

At the Outer Limits of Democratic Division: on Citizenship, Conflict and Violence in the Work of Chantal Mouffe and Étienne Balibar

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Abstract

This article's guiding thesis is that the theory of radical democratic citizenship is built on a tension between a radical, conflictual element and a democratic element. As radical democrats, these philosophers point to the intimate relation between conflict and both emancipation and democracy. But as radical democrats, they also propose different methods that prevent conflict from breaking up the polis—the common ground that makes democratic conflict possible. I look at two radical democrats' way of dealing with this tension: Chantal Mouffe and Étienne Balibar. My claim is that the former ends up overemphasising the danger of division in her later democratic works and is therefore unable to account for more intense forms of democratic resistance (such as riots). In the work of Balibar, however, we find a way of dealing with this tension.

Keywords Chantal Mouffe · Etienne Balibar · Radical democracy · Conflict · Political violence · Riots

Introduction

We are living in an age of riots and urban revolts. As Mustafa Dikeç recounts, in 2001, Cincinnati erupted into riots of an order not seen since the 1992 Los Angeles riots; in 2005, France saw a string of riots on a scale not seen since 1968; Greece (2008), London (2011), Stockholm (2013) and Istanbul (2013) followed; and most recently, the cities of Baltimore

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(2015), Milwaukee and Charlotte (2016) did as well (Dikeç 2017, p. 1). These riots, Dikeç argues, speak to the failure of liberal democracies—to the tension between the ideals of equality and liberty that they uphold and the empirical realities of inequality that give rise to these forms of revolt (*ibid.*, p. 218). As the institution of liberal democratic citizenship is being hollowed out, new figures of citizenship emerge.

This paper is not mainly concerned with the specificities of this age of riots. What I am interested in is how democratic theory could respond to the emergence of this rioter-citizen. What got me started on this piece are two conflicting politico-philosophical interpretations of the French riots. On the one hand, the French philosopher Étienne Balibar wrote an essay in the wake of these riots in which he carefully examined the conflicting tendencies at the heart of these riots. A riot, he argued, is characterised by political and anti-political elements. It is up to activists and political thinkers to understand the riot and reinforce its political tendencies (Balibar 2014, pp. 231–258). The Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe, on the other hand, restricted herself to a few disapproving paragraphs. Riots, she wrote, are a blind form of violence that erupts in response to a crisis of political representation (Mouffe 2013, pp. 121–122).

I propose to connect these judgements to the philosophical positions that produce them. What is striking, then, is that both authors work in a similar philosophical tradition: that of radical democratic theory. In other words, here are two prominent thinkers who attach great importance to political conflict. According to them, conflict is of central importance to a democracy. I would suggest, then, that their different views on riots derive from a tension within this radical democratic thinking.

On the one hand, conflict is the very soul of a radical democracy. Against the tendency to neutralise political problems with technocratic means, the radical democrat argues that without political conflict, there is no democracy. On the other hand, the radical democrat is also a democrat, and this implies that she sees the need for a shared and stable political space. After all, if political conflicts escalate, it will be harder for citizens to see their opponents as co-citizens. Radical democrats are thus well aware of the dangers of a civil war—a conflict in which shared rules of engagement lose their value and citizens can no longer see each other as political opponents. The result is a circulation of violence and the impossibility of (democratic) politics (Traverso 2017, pp. 64–100). Radical democracy is haunted by this danger and is therefore compelled to install some provisos. They limit the conflict that they value to prevent its escalation.

I will argue that this latter precautionary principle can turn against the central insights of radical democratic theory. In Mouffe's later works on agonistic democracy, we will see that her (Schmittian) concern with the escalation of violence turns against her earlier, radical democratic insights into the value and necessity of political conflict. This leads her to denounce more radical or violent forms of conflict such as riots or revolts. Having demonstrated this, I will turn to the work of Balibar. In his writings on civility and violence, we find a way to hold on to the insights of the radical democratic tradition without necessarily ignoring or belittling Mouffe's legitimate concerns with violence.

Chantal Mouffe: the Threat of the Untamed Conflict

Chantal Mouffe's name is inextricably connected to the notion of democratic conflict. Her position in the politico-philosophical landscape is tied to her claim that most social and political philosophies either suppress or ignore conflict. Her own theories of radical and agonistic democracy, on the other hand, leave ample room for political conflict.

However, her notion of political conflict and justification for the importance of a certain kind of conflict are subject to subtle yet important changes. Before we can criticise her theory, we must show how the relation between conflict and democracy evolves throughout her work.

Laclau and Mouffe: Antagonism, Hegemony and Radical Democracy

The first formulation of this relation can be found in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (co-authored with Ernesto Laclau) (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985]). This volume is conceived as an attempt to apply insights garnered from anti-essentialist traditions (such as structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics) to the study of politics and society. The first axiom of their approach is that there is no such thing as society as an objective 'thing-in-itself'. Social entities and the relations among them can only become accessible for us through an act of discursive articulation. More precisely, they argue that social objects do not have an objective essence but can only appear to the extent that they are articulated in relation to other objects (ibid., pp. 92–93). In turn, this structuralist framework is subjected to Derrida's critique: discursive articulation is not only necessary, but also—and paradoxically—impossible. A discursive articulation among different elements can never become a closed system as 'all discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity which overflows it' (ibid., pp. 98–99). Even if society can only appear discursively, our attempts at discursive articulation will never be completely successful.

Laclau and Mouffe appropriate two concepts to carry out the translation to social theory: 'antagonism' and 'hegemony'. The concept of antagonism stands for the idea that negativity is constitutive of society and can never be overcome (Mouffe 2013, p. 130). In their own words: antagonism 'is a relation wherein the limits of every objectivity are shown' and therefore antagonisms constitute the limit of society, the latter's impossibility of fully constituting itself (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985], p. 112). Hegemony, in turn, functions as the constructive element of their theory. The impossibility of society—its lack of an ultimate organising principle—is not the endpoint of this theory. They recognise the need to create some form of order (ibid., pp. 112, 115). This is where the concept of hegemony comes in: it is through hegemonic practices that a (contingent) social order comes into being. What this entails is that there is no such thing as a social order that is not political. The constitution of social objectivity is an act of power that excludes (Mouffe 2005, p. 17). After all, if order is created in a context of indeterminacy, it necessarily forecloses other possible articulations of social objectivity (Mouffe 2013, p. 131).

It is on this terrain that Laclau and Mouffe construct their theory of radical democracy. It is an attempt to carry on the Marxist concern with emancipation—the struggle against inequalities and relations of subordination—in a world that is at odds with the premises of classical Marxist theory. First of all, it is no longer possible to assume the ontologically privileged position of the proletariat. On the contrary, 'there are a variety of possible antagonisms in the social, many of them in opposition to each other' (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985], p. 117). Not only does the anti-essentialist framework call into question the social-scientific concept of 'class struggles'. We have also arrived at a moment in history in which many new antagonisms (e.g. ecological, feminist, anti-institutional, anti-racist) proliferate (ibid., pp. 143–155). Second, to the extent that antagonism and hegemony are constitutive of social reality, it is no longer possible to hold onto a view of communist society as 'a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared' (ibid., p. xxiv).

Therefore, the project of emancipation will have to be waged on different terms. In the first place, Laclau and Mouffe no longer assume that relations of subordination automatically give rise to struggles against it. After all, certain relations of subordination—in which one agent is subjected to the decisions of another—are perfectly ‘natural’ within particular discursive formations. As long as women are seen as naturally subordinate to men, the relations of subordination between men and women cannot yet become a site of antagonism. It is only ‘in the terms of a different discursive formation, such as ‘the rights inherent to every human being’, that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination constructed as oppression’ (ibid., p. 138).

This brings us to a second important element: modern emancipatory struggles only become possible as a result of the democratic revolution once the democratic principles of liberty and equality have imposed themselves ‘as the new matrix of the social imaginary’ (ibid.). Hence, in contrast to classical Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe accept the principles of liberty and equality as the horizon of modern emancipatory struggles (Decreus and Lievens 2011, p. 691).

The final element concerns the matter of the new antagonisms. As the principles of liberty and equality constitute the matrix of our social imaginary, different relations of subordination can become constructed as forms of oppression. As Mouffe argues, ‘social relations, hitherto considered apolitical [...] become loci of conflict and antagonism’ (1993, p. 77). And as there is no longer a primary antagonism, emancipatory politics has to be able to incorporate different democratic struggles. This is what Mouffe and Laclau call the project of radical democracy: an attempt to establish a ‘chain of equivalence’ among the different democratic struggles that traverse society. Concretely, the goal is to create a reciprocal identification among these different struggles through an articulation (in terms of a hegemonic interpretation of the democratic principles) of their mutual antagonism to oppressive forces (ibid., pp. 77–78). If this process is successful, the democratic principles can be deepened and expanded (Laclau and Mouffe 2014 [1985], p. 160).

Mouffe and the Critique of Normative Liberalism I: Agonistic Democracy and Radical Pluralism

Whereas the concept of antagonism is initially employed in this deconstruction of the Marxist project, we see a shift in Mouffe’s later works on agonistic democracy. A first aspect of this shift is that the post-structuralist concept of antagonism is supplemented with a notion informed by the work of Carl Schmitt. A second aspect of this shift is that the object of her critique is no longer classical Marxism, but the normative liberal theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, on the one hand, and the technocratic discourse of post-politics, on the other. A third and final aspect is the integration of radical democracy into the theory of agonistic democracy. More precisely, the latter is an *analytical theory of democracy* that accounts for the centrality of antagonism and hegemony in democratic politics. The former is an *ethico-political project* that Mouffe endorses in which the expansion and deepening of the democratic principles of equality and liberty is central. However, it is but one of the many ways in which the democratic principles can be interpreted in an agonistic democracy (Decreus and Lievens 2011, pp. 687–689).

To start with the first shift, as Oliver Marchart argues, we could say that already in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, two different—though not necessarily incompatible—definitions of antagonism are at play. On the one hand, we have a ‘real antagonism’ which stands for the impossibility of society. But, on the other hand, they also work with a second

concept of 'symbolic antagonism'. This is the antagonism that accompanies identity formation and is a form of symbolic inscription (Marchart 2013, pp. 308–312). Let us return to the example of radical democracy: this new identity can only be created insofar as an equivalence is created among different democratic struggles. In order for this to happen; however, 'something identical'—underlying their reciprocal differences—has to be expressed. And this 'something' is that which makes them stand out from their 'oppressor'. What makes this aspect of identity formation antagonistic is the fact that 'the other' (in this case the oppressor) becomes both a condition of possibility and impossibility of 'my' identity (in this case that of the radical democrats) (Wenman 2013b, p. 60).

Looking back on this shift, Mouffe argues that indeed there are two definitions of antagonism at play here. However, she proposes that the category of 'real antagonism'—that indicates the limit of every objectivity—be replaced by that of dislocation.¹ Antagonism, on the other hand, is firmly located within the symbolic order—it is the symbolic inscription of a dislocation. For example, at one point, a colonial society will fail to fully constitute the identities 'coloniser' and 'colonised' (i.e. a dislocation). In turn, this enables the attempt to inscribe this dislocation in the symbolic order antagonistically. The former 'the colonised' can now identify anew as 'liberation fighters' against the 'colonial occupiers'. It is this latter definition, she argues, that becomes a priority in her later works (Decreus and Lievens 2011, p. 682).

In these later works on agonistic democracy (starting with *The Return of the Political*), she develops this concept of antagonism through an engagement with Carl Schmitt. Here, Mouffe contends, we discover 'the specificity of the political in its dimension of conflict/decision' (Mouffe 1993, p. 2). Schmitt's lesson is twofold: first, he teaches us that in politics we cannot do without collective forms of identification in which a 'we' is delimited from a 'them'. Therefore, politics does not primarily concern the interactions between individuals, but the conflict between collectives. Moreover, a we/them relation can always become a friend/enemy relation. This entails that as the 'enemy' puts our very existence into question, this relation is potentially violent (Mouffe 1993, p. 3; 2005, p. 11). The second lesson is that the decision that grounds the friend/enemy distinction is itself without ground. It cannot be justified with reference to a universal consensus based on reason (Mouffe 2005, p. 12). As decisions concerning the principles of political association cannot represent an impartial standpoint, they should be seen for what they are—namely, political decisions (Mouffe 2000, p. 47).

It is this dimension of antagonism—or, 'the political'—that is disavowed in the normative, liberal theories of democracy of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. These theories assume that a rational consensus concerning essential moral-political principles is the horizon of democratic politics. This does not mean that they deny the reality of conflict. On the contrary, normative liberal theories are in part a response to the possibility of conflict that accompanies modern pluralism. The problem is that they assume that this conflict can be neutralised. They believe that it is possible to reach a reasonable agreement on the public principles ordering our society and do this by relegating substantive differences in worldviews to the private domain (Mouffe 1993, pp. 122–128; 2000, pp. 19–20).

Mouffe's own theory of agonistic democracy, on the other hand, tries to incorporate and defang this dimension of antagonism. It acknowledges that antagonism is ineradicable, but also realises that it is incompatible with a modern pluralist democracy in which citizens should

¹ This formulation was initially proposed by Ernesto Laclau in *New Reflections on the Revolutions of our Times* (Laclau 1990, pp. 3–89).

not see each other as enemies but as political opponents. Therefore, the democratic process should be agonistic: it should allow for a conflict between political projects (or, collective forms of identification); but the we/them distinction that this conflict entails should be relativised. In such an agonistic relation, ‘the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents’ (Mouffe 2005, p. 20). According to Mouffe, this model of agonistic democracy is superior in two ways. On the one hand, it is more genuinely pluralistic (i.e. a democratic-normative argument) (see *infra*). On the other, as it does not disavow the logic of antagonism, it is less likely to fall prey to its dangers (i.e. an analytical-realist argument) (see the “Mouffe and the Critique of Liberalism II: Agonistic Democracy and the Sublimation of Antagonism” section).

Let us start with the first argument. For the theory of agonistic democracy, Mouffe argues that pluralism is an axiological principle: ‘[i]t is taken to be constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should celebrate and enhance’ (Mouffe 2000, p. 19). The normative liberal theories of Rawls and Habermas, on the other hand, pay lip service to the ideal of pluralism but when push comes to shove, they shy away from embracing a true plurality of political identities. They can only posit the possibility of a rational consensus on the principles of political association by excluding conflicts of values from the public sphere.

The problem with this position, Mouffe argues, is not exclusion *per se*, but that Rawls and Habermas present the exclusion of certain interpretations of the principles of political association as justified from an impartial moral standpoint. They do not deny that the harmonious political orders that they propose exclude or coerce certain political actors, but take it that these forms of coercion and exclusion are stripped of their problematic aspects. After all, if the principles that animate a liberal political order are the result of a reasonable dialogue, they only exclude those citizens that are unreasonable. Thus, if exclusion and coercion are involved, they are perfectly justified. Political liberalism, Mouffe argues, makes it look like that problems such as exclusion, violence and coercion can be driven out of our societies or, at the least, be rationalised (Mouffe 1993, p. 141).

However, by covering up the political decision at the basis of these liberal orders, Rawls and Habermas fail to do justice to the fact that a genuine pluralism entails that there is a ‘diversity of ways in which the ‘democratic game’ can be played’ (Mouffe 2000, p. 73). It is impossible, Mouffe argues, to neatly separate the procedural from the substantial. Democratic procedures, that is, already ‘presuppose the acceptance of certain values’ (*ibid.*, p. 91). Therefore, we will have to accept that there is no sole rationally acceptable way of playing the democratic game. In other words, we can no longer isolate the democratic ‘rules of the game’ from contestation (Wenman 2003, p. 62). In turn, this is important because if we ‘present the institutions of liberal democracy as the outcome of a pure deliberative rationality, [we] reify them and make them impossible to transform’ (Mouffe 2000, p. 32). If a political regime is seen as the only reasonable alternative, then resistance to and critiques of this regime can only be perceived as irrational. Yet, if we take the post-structuralist critique of rationalism seriously, then we should also accept the likelihood of blind spots in purportedly rational political orders (Mouffe 1993, p. 123; 2000, p. 31). In this respect, the liberal normativism is problematic and not genuinely pluralistic because it forecloses on the possibility of alternative interpretations of the principles of liberty and equality.

Mouffe and the Critique of Liberalism II: Agonistic Democracy and the Sublimation of Antagonism

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In addition to this normative-democratic argument, there is also an analytical-realist critique of normative liberalism. This argument goes as follows: the disavowal of antagonism is not only problematic from the standpoint of a pluralist democracy, it is also potentially dangerous. As the failure of Third Way and technocratic post-politics shows, the attempt to ban conflict from the public sphere gives rise to more intensely antagonistic and even violent forms of conflict (such as terrorism, right-wing populism and riots) (Mouffe 2005, pp. 21, 64–89). In contrast, what a good agonistic democracy should do is to provide an outlet for conflicts and passions (Mouffe 1993, pp. 5–6). It should sublimate—as opposed to disavow or suppress—the antagonistic dimension (Mouffe 2000, p. 107n131). The crucial point that both the normative theory of liberalism and technocratic post-politics miss is that a certain kind of conflict plays an integrative role in modern democracy (ibid., p. 113).

In order to understand this argument, we have to investigate the Schmittian concept of antagonism anew. Until now, we have mainly demonstrated that Mouffe sees value in the concept of antagonism and its emphasis on collective identification and political decision. However, following Schmitt, she also sees danger in antagonism: ‘he was no doubt right,’ she writes, ‘to warn against the dangers that an antagonistic pluralism entails for the permanence of the political entity’ (2005, p. 16). As Mark Wenman notes, Schmitt does not only argue that antagonism is constitutive of the nature of the political, but also that it poses a security threat and therefore has no place within the political association (2013a, p. 193; 2013b, p. 94). One reason for the exclusion of intra-associational antagonism is its incompatibility with the authority of the state. For Schmitt, there cannot be an antagonistic pluralism concerning the principles of legitimacy ‘without the political reality of the state automatically disappearing’ (Mouffe 1993, p. 131). A second reason, as Johanna Oksala clarifies, is that the friend-enemy distinction refers to the ‘the real possibility of physical killing’ (Schmitt cited in Oksala 2012, p. 60). As antagonism includes the risk of violence, it also has to be expelled from the political association because it ‘would lead to a civil war’ (Decreus and Lievens 2011, p. 683).

It is at this point, however, that Schmitt and Mouffe go their separate ways. While both acknowledge the antagonistic dimension of politics, the latter decides that democratic pluralism and the acknowledgment of antagonism are not irreconcilable. Schmitt’s solution to the danger of antagonism is to expel antagonism outside the demos. It is through a displacement of antagonism onto the international political sphere that the unity of the people and the stability of the political association is safeguarded (Mouffe 2000, p. 54). In contrast, an agonistic democracy allows for division and pluralism within the political community. The reason it is able to do so is that conflict in a parliamentary system is able to sublimate antagonism. Referring to Elias Canetti’s analysis of the parliamentary system, Mouffe notes how it ‘uses the psychological structure of opposing armies and stages a form of warfare which has renounced killing’ (2005, p. 22).

Here, Ben Cross argues, Mouffe defends the theory of agonistic democracy against both liberal normativism and Schmitt on political realist grounds. What makes this form of democracy superior is that it is able to sublimate the antagonistic dimension and is thus more stable than both. Against her liberal opponents, she argues that a rational consensus can never safeguard the stability of a modern democracy. By relegating passionate attachments to the private sphere and suppressing conflict, they end up creating problems that are far worse—such as far-right populism or religious terrorism. Against her other intellectual opponent—

Schmitt—she argues that by insulating the political community from internal conflicts, you create a breeding ground for destabilising forms of partisanism. One can only stabilise a democracy by turning democratic institutions into an outlet for political conflicts and thus by making them into apparatuses for transforming antagonistic conflicts into agonist ones (Cross 2017, pp. 182–185; see also Mouffe 2005, pp. 22–23).

The Ambiguity of Agonistic Democracy and the Problem of the Rioter

This solution, however, is not without its problems. After all, not all forms of antagonism can be sublimated in an agonistic democracy. Mouffe admits as much: there are certain antagonistic actors, she writes, that cannot find a place in an agonistic democracy. ‘Some demands,’ she explains, ‘are excluded not because they are declared to be ‘evil’, but because they challenge the institutions constitutive of the democratic political association’ (2005, pp. 120–121). With these actors, then, we remain in a relation of antagonism.

Again, this requires explanation. For an agonistic democracy to function, there has to be some kind of ‘conflictual consensus’. There has to be a ‘common symbolic space among opponents who are considered as “legitimate enemies”’ (ibid., p. 52). A political position is compatible with this conflictual consensus as long as it meets a substantial and a formal criterion. The substantial criterion is an ‘adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy’. Democratic citizens must accept both the equality and liberty of all (e.g. accepting that all citizens regardless of gender, race or class has a right to political participation). The formal criterion is that we treat political actors that also adhere to these principles but defend another interpretation as ‘adversaries’. An adversary, Mouffe clarifies, is ‘somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question’ (Mouffe 2000, p. 102; see also Rummens 2009, pp. 377–391).

In accordance with this scheme, two kinds of political actors should be treated as antagonists. On the one hand, there are those political actors that fail to meet the substantial criterion. Examples are Islamist extremists or neo-fascists. Positions that, say, fail to acknowledge the liberty and equality of women are unacceptable in an agonistic democracy. Therefore, we remain antagonistic towards those actors that stubbornly hold onto anti-democratic demands (Mouffe 2013, pp. 13–15).

On the other hand, there are actors who might meet the substantial criterion—and thus make democratic demands—but do not meet the formal criterion because their actions are not agonistic (Oksala 2012, p. 64). This criterion, I would argue, is vague and therefore potentially problematic. As long as we assume that political actors who fail this criterion also fail the former one, this stance remains intuitive. It is not very difficult to see why violent neo-fascist groupings should be excluded from the democratic space. However, the question becomes more difficult once we introduce the possibility that democratic demands are made in ways that are not strictly speaking agonistic because they are violent or coerce, discipline or punish political opponents (Breen 2009, p. 140; Oksala, ibid.; Olson 2009, pp. 87–90). Recent research on radical and uncivil disobedience reveals how citizens have opposed oppression in uncivil ways throughout the history of modern democracy and still do so to this day. Principled disobedience as resistance against oppression, Candice Delmas argues, is not always peaceful: militant suffragettes smashed windows and heckled opponents, rioters destroy(ed) property and confront(ed) the police, and strikers deploy(ed) force against strike-breakers (2018, pp. 38, 45, 65–66).

Confronted with this question we start to see the tensions in Mouffe's thinking. As we demonstrated earlier (in the "Laclau and Mouffe: Antagonism, Hegemony and Radical Democracy" and "Mouffe and the Critique of Normative Liberalism I: Agonistic Democracy and Radical Pluralism" sections), she is acutely aware of phenomena like power, exclusion and domination. Moreover, she recognises the need to contest relations of domination and 'to problematize the constitution and shape of [the] common political space' (Norval 2007, p. 159), if not as an agonistic democrat, at the least as a radical democrat. However, at the same time she struggles with her Schmittian heritage (see the "Mouffe and the Critique of Liberalism II: Agonistic Democracy and the Sublimation of Antagonism" section). As some critics note, her agonistic solution to the Schmittian problem of intra-associational antagonism cannot entirely escape its conservative framing (Oksala 2012; Sommerer 2018; Wenman 2013a, pp. 197–201; 2013b). There are many times that Mouffe uncritically accepts Schmitt's linking of the problem of antagonism, on the one hand, and the danger presented by the human inclination towards violence and aggression, on the other (Mouffe 1993, p. 6; 2000, p. 131; 2005, pp. 3, 25–26; 2013, pp. 4, 47). The reason that this framing is conservative is that it accepts the human propensity for violence as a given against which a certain form of political order has to protect us. And it is this framing that compels Mouffe to describe '[p]olitics, as the attempt to domesticate the political, to keep at bay the force of destruction and to establish order' (1993, p. 141) and leads her to be wary of more intense forms of resistance that 'tear up the basis of civility' (2000, p. 104).

I would like to argue that nowhere is this tension more visible than in her treatment of riots. At different points, Mouffe gives some version of her argument that riots are 'a sheer expression of blind violence without any specific claims' that are the result of a lack of political fora in which dissent can be expressed (Decreus and Lievens 2011, p. 698; Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014, p. 104; Mouffe 2013, p. 12). The aforementioned tension is visible in the following way: on the one hand, and in line with her critique of exclusion, Mouffe refrains from blaming the rioters. After all, the crisis of democratic representation is to blame. Yet, in line with her concern with the sublimation of antagonism, she is unwilling to grant the riot a democratic role given the dangers its violent and antagonistic character presents.

However, as different political thinkers have already indicated, riots might look like they have no positive political or democratic content, yet some of them do (Badiou 2012; Clover 2016; Dikeç 2017; Kaulingfreks 2016). Mustafa Dikeç who investigates riots in different democratic countries writes the following: riots 'are neither *preconceived* nor organised, and they are not articulated as collective efforts aimed at transforming the established order' (2004, p. 191 emphasis mine). In this respect, the riot cannot be seen as an organised justice movement. However, Dikeç emphasises that we can neither consider these riots in isolation from democratic demands. In the West, riots are often a reaction to a situation of injustice (ibid.). They often arise in situations where there is some sort of exclusion (in the form of concentrated poverty, police violence, discrimination or segregation) (Dikeç 2017, p. 6). Hence, the fact that these riots are seen as apolitical is often a result of the way in which the state frames them rather than any intrinsic characteristic (Dikeç 2004, pp. 192–200). Of course, the violence that explodes in the form of riots is not necessarily emancipatory or democratic (ibid., 2017, p. 174). Riots are ambiguous, Stephen D'Arcy argues, which makes it important to distinguish the different forms that they take. Some of these are unjustifiable: authoritarian riots, for instance, reinforce relations of domination (e.g. Kristallnacht or the 1919 Chicago race riots). Recreative riots (e.g. hooliganism) are also hard to justify (D'Arcy 2014, pp. 131–132; see also Kirkpatrick 2008). The 'grievance riot', however, can be seen as emancipatory: such a riot contests a relation of subordination (e.g. police violence, structural unemployment or racism) (ibid.).

One could respond that citizens have other, non-violent means of contestation at their disposal such as engagement in the public sphere, protests or civil disobedience. But this overlooks the fact, Candice Delmas notes, that rioters use violence precisely because ‘they are not allowed to participate on civil terms’ (2018, p. 65). Moreover, political riots are at times simply more successful than civil protest ‘in projecting the seriousness of the problem, in part by threatening further disruption’ (ibid., pp. 65–66). Indeed, as recent research shows, the riot is a form of political disobedience with a specific strategic rationale. Rioters erect blockades in order to disrupt economic circulation (Clover 2016); they threaten ‘the state with a breakdown of its claim to authority [and thus create] a strong incentive to listen to what the unheard have to say’ (D’Arcy 2014, pp. 133–137); and communicate and express anger at the persistence of injustice, exclusion and subordination (Delmas 2018, p. 65; Pasternak 2019, p. 391).

This raises the question whether we can accept the democratising potential of riots without giving short shrift to Mouffé’s concerns with the dangers of violence and antagonism. This is material for the following section: here, I will argue that we can find supplementary concepts that allow us to bridge these concerns in the thought of Étienne Balibar.

Étienne Balibar: Civilising the Insurrection

Conflict and Normativity: the Many Faces of ‘Equaliberty’

Although an extensive discussion of Balibar’s project is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to show how he envisions the connection between conflict and the democratisation of citizenship. In the first place, we should note that Balibar’s thought has a great deal in common with Mouffé’s. Both recognise the importance of conflict in a democracy, position themselves as adherents of the unfinished project of political modernity and try to balance the critique and upholding of political universalism. In addition, they can be identified as radical democrats that initially developed their theories from within the Marxist tradition (see Ingram 2015).

Nonetheless, there are also important differences. Balibar does not wield an abstract theory of ‘the political’: he assumes that politics has many different faces. In his *Three Concepts of Politics*, he discerns at least three concepts of politics. This position entails that, in contrast to liberals, he refuses to reduce politics to a discussion of rights and, in contrast to Marxists, he refuses to reduce it to class struggle. Politics concerns both classically liberal themes like juridical freedom and equality, and the material conditions in which the concrete realisation and deepening of these values is possible (Balibar 2002, pp. 1–39; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, p. 3). In addition, this stance entails, as I will show further on, a greater openness to the diversity of political strategies. Where Mouffé reduces democratic politics to a certain version of the agonistic conflict, Balibar argues that emancipatory politics calls for a mixture of political forms (Balibar 2015a, pp. 106–107).

Why will democratic citizenship remain illusory without conflict? At the onset of the French Revolution, Balibar argues, an ideal was called into life that forms the kernel of democratic citizenship. This ideal he calls ‘the proposition of equaliberty’ (*la proposition de l’égaliberté*). This rather awkward play on words allows him to question the artificiality of an often-made distinction: the assumption that liberty as a liberal value is opposed to equality as a socialist value. Freedom without equality, Balibar contends, is an illusion and vice versa. Specifically, this means that ‘[...] the (de facto) historical conditions of freedom are exactly the same as the (de facto) historical conditions of equality’ (2014, p. 48). Equaliberty dictates that

every single situation in which the freedom or equality of citizens are suppressed is unacceptable. More precisely, 'there is no example of conditions that suppress or repress freedom that do not suppress or limit—that is, do not abolish—equality, and vice versa' (ibid., p. 49). However, the implications of this proposition are far-reaching. That is why Balibar proposes a subtle, but significant nuance: equaliberty is a negative universal. Each attempt to give a concrete, institutional form to this ideal will fall short of it. Consequently, modern citizens will have to recover this ideal again and again (ibid., p. 50).

In turn, this explains the importance of conflict. If not a single historical form of democratic citizenship is able to live up to the ideal of equaliberty, this entails that democratic citizenship is always built on forms of exclusion and domination. That is why citizens have to recover this ideal from time to time—confronting the forms of exclusion and domination on which their citizenship is built. However, those citizens that have a strong interest in maintaining these forms of oppression, exclusion and inequality, will do so. There is no such thing, Balibar argues, as a natural disposition to keep up and preserve equaliberty: '[t]he dominant never give up their privileges or their power voluntarily' (ibid., p. 5). Political conflict is therefore that which makes the further extension of this ideal possible. Conflict enables us to open up democratic citizenship to those that are excluded from it, to implement it beyond the nation state and extend it to formerly 'apolitical' domains of society (Balibar 2014, p. 157). As this task will forever remain unfinished, conflict will always be necessary to drive forward the democratization of citizenship.

The Politics of Civility

However, this conflictual democratic citizenship has a certain relation to danger. Specifically: 'In order to save themselves or remain alive as a community of citizens, the city must run the risk of destruction or anarchy' (ibid., p. 284). If we want to fulfil the promise of democratic citizenship, we have to jeopardise our peaceful co-existence from time to time (Balibar 2005, p. 127).

Nonetheless, this does not mean that we can reproach Balibar for being reckless. He is acutely aware of the dangers that accompany political conflict. There is, as he notes, a tragic aspect to his views on politics. We should hold up the promise of democratic citizenship, and this entails transforming the status quo and the forms of structural violence that characterise it. Yet, at the same time, the emancipatory struggle can produce forms of violence of its own that threaten to undermine it (Balibar 2009b, p. 10).

This is an idea that Balibar develops in his critical study of the Marxist tradition. One of the paradoxes of Marxism is that, on the one hand, it gives us a fresh perspective on the relation between economic structures and violence and, on the other hand, has a distorted vision on the relation between emancipatory politics and violence (Balibar 2010, p. 251). The dominant tendency in the Marxist tradition, Balibar argues, accepts the illusion of a 'counterviolence'. This is the idea that revolutionary violence can avoid reproducing aspects of the structural violence it opposes. The illusion consists in the idea that an emancipatory insurrection can bring about emancipation by violently eliminating the oppressing class and its apparatuses of violence, without itself succumbing to (and therefore reproducing) the violence that it employs (Balibar 2015b, pp. 6–7). For example, we find this idea in Marx's statement that 'force [Gewalt] is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one' (1976 [1867], p. 916). The intuition implicit in this statement is that the destruction, violence and suffering that accompany revolutionary change can be neatly transformed into emancipation, progress and a society free from violence (Balibar 2015b, pp. 6–9). To reiterate, politics, and certainly

emancipatory politics, is tragic. On the one hand, the status quo is never acceptable. But on the other hand, political change risks producing forms of violence that have a cruel character. In such cases, politics is made impossible as the shared political space collapses under the weight of hostilities (Balibar 2009a, p. 62).

This last idea has to be specified as it brings Balibar closer to a problematic central to Mouffe's philosophy: it shows that he acknowledges that a conflict can become so intense that politics—also insurgent politics—is made impossible. In doing so, he introduces the (corresponding) concepts 'cruelty' and 'extreme violence'. Cruelty is a specific type of violence that is both inextricable from politics (political action always risks producing cruelty) and a limit to politics (once it is produced, it eliminates the conditions of possibility of politics). To specify the latter, cruelty is a limit to politics because it is incontrovertible. This means that cruelty can never lead to progress or lead to constructive change. This extreme violence is incontrovertible, Balibar further specifies, because it eliminates the 'human in man' (2015b, p. 52). For the victims of extreme violence 'it is virtually impossible [...] to imagine or present themselves in person as political subjects capable of humanity by emancipating themselves' (ibid., p. 57). It is a form of violence that is so unbearable to its victims that it affects their capacity for political action. In turn, examples of cruelty can be found in two forms: ultraobjective and ultrasubjective ones. The first are forms of structural violence that produce 'disposable human beings'. If people are forced to live on the streets or populations are deprived of vital medications purely as a result of an economic logic, we speak of ultraobjective cruelty. Ultrasubjective cruelty, on the other hand, is a form of violence that pursues the elimination of individuals or groups that are seen as the incarnation of evil (ibid., p. 52–53). The Nazi extermination camps and the most extreme stages of civil wars provide examples of such a violence.

What makes Balibar's introduction of the concept of cruelty interesting is that it introduces a conceptual distinction within the concept of violence. After all, not all forms of violence deserve to be called 'extreme' (ibid., p. 21). In this respect, Balibar admits that his thought is indebted to Max Weber: it is not impossible that the limited exercise of violence might prevent a far worse violence. Yet, this also entails the need to develop a political ethic that is appropriate to this tragic (because violent) nature of political action. Political actors must cultivate a political sensibility appropriate to a world that often is violent, meaning that they have to learn when to avoid violence, but also—if necessary—when to resort to violence (Balibar 2009b, pp. 28–29; see also Balibar 2014, p. 284). In this respect, Balibar not only provides us with a more complex theory of violence (as opposed to Mouffe's more monolithic approach). But he also has a provisional theory of how to prevent the deterioration of political action (including forms of violent political action) into cruelty. This is a second advantage over Mouffe's approach: after all, as we noted above that she has no theory of how to transform violent forms of antagonism into forms of agonism, apart, that is, from reiterating that antagonistic conflict is less likely to occur as long as there is agonistic conflict.

This political ethic goes under the name of strategies of civility. Every emancipatory politics, Balibar argues, calls for these strategies that aim to reduce the violence bred by political change. First, we should note that civility is something that political movements impose on themselves. Civility is not something that is enforced by a state that sets limits to political conflict (Ingram 2015, pp. 226–227). Moreover, civility 'does not necessarily involve the idea of a suppression of 'conflicts' and 'antagonisms' in society' (Balibar 2014, p. 116). It is up to political movements themselves to find ways of changing society for the better without letting violence get out of hand. This entails that civility operates on different levels. On the

one hand, emancipatory movements try to civilise state and economy. Because state and economy can sustain forms of cruelty, emancipatory movements have to civilise them from the bottom up. This means that these movements force state and market to perceive citizens as human beings—not as ‘enemies of the state’ or ‘disposable humans’. On the other hand, these movements—and certainly revolutionary ones—owe it to themselves to civilise their revolution. After all, this is the only way in which they can keep their resistance alive (Balibar 2015b, p. 131). It breaks the mimetic circle in which the resistance against violence and exclusion takes on extremely violent forms that undo its effectivity (Balibar 2015a, p. 67). Hence, the history of these movements teaches us that not a single strategy is able to balance these different tasks. Violent resistance is often not able to temper its excesses and is thus bound to succumb to a state whose means of violence always exceeds its own. And non-violent strategies do not always succeed in bringing those in power to their knees. This is why a mix of strategies—violent and non-violent, strategies aimed at and withdrawn from the state—is always necessary (Balibar 2015b, pp. 93–126).

The Becoming-Insurrectional of the Riot

In the current section, I will give these foregoing propositions a more concrete form. And to do this, we will have to return to the introduction to this article: the French riots and Balibar’s reflections on them. Let us reiterate President Nicolas Sarkozy’s reaction: rioters, he said, are criminals and the proper political response is the strict enforcement of the public order. Balibar, however, arrives at a different conclusion: riots stem from a situation of exclusion and oppression, and therefore, they cannot be apolitical. More precisely, although it is an open question whether the actions of rioters are political, we cannot deny that the riot is a political event (Balibar 2014, p. 234). He characterises the situations from which riots arise as states of ‘internal exclusion’. This is a type of exclusion that is characterised by the fact that the excluded can neither be wholly accepted by, nor wholly expelled from the community of citizens. The form assumed by internal exclusion is hence that of a differentiated citizenship. A citizenship, that is, in which access to (and the full exercise of) rights is not equally distributed, and structural forms of racism and economic domination reduce certain citizens to second-class citizens (ibid., pp. 201–202; 249–250).

Given these circumstances, the riot can be described as an ‘anti-institutional violence that aims to ‘break down the gates’ of the space of citizenship’ (Balibar 2015a, p. 66). This violence, however, can be counterproductive. First, it takes place on uneven terrain: rioters often can do little to resist the overwhelming power of the state. Second, states often refer to the violence of riots to justify their own violence (ibid.). Lastly, it is still an open question as to what extent the violence of riots is political. As Balibar writes, one of the first things he noticed about the French riots was its partly self-destructive character. Was not it their ‘own’ schools, ‘own’ community centres and ‘own’ cars that went up in flames (2014, p. 236)?

However, as opposed to Mouffe, Balibar refuses to give up on the riot. We must try to understand, he writes, how politics can emerge from its opposite—anti-politics (ibid., p. 251). To put it in differently, how can we politicise the riot which is driven both by political and anti-political tendencies? For a start, we cannot deny that there is a certain strength in riots and this strength is precisely the force of its negativity—the force of refusal. Because the riot arises from forms of injustice and domination that cannot be easily resolved within the existing political order, it confronts a society with its shortcomings and blind spots. At the same time, its greatest strength is also at once a weakness. The negativity of the riots can also prove to be its undoing (ibid., p. 256).

This is essentially, I would argue, a question of the proper strategies of civility. After all, it requires us to consider how a movement that arises against forms of domination can be kept from succumbing to its own violence and the violence of the state. What is striking, then, is that Balibar's recommendations always point in the direction of strategies that, on the one hand, are developed from the bottom up and, on the other hand, do not aim to compromise the radicalism of the riot. It is not up to the state or political parties to curtail the riot. What must be realised is a becoming-political or becoming-insurrectional of the riot. This is the process in which the political demands of rioters are echoed by and translated to other revolts (ibid., p. 255). An arresting example of this process is the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. On August 9th, 2014, policeman Darren Wilson shot and killed the Afro-American teenager Mike Brown in the city of Ferguson. This would prove to be the final straw in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the region. Also here, peaceful protest quickly gave way to riots. What makes the uprising interesting, however, is how other political actors responded to the riots. What could easily have remained limited to a short outburst of anger was—through a diversity of strategies such as direction actions, organisational work and occupations—transformed into a mass movement against racism, mass incarceration, poverty and police violence. And all of this was done without making concessions to the political order (Taylor 2016, pp. 153–190).

Conclusion

Rather than summarise the argument, I want to conclude with a reflection on its relevance to this special issues' debate on citizenship in a time of crisis. We argued that the radical democratic theories of Mouffe and Balibar exhibit a tension between the desire for a thriving democratic conflict and the necessity to circumscribe this conflict. This tension is replicated in their respective concepts of citizenship. To start with Mouffe, throughout her oeuvre, she holds on to a definition of citizenship that emphasizes active political involvement (and not only legal status). In particular, she supports a radical democratic form of citizenship: social agents act as citizens if they contest relations of domination by referring to the principles of liberty and equality (Mouffe 2018, pp. 47–48). However, she also recognises that this is but one form of citizenship: 'there can be as many forms of citizenship,' she writes, 'as there are interpretations of [the principles of liberal democracy]' (Mouffe 1993, p. 84). Hence, in order to keep the political community from disintegrating, we need an 'idea of commonality, of an ethico-political bond that creates a linkage among participants in the association' (ibid., p. 66). In other words, the radical democratic citizen is caught between two citizen roles: (a) that of the radical democratic citizen confronting domination and (b) that of a fellow citizen to others who are no radical democrats and might oppose their ideas and actions.

This involves constraints on the political principles that radical democratic citizens can defend and the means that they can use to achieve their goals. The first requirement is no real problem as radical democratic citizens enact an immanent critique of liberal democracy—mobilising its ideals to contest its failures (Mouffe 2018, p. 33). The means-question, I argued, is more tenuous: in the later stages of its development, Mouffe's democratic theory presupposes the incompatibility of democratic action and violence. This influences her preferred choice of political strategy such as her recent defence of a left populism that aims to transform the state from within through a non-violent engagement with the institutions of representative democracy (Mouffe 2018). It also precludes violent and coercive forms of insurgent

democratic action. Violence can constitute a democratic space (in a revolution against a non-democratic regime), and it can protect this space against anti-democrats. But once the democratic space is constituted, democratic violence is strictly speaking an anomaly. Different forms of radical democratic citizenship such as uncivil disobedience, revolts and riots thus disappear from view.

Obviously, whether this is a problem depends on your beliefs concerning the admissibility of citizen violence. You may believe that the use of violence is unworthy of a citizen. However, I argue that it might be warranted in certain cases such as riots in which second-class citizens contest their exclusion. Riots exist at the crossroads of two contemporary but opposing movements. They arise in response to an ongoing *de-democratisation of citizenship*: the hollowing out of social citizenship, the racist policing of second-class citizens in the *banlieues* and the crisis of political representation. But riots can also have the effect of *democratising citizenship* as they contest these tendencies and the relations of subordination they result in. Under this interpretation, the rioter is an instance of Balibar's figure of the active citizen who 'openly confront[s] the lack of democracy in existing institutions and transform[s] them in a more or less radical manner' (Balibar 2015a, p. 124). Of course, the riot is a limited strategy for the democratisation of citizenship, if only because it is always in danger of succumbing to its own violence. But Balibar gives us a glimpse of what it would mean to increase—and not restrict or reduce—the radicalness of the riot. Strategies of civility allow us to do this by increasing the longevity of these revolts. Confronted with political subjects that jeopardise the peacefulness of the community of citizens, we should ask whether their resistance has an emancipatory or democratic kernel. Our task is to reinforce it.

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