinctions, that of antagonists and agonists. Without a clear account of democratic identification, it is hard to envisage how antagonists come to embrace the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Second, there is the question of the nature of Mouffe's pluralism. Although she writes that any political consensus will contain traces of violence and subordination, she holds, at the same time, that her agonistic pluralism is born out of the wish to combat these political wrongdoings. Does Mouffe differentiate between the relative merits of different hegemonic powers? If so, can she then still defend the idea that the conception of the concepts of 'liberty' and 'equality' are up for grabs within an agonistic power struggle, or is the range of political plurality she actually endorses much more limited than she likes to portray?

CHAPTER 3

IDENTIFICATION AND EMANCIPATION

After having established the strengths and the weaknesses of the deliberative democratic critique on Mouffe in the last chapter, there are still two major challenges that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism from a deliberative democratic perspective needs to address. First, Mouffe does not elaborate enough on the way in which antagonists become agonists, which does seem to be of major relevance for agonistic pluralism to be considered a viable alternative to deliberative democratic theory. Her agonistic pluralism appears to be confined to political entities that have already embraced liberal democracy, hence greatly limiting the scope of her political project. I will try to expand Mouffe's notion of identification by linking it to an article by Aletta Norval called 'Democratic Identification: A Wittgensteinian Approach'. Both Mouffe and Norval draw on Wittgenstein for their respective analysis of democratic identification. However, whereas Mouffe mainly employs Wittgenstein's philosophy to attack the deliberative democrat's notion of rationality, Norval draws on Wittgenstein's notions of 'aspect dawning' and 'continuous aspect perception' in order to explain how a democratic political grammar comes about. I believe Norval's political interpretation of these Wittgensteinian notions can help us understand how antagonists become agonists within Mouffe's political framework.

Second, there is the question of Mouffe's substantive commitments. She presents her theory as a pluralist alternative to deliberative democratic theory, but at the same time delimits the democratic playing field by demanding that all agonists adhere to the ethico-political principles of freedom and equality for all. This raises questions concerning the political agenda informing her political theory. By discussing two different articles by Acampora and Fossen, we will elucidate the values underpinning Mouffe's pluralism. The central question of this chapter is as follows: is Mouffe's agonistic pluralism conceptually coherent?

3.1 IDENTIFYING AS A LIBERAL DEMOCRAT

The 1995 article ‘Democratic Politics and the Question of Identity’ is one of Mouffe’s clearest works on political identification. According to Mouffe, the main difficulty concerning democratic politics from the viewpoint of political identity is “[h]ow to conceptualize our identities as individuals and as citizens in a way that does not sacrifice one to the other” (Mouffe 1995: 34). She makes explicit that her treatment of this question should be located within a modern democratic political framework, which “postulates certain ethico-political principles that constitute its principles of legitimacy: liberty and equality for all” (41). Since the legitimacy of the liberal democratic state rests on its adherence to these principles, our political identity overrides our other identities (41). This leads Mouffe to the conclusion that “we need a conception of citizenship as political identity that consists of the identification with the political principles of modern democracy and commitment to defend its key institutions” (41). She does not explain how this identification comes about in the first place; Mouffe just wants to argue that we can only understand modern liberal democracy properly, if we think of citizenship in terms of identification with the political principles of liberal democracy. This seems to be a real weakness in her political theory, however. While her political framework rests on the transformation from antagonism into agonism, she does not properly argue how antagonists come to accept the same ethico-political principles. In the last chapter, we saw how Erman criticizes her on this point, by branding the change from antagonist to agonist “a moral choice that can be neither explained nor grounded” (Erman 2009: 1049).

In ‘Democratic Identification: A Wittgensteinian Approach’, Aletta Norval offers an analysis of democratic identification that supplements Mouffe’s discussion of democratic identification very well and in ways Norval herself does not make explicit. Like Mouffe, Norval makes use of Wittgenstein’s language philosophy. She does not do so to criticize value-neutral

rationality, however, but to show how we should understand democratic identification. Norval points out that “[t]he absence of an account of the moments in which we assume democratic subjectivity in deliberative and post-structuralist conceptions of democracy leaves us unable to think through how it is that we become democrats and make democratic subjectivity ours” (Norval 2006: 230). In order to understand how the democratic subject comes about and what practices are needed to sustain democratic identification, Norval believes that we should consider the role of ‘political grammars’, “those horizons delimiting what is possible in any given context” (231). A political grammar dictates “what may count as possible descriptions of how things are” (231). Within this context, Norval gives the example of ‘liberty’. Liberty could be defined as a human-growth theory or an unlimited self-determination theory for example. Within the former a concept like ‘equality of opportunity’ will take centre stage, whereas in the latter principles of non-interference will be prevailing (232). Norval contends that we get a better understanding of the way in which political grammars change if we consider the Wittgensteinian concepts of ‘aspect dawning’ and ‘continuous aspect perception’.

‘Continuous aspect perception’ denotes the way in which we usually think of the world, “where words are used as a simple perceptual report” (235). It refers to mental pictures of the world that have become so natural to us that we do not recognize them as mental pictures any longer. If we have always thought of ‘liberty’ as being about human-growth for example, it might have never occurred to us that liberty could also be thought of as an unlimited self-determination theory. Norval writes that “[p]olitically, this is analogous to a situation of hegemony in which we just treat matter in a certain way, where we do not weigh up different alternatives and interpret our practices but simply take them for granted” (235). ‘Aspect dawning’, on the other hand, indicates the moment “when one realizes that a new kind of characterization of an object or situation may be given, and we see it in those terms [...]” (235). Norval thinks aspect dawning is especially pertinent to the way political grammars change as it

explains how new political grammars come about, while at the same time highlighting the continuity between them. Aspect dawning does not suggest radical change between political grammars, but “is closely connected to providing a surview, that is to say, by putting objects, words, or rules in relation to other objects, words, or rules, they are situated in a different context in which sense is made of them” (236). According to Norval, the dynamics between continuous aspect perception and aspect dawning give a much better account of political subjectivity than historicist or voluntarist accounts, by highlighting the interplay between continuity and discontinuity: “[t]hings simply are no longer the same; our way of looking at things has changed. But [...] this is not a break that denies all that has gone before. To the contrary, it is dependent upon what has gone before, but that before is also rearranged – resignified – in important respects” (238).

Having thus set the conceptual framework for understanding changes in political grammars, Norval brings up two points that are of particular interest to our discussion of Mouffe’s antagonism/agonism distinction. First of all, she maintains that becoming a democratic subject entails being gripped by a certain picture, an ‘identification-as’. Against deliberative democratic theory, Norval believes this ‘identification-as’ “is the embodied act of a subject passionately involved in an activity that structures her political life and participation in a certain way” (241). This quote could have been easily from Mouffe, who puts the passions and identification at the forefront of her political theory, too. In her chapter on Wittgenstein in *The Democratic Paradox*, she writes for example that “[t]he creation of democratic forms of individuality is a question of *identification* with democratic values, and this is a complex process that takes place through a manifold of practices, discourses and language-games” (Mouffe 2000: 70). According to Mouffe, “democracy does not require a theory of truth and notions like unconditionality and universal validity but a manifold of practices and pragmatic moves aiming at persuading people to broaden the range of their commitments to others [...]”

(65, 66). While she underscores the importance of identification and democratic practices for democracy, Mouffe does not offer many pointers to understand how a democratic grammar comes about. It is here that Norval's political appropriation of Wittgensteinian aspect dawning comes in. Aspect dawning not only implies describing pictures anew, but also seeing pictures as pictures. Politically speaking, this translates to the idea that "being aware of a political grammar as a grammar is indicative of an awareness of multiplicity, and recognizing that things can never be quite the same again" (Norval 2006: 242). Norval believes that this awareness of multiplicity could foster a more open political community (242). This is precisely what Mouffe expects of the transition from antagonism into agonism: by acknowledging the legitimacy of other political views and being able to relativize their own, antagonists become able to agree on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. While both Mouffe and Norval stress the importance of practices for democratic identification, Norval makes us understand how these practices induce aspect change and the development of a democratic grammar. The concept of aspect dawning offers a theoretical scaffolding as to how democratic practices might contribute in creating the conditions in which antagonists come to embrace the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and hence turn into agonists.¹⁷ Yet, as both Norval and Mouffe attest, citizens do not become democrats once and for all. Aspect dawning in the form of participation within democratic practices is constantly needed in order to steer the passionate 'identification-as' towards democratic political grammars (248).

I believe Norval's discussion of political grammars in terms of aspect dawning and aspect change fills in a conceptual lacunae in Mouffe's antagonism/agonism discussion.

¹⁷As an illustration of such a democratizing practice, Norval describes her experience of standing in line to vote in South-Africa after apartheid: "[T]he atmosphere at polling stations was nothing short of festive. There was no shortage of radios and cassette players providing music and stalls selling refreshments, contributing to the festive atmosphere. Most notable of all, though, was the interaction between those queuing. Both black and white, living and working in what were the highly unequal conditions of the "white" suburbs, engaged in conversation and shared an experience of enormous significance – as equal participants. This participation signalled the public assumption of democratic subjectivity" (Norval 2006: 229, 230).

Whereas Mouffe does not offer a satisfying answer to the question how antagonists come to embrace the same ethico-political principles except for alluding to the necessity of the friend/enemy distinction and passionate democratic identification, Norval offers us a conceptual model in order to explain how this democratic identification could possibly lead to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Participation in democratic practices may induce aspect change, which in turn can change the political grammar. By learning to relativize one's own political position and acknowledging the legitimacy of that of others, the way is paved for antagonistic support for the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy, i.e. freedom and equality.

3.2 EMANCIPATORY AGONISTIC PLURALISM

While Norval thus offers a conceptual framework to buttress Mouffe's antagonism/agonism distinction, Mouffe's substantive commitments regarding pluralism in a modern liberal society might prove more challenging to be rendered coherent. On the one hand, Mouffe criticizes deliberative democratic theory for implicitly and unwarrantedly compromising political pluralism. On the other, Mouffe seems to be more rigid than deliberative democrats as to what beliefs are permissible within a liberal democracy. Agonists are distinguished from antagonists by their adherence to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy, seemingly implying as well that all who do not adhere to these principles can be said to be legitimate enemies. For a political theory that originated as an answer to the pluralist shortcomings of deliberative democratic theory, this appears to be at least somewhat contradictory. In order to shine light on the nature of Mouffe's pluralism, I will first discuss an article by Acampora called 'Demos Agonistes Redux', in which she gives a Nietzschean critique of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. Acampora argues that if Mouffe were truly committed to agonism and democracy, she would have to admit that even the ethico-political principles underlying a political community should

be at stake in the agonistic struggle. Why she does not want to do this becomes clear in Fossen's article 'Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism: Perfection and Emancipation', in which he brands Mouffe's agonistic pluralism 'emancipatory'. According to Fossen, Mouffe values pluralism as it promulgates 'difference' and the possibility for contestation against harm and injustice. I will conclude by discussing to what extent Acampora and Fossen's critiques compromise Mouffe's political framework.

In 'Demos Agonistes Redux', Acampora gives a Nietzschean analysis of the ethico-political principles of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. Although staying true to the original Nietzschean concept does not seem to be one of Mouffe's main worries, Acampora argues that even if Mouffe entertains her own notion of agonism, she runs into a Nietzschean critique regarding the nature of democracy. The most pregnant question Acampora puts forward is why the desirability of democratic values should be immune to critique, as is the case with Mouffe's ethico-political principles (Acampora 2003: 384). We have seen before that adherence to the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality is a prerequisite for all agonists within Mouffe's political framework. Besides pointing out that this leads to undemocratic exclusion, Acampora underscores that these principles delimit what the agonistic struggle can be about as well, i.e. liberty and equality: "Mouffe's adversaries will differ only in terms of the content they give to those liberal democratic principles [...] and hence *the point of the contest will always and only be to give meaning to those two values*" (385). Damningly for Mouffe, Acampora believes this implies that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism does not substantially differ from the political frameworks offered by Rawls and Habermas. Just like Rawls and Habermas, Mouffe's political theory retains a fixed hierarchy of values, simply substituting reason for liberty and equality (385).

What Acampora brings to the fore is that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is confined by her undemocratically chosen ethico-political principles. Both the undemocratic distinction

between antagonists and agonists on the basis of their adherence to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and the untouchable character of these principles compromise the plurality of agonistic positions. They show that there is a clear substantive aspect to Mouffe's agonistic project, which Fossen brands 'emancipatory'.¹⁸ Although at a first glance it might seem that Mouffe values pluralism by itself, Fossen maintains that this commitment to pluralism "is insufficient to explain a commitment to contestatory politics" (Fossen 2008: 2). He argues that "the agonistic concern with pluralism cannot be understood in abstraction from underlying normative and theoretical commitments" (3). Fossen points out that Mouffe's normative and theoretical commitments revolve around 'difference', on three different conceptual levels: that of "the constitutive principles of liberal democracy, disagreement and public reason, and identity" (10). The irresolvable tension between the liberal and democratic traditions of liberal democracy, the impossibility of 'objective' rationality and the 'constitutive outside' fundamental to identity formation can all be articulated in terms of 'difference'. He argues that for agonistic pluralists, it is this difference that is at stake within deliberative democratic theory. By depoliticizing pluralism, deliberative democrats would violate against difference and hence pluralism. *Pace* Fossen, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism accordingly has "an emancipatory ideal at its core" (12). He goes on to specify what he means by emancipatory: [e]mancipation should be conceived broadly here: not simply as a call to establish (socio-economic) equality among individuals or groups, but as a permanent attempt to lay bare and redress the harm and injustice caused by violence and exclusion, by restrictions of pluralism"

¹⁸ Fossen argues that we should make a distinction between 'emancipatory' agonism on the one hand (represented by Mouffe and Honig) and 'perfectionist' (represented by Owen) on the other. While emancipatory agonistic pluralism is best understood as a critique of liberalism, perfectionist agonism "values agonism not for its capacity to challenge violence and exclusion, but for its capacity to enhance citizens' virtues and capacities – for its *Bildung* of better citizens" (Fossen 2008: 10, 16). According to Fossen, perfectionist agonism is the more radical of the two, as it poses an external challenge to liberal political theory. Instead of criticizing liberalism for its harms and injustices, as emancipatory agonists do, perfectionist agonists like Owen question its ends: "[s]hould we affirm the cultivation of excellence as an aim of politics? And to what extent does liberalism undermine the cultural resources for this?" (20). See Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: a Critique of Liberal Reason* (1995).

(13). Pluralism is valued inasmuch as it gives room to difference and contestation, precisely the opposite of the deliberative democratic search for consensus-enhancing conditions.

Based on Acampora's and Fossen's critiques, we can ask ourselves whether Mouffe's brand of agonistic pluralism is more pluralist than deliberative democratic theory. By delimiting the ethico-political principles agonists have to abide by and through its insistence on difference and contestation, the ideal agonistic pluralist seems to be a (radical) leftist. This is not remarkable, giving Mouffe's endorsement of leftist views in earlier works.¹⁹ It does raise the question whether her agonistic pluralism offers a more pluralist conception of a democratic society than deliberative democracy does, as it now seems that the hegemonic power that leaves the most room for contestation and differences should be seen as the preferred one. Is not the kind of pluralism she defends then just as much compromised by the requirement of supporting difference within the boundaries of 'liberty and equality for all' as the political pluralism dominated by reason of Rawls and Habermas? In defence of Mouffe can be said that this is precisely the reason for her distinction between antagonism and agonism. For Mouffe, liberal democracy presupposes agreement on some core values, which she considers to be the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality. Agreeing on liberty and equality for all, however, implies for Mouffe that we commit ourselves to difference and the possibility for contestation. In other words, difference and contestation are written into liberal democracy's DNA. What Mouffe's agonistic pluralism then tries to do is to tap into the potential for difference and contestation at the heart of liberal democracy. While Rawls and Habermas seem to want to lead liberal democracy to its supposed consensual optimum, Mouffe highlights that its greatest merit lies in its potential for agonistic conflict.

¹⁹ See for example *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), co-authored by Ernesto Laclau.

3.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have addressed two pressing issues concerning the coherence of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. First, I have argued that Norval's Wittgensteinian inspired discussion of 'aspect dawning' and 'continuous aspect perception' regarding changes in political grammar is an important supplement to Mouffe's own discussion of democratic identification. Norval's account is more comprehensive than Mouffe's and refutes Erman's criticism that agonistic pluralism cannot account for the transition from antagonism to agonism. Norval's conceptual framework aligns itself well with Mouffe's critique of deliberative democratic theory that it puts too much emphasis on deliberation regarding democratic subject formation, which instead should be thought of in terms of practice and identification. Having thus cushioned Mouffe's move from antagonism to liberal democratic agonism, I have discussed the more contentious issue of the nature of Mouffe's pluralism. Following Acampora's analysis, we saw that Mouffe does not think agonism all the way through. She lays bare that Mouffe is more committed to political pluralism than agonism. In addition, Fossen showed that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is based on difference and contestation, for which he calls it 'emancipatory'.

It may seem that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism would therefore be incoherent; if she endorses pluralism because of other values, it seems to follow that she only endorses kinds of agonism that are in support of those values. Following Acampora's critique, Mouffe would restrict liberal democratic pluralism just as much as Rawls and Habermas, only on the basis of a different hierarchy of values. Moreover, if her branch of agonistic pluralism contains political commitments to difference and contestation, as Fossen argues, Mouffe's pluralism is not only restricted on the antagonistic level of the ethico-political principles, but as well on the agonistic level of their conception. I contend, however, that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism is not decisively undermined by these dissections. Regarding Acampora's critique, I would like to emphasize that Mouffe believes that all agonistic hegemonies are already committed to liberty and equality

for all through their adherence to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Since liberalism and democracy and their concomitant values of liberty and equality constitute for Mouffe the conceptual framework of liberal democracy, it simply cannot do without. Furthermore, Mouffe does not want to challenge liberal democracy per se. Her agonistic pluralism is directed against deliberative democratic theory's attempt to reconcile liberalism and democracy with each other in the form of a rational consensus. Instead, Mouffe maintains we should acknowledge the ineradicable tension between liberalism and democracy in order to appreciate its strength, which lies in its ability to challenge "relations of inclusion-exclusion" and its "logics of equivalence" (Mouffe 2000: 10). In order to preserve liberal democracy's valuable but fragile equilibrium, agonistic debate over the values that make liberal democracy possible at all is excluded.

Mouffe's commitment to difference and fighting relations of subordination moreover need not compromise her commitment to agonistic pluralism. We have seen before that she holds that any hegemonic power within a liberal democracy can be challenged for the way it interprets the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality for all. Mouffe might think that a (radical) leftist hegemony fighting subordination would offer the fullest expression of these principles, but as long as she does not deny that even such a hegemony could be contested, this does not undermine her commitment to agonistic pluralism. Both her antagonism/agonism distinction and her pluralism-delimiting commitment to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy thus, ultimately, do not pose insurmountable challenges to the conceptual coherence of her agonistic pluralism.

CONCLUSION

Can agonistic pluralism better accommodate political pluralism than deliberative democratic theory?

In order to formulate an answer to the central question of this thesis, we have had to traverse a diverse landscape of deliberative democratic and agonistic pluralist arguments. In the first chapter, we saw how Mouffe's agonistic pluralism critiques some of the central tenets of deliberative democratic theory. By carefully scrutinizing Mouffe's critique, we noticed how the most fundamental disagreements between Mouffe and her deliberative democratic opponents revolve around 'the political'. While 'the political' constitutes for Mouffe *the* key to understanding the liberal democratic predicament, Habermas believes that political power always requires democratic legitimacy through rational argument. Their respective views on 'the political' have important implications for the way they conceive of political pluralism. While for Mouffe antagonistic disagreement (under the guise of 'the political') is an ineradicable aspect of liberal democracy, Habermas believes political differences can be overcome by rational argument. As I stated at the end of the first chapter, it would seem as if we are in a deadlock; since Mouffe predominantly gives consequentialist answers to the reason why we should accept 'the political' (as it helps us understand the predicament of modern democracy), deliberative democrats might easily reject them for not abiding by their standards for rational argument. Yet, we have seen how Erman, Dryzek and Knops take up Mouffe's agonistic challenge by criticizing agonistic pluralism's key concepts and showing how deliberative democratic theory withstands her critique.

Through our analysis of their respective critiques, we concluded that they fail in definitively subsuming agonistic pluralism under a deliberative democratic banner. An especially thorny point proved to be Mouffe's notion of consensus. As she attacks the idea of a rational consensus vehemently, it seems as if she were against any consensus whatsoever. Yet,

as we have discussed, Mouffe does not deny the need for consensus, quite the contrary. For antagonism to turn into agonism, agreement on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy is an absolute requirement. What she criticizes, however, is the deliberative-democratic notion that a rational consensus ensures political pluralism. Opposed to this view, Mouffe argues that such a consensus ignores the dimension of 'the political'. She believes any consensus should be seen as a hegemonic expression of power suppressing 'difference' and hence pluralism. Moreover, Mouffe maintains that there is no such thing as a rational argument. By propagating rationality as the yardstick with which to measure the validity of arguments, deliberative democrats would preclude political pluralism, since everything that does not fit their deliberative criterion of rationality becomes disqualified as irrational and therefore argumentatively invalid. Instead of consensus, liberal democracy would be better served if 'difference' and contestation enter the liberal democratic limelight. Only then would political pluralism be a reality.

Notwithstanding the fact that the deliberative democratic critique of Mouffe did not fully achieve its goal, it did point out two major challenges regarding the coherence of Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. First, there was the question of the tenability of the antagonism/agonism distinction. I have argued that Mouffe makes some confused remarks on this issue, by stating that antagonists do not share a common symbolic framework, while agonists do. To save this distinction, she would add that she means a common *political* symbolic framework. Without any common symbolic framework whatsoever, agreement on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy would be inconceivable. Moreover, a substantial weakness in Mouffe's theory is that she gives very few pointers as to how antagonists come to accept the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy. Although she alludes to the friend/enemy distinction and the importance of democratic identification through democratic practices, the coming into being of such a consensus between antagonists remains an enigma. It is here that Norval's

discussion of ‘aspect seeing’ and ‘aspect perception’ came to help. Fitting in perfectly with Mouffe’s own discussion of Wittgenstein, Norval points out that it helps to think of democratic identification in terms of ‘aspect change’: when aspect change occurs, one looks both at his own political position anew and learns to relativize it. This is precisely what Mouffe requires of antagonists. By accepting the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and acknowledging others as legitimate political opponents, their antagonistic disagreement turns into an agonistic one. The antagonist-turned-agonist can relativize his own position by acknowledging the legitimacy of other political conceptions of freedom and equality, while at the same time having the inalienable right to question those conceptions. The concept of aspect change thus helps us understand how Mouffe’s democratic identification can change the political grammar of communities and opens the possibility for consensus on the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy.

Second, there was the question of Mouffe’s substantive commitments. We have seen that Mouffe is (undemocratically) committed to a kind of pluralism that Fossen calls ‘emancipatory’. It appears that Mouffe thinks that the fullest expression of the ethico-political principles can be found in a leftist hegemony and that the agonistic struggle will necessarily move into that direction, as any political consensus inherently violates and subordinates some of its subjects in her view. Since she does not explicitly state that her own preferred hegemonic conception of the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy constitutes the fullest conception of the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy, this ultimately does not compromise the coherence of her agonistic pluralism, however.

The answer to the question whether agonistic pluralism can accommodate pluralism better than deliberative democratic theory then mostly depends on the question whether we see pluralism as constitutive of liberal democracy or as a challenge. If we accept Mouffe’s category of the ‘the political’ and her inscription of pluralism at the conceptual level of liberal

democracy, we can agree with her that political pluralism is constantly under pressure from consensual forces aiming for homogenization. In that case, agonistic pluralism would indeed offer a pluralist alternative to deliberative democratic theory. If, however, we do not accept Mouffe's "conception of democratic politics"²⁰, for which she gives few 'rational' arguments from a deliberative democratic perspective, deliberative democratic theory offers a more elaborate political framework for envisaging a well-functioning pluralist society.²¹ It is questionable, however, to what extent deliberative democratic theory's reliance on impartial or intersubjective rationality is tenable. If rationality does not prove to be the solid rock on which to build a fully inclusive political consensus, as Mouffe argues through her discussion of Wittgenstein, political pluralism is better served with a political theory that openly acknowledges that such a consensus is conceptually impossible, like emancipatory agonistic pluralism.

Whether we think political pluralism is better accommodated within consensual deliberative democracy or emancipatory agonistic pluralism, is ultimately decided by our convictions on the nature of concepts like 'rationality' and 'the political'. By showing that Mouffe's agonistic pluralism withstands its deliberative democratic critiques, I have argued that her agonistic pluralism should be considered a viable alternative to deliberative democratic theory at the very least. There is no neutral criterion, however, to decide which political theory is 'objectively' better suited to political pluralism and there cannot be one. As Wittgenstein

²⁰ Phrasing by Fossen (2008).

²¹ While in this thesis I have largely confined myself to conceptual challenges to Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, her political theory has also been questioned on its interpretation of political institutions and collective decision making. In *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy: Post-Foundationalism and Political Liberalism* (2011), Wingenbach argues that agonistic pluralism can be best envisaged within the institutional model of political liberalism: "[...] The account of institutional structure most likely to both support agonistic engagement and preserve the conditions for agonism to flourish while nevertheless generating collectively binding decisions is a modified version of Rawls's political liberalism" (Wingenbach 2011: 12, 13). He argues that "if the architecture of political liberalism [...] could be severed from the commitment to consensus and order, then an agonistic version of liberalism might emerge" (13). If Wingenbach is right, political liberalism's institutions and Mouffe's agonistic conceptual framework could thus be aligned with one another. Whether this is truly the case has to be the topic of another thesis.

writes in *On Certainty*: “At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*” (Wittgenstein 1984: 243).²²

If I have persuaded the reader within the language game of a master’s thesis that Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism is a conceptually sound political theory for reflecting on the nature of political pluralism, I consider this thesis to be a success.

²² “Am Ende der Gründe steht die *Überredung*.”

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