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Between conflict and consensus: Why democracy needs conflicts and why communities should delimit their intensity

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Abstract: The contemporary agonist thinker, Chantal Mouffe argues that conflicts are constitutive of politics. However, this position raises the question that concerns the survival of order and the proper types of conflicts in democracies. Although Mouffe is not consensus-oriented, consensus plays a role in her theory when the democratic order is at stake. This suggests that there is a theoretical terrain between the opposing poles of conflict and consensus. This can be discussed with the help of concepts and theories that seem to be standing between the two, namely compromise, debate and the borders of democracy. I will argue that we can reveal this position with the theoretical analysis of compromise in the works of F. R. Ankersmit on the historical origin of representative democracy, and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson on the role of compromise in divided communities. J. S. Mill's view of colliding opinions offers a moderate agonistic understanding of politics, while the concept of debate plays a similar role for Márton Szabó, a contemporary Hungarian political theorist. Finally, Mouffe's position stands at the conflictual end of this spectrum, although conflicts are delimited on the normative ground of democracy.

Keywords: democracy, agonism, conflict, compromise, consensus, debate

Conflict, consensus and in-between-positions

Current trends in politics and political culture, such as polarization and populism, highlight that conflict may be a widespread experience, and suggest that politics is always conflictual in nature. However, conflict does not necessarily play a constitutive, let alone a positive role in theories of politics. Chantal Mouffe's theory is an exception, since she accepts the role of conflicts within a

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definitely democratic order.¹ Nonetheless, the extension of conflict to democracy is not unambiguous in its consequences, and raises questions on the nature and intensity of conflicts, and on the relation between conflict and its opposites. Given that democracy, speaking in spatial metaphors, is the terrain of politics palisaded against the disruption of order through violence or killing the ‘other’, it should offer answers to the nature and intensity of conflicts.

This is a problem addressed in Mouffe’s theory, which stems from a Schmittian starting point but is delimited with the help of the criterion of democracy. Mouffe’s agonistic theory may be understood in some sense as a non-pure but “in-between” theorization. In the following, I discuss the consensus-conflict relation from a theoretical position that aims to reveal the ground for understanding their complex nexus. In order to do so, I seek the conceptual and theoretical formulations that are versions of this in-between-position, or may help to formulate a more complex relationship between conflict and consensus. Mouffe’s theory of democratic agonism is inserted into these non-pure positions as a formulation of democracy on a more radical and political ground, although sometimes standing closer to the in-between argumentations.

As the first move in this theoretical route, the first section seeks theories of compromise, i.e., not the direct opposite of conflict, which would be consensus. Theories of compromise reveal that compromises entail a moment of consensus. Compromises can be divided into two types: the one that concerns the nature of order, and the other that concerns a given politics within the established order. However, in the first case, compromise can be accepted as the foundational moment of order. In the second case, compromise is a disputable expectation, and stands closer to consensus than conflict. Given that the latter belongs to the theoretical group that interprets discussion, discourse and deliberation as a vehicle carrying a divided community to a sort of consensus, in the second section the theoretical elaboration deals with a conceptualization of deliberation and conflict, under the concept of “debate”. Although the concept is applied by Mouffe as well, she adds the more radical point of power to this logic. In the third section, I discuss Mouffe’s formulation and delimitation of the political, and her answer to the problem stemming from the radical theorization of conflictual politics.

¹ With this theoretical move, she offers a more realistic view of democracy (cf. Beckstein 2011, p. 37) and thus makes her theory attractive for contemporary realists as well (cf. Galston 2010, p. 396), who generally value conflict. That is, conflict can be seen as a central element in Mouffe’s theory.

Conflict, consensus and compromise

A common, although not very general attitude towards conflict is caution and avoidance, which might be a valid answer in a conflict-led political culture. The demand for consensus seems to be a proper answer in cases when the refusal of conflicts can support democracy's stability against tendencies towards radicalization and polarization as exclusivist populism illustrates.

While conflict may be a burden in political life, consensus, its direct opposite, may be equally unattainable. In a polarized political culture, consensus is available only in minor issues, which are irrelevant for the actors involved; in other words, in issues which are non-political. Besides conflict and consensus, there is another concept worth noting, i.e. *compromise*, which might be the realistic answer to the problem of radically divided societies' survival. For a conceptual differentiation between consensus and compromise, two theories are worth analysing: F. R. Ankersmit's interpretation of representative democracy as a compromise-based order; and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's theory of compromise based on deliberation. The former would be neutral from Mouffe's perspective, but conflictual agonism certainly stands against the deliberative expectation of compromise.

Ankersmit (2002) offers a historical survey on representative democracy, and presents political conditions as problems to which representative government was the historical answer. The specific problem in the 19th century was that society was divided into two irreconcilable ideological camps. Although contrary to earlier centuries, this 'mortal opposition' was secular in nature (Ankersmit 2002, p. 93). However, the two eras were identical in their fear of civil war. This led to different institutional answers relating to the role and nature of the state. In the religious civil wars of the 17th century, the state emerged as an independent arbitrator between the camps and thus could secure peace. Contrary to this, in the post-Napoleonic order, the state became the site of fight. The expression of social division on the level of the state jeopardized the order, and the situation might have led to civil war.

The answer was, according to Ankersmit, representative democracy, an "ingenious political system", which eventually offered the frame of a specific form of politics: a compromise-led practice in radically divided societies. Thus, representative democracy is organized to fulfil this expectation, offering a political space to resolve the conflicts of a deeply divided society. Under the conditions of radical division, "the political challenge of the time was not to create consensus out of political disagreement... the best they could realistically strive for was not *consensus*, but *compromise*." (Ankersmit 2002, p. 96; emphasis in the original). As a result of this political arrangement, and "thanks to this readiness to compromise,

civil war could be avoided,” and opponents “could now live more or less safely under the same political roof” (Ankersmit 2002, p. 96). Compromise demanded certain forms of political attitudes: the capacity to transcend strife, to see oneself from the outside, and a certain degree of impartiality (Ankersmit 2002, p. 97). In other words, compromise needs some depoliticizing capacity on the part of the individual involved in political matters.

What Ankersmit states is that representative democracy, i.e., the democracy we currently live in, is designed to solve the problem of the tragic collisions of irreconcilable political standings and ideologies. Thus, representative democracy enables people to live in the same political community. And representative democracy cannot be maintained without people’s willingness to transcend the intensity of conflict to the degree to be able to compromise. This suggests that compromise belongs to modern democracy by nature, while consensus cannot play this role. Consensus and compromise both need a certain degree of depoliticization. From this perspective, they differ in how much intensity-loss they demand. However, consensus has another meaning: completely abandoning core ideas, values, ideologies in order to gain a peaceful solution. Compromise seems to be different, and may be seen as the realistic answer to deep social divisions.

Although from the different perspective of contemporary American democracy, compromise plays a central role also for Gutmann and Thomson’s deliberative theory (2010). However, their main concern is the proper functioning of a fully-fledged democracy, rather than the foundations of democracy from the perspective of its ever-existing possibility of dissolution. For them, compromise is necessary for democratic politics not only because of counterweighing polarizing tendencies, but because of democracy’s possible success in creating sound decisions and good policies. For good democracy, a certain degree of openness is necessary: chances for change, and decisions that are legitimate because the temporarily excluded minority also accepts them.

Contrary to this ideal condition, permanent campaigning anchors political positions and thus strengthens the status quo, which is not a value *per se* (Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1129). Thus, compromise is necessary in a divided society in order to make change. Compromise needs a certain form of agreement over the goals, as well as specific personal capacities or ‘mindset’ towards the opponents: a compromising attitude and mutual respect. Mutual respect is also part of mainly deliberative democratic theories, and this is true for compromise as well, since it “helps a democracy endure in the face of irresolvable moral disagreement” (Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1129–30). Compromise is understood here in conditions of radically divided political communities, but can only be attained if the opposing parties find value in compromise itself.

A conceptual differentiation can be drawn here between compromise and consensus, since Gutmann and Thomson argue that there is a difference between sacrificing something relevant as a result of a debate with the adversary in order to gain something additional, and sacrificing core values but gaining nothing. The latter is in fact a ‘capitulation’, not a compromise (cf. Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1130, 1134). They do not label this form of ‘capitulation’ as consensus, but as a non-attainable form of compromise. But we may suppose that this is also a consensus, since consensus and ‘capitulation’ have in common that they can be interpreted as non-valid political claims. As ideals, they stand above the working of real politics. Compromise seems to be standing between two opposites: standing on principles and giving up everything valuable: “[c]ompromises are usually a mélange of measures that reflect to conflicting values which no single theory or ideology could consistently encompass” (Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1132).

However, we could ask at this point why we need compromise at all; a compromise which, in fact, blurs the difference between political positions. Gutmann and Thomson note that sometimes uncompromising positions are valuable because of the mobilizing effect of intransigency, as in the case of social movements, or politicians who represent their voters’ will and desires (Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1128). However, that is the point where Chantal Mouffe’s critique of consensus-based politics might be recalled. As Mouffe emphasises in her works, blurred positions may question clear differences between political positions. This practice may weaken identifications with unclear political positions and strengthen clear, visible and distinguishable political positions with which people can easily identify.² This leads to the displacement of the point of identification, and may be exemplified in the success of current exclusivist populisms and in the rise of the radical right.

In other words, we have found two positions: The one that argues for compromise in order to make change for successful governing. Although this is not giving up everything valuable for us and our voters’ position, but apparently needs some sort of common ground which, as a consequence, creates vague boundaries among political positions and points of identification. The second position is that successful politics and, as a consequence, democratic order as a whole cannot be maintained without the people’s emotional commitment. What is necessary for this is not consensus or, perhaps, its more realist version,

² This argument appears in Mouffe’s many works since the 1990s, here I only mention the perhaps most elaborated and concise appearance: Mouffe 2005; cf. Mouffe 2000, p. 5–6; p. 113–114, etc.; or Mouffe 2008.

compromise, but the acceptance of the role of conflict in politics. This helps to highlight differences and offers a vision of clear-cut political boundaries.

Although the latter position is that conflict is valuable for democratic politics, Ankersmit's historical analysis suggests that representative democracy is constructed under the condition of an urgent need for compromise. Democracy probably can be maintained only with a politics which entails the moment of compromise, when conditions are conflictual in the Schmittian sense. That is, when democracy should be maintained, i.e. under conditions which entail the ever-existing possibility of the friend/enemy-relations to appear. Democracy stems from mastering this problem, which suggests that theories that accept the relevance of non-consensual politics as the foundation of democracy must take into account a certain form of moderation of conflict. However, it is not necessarily consensus, which precedes or ends politics. In Gutmann and Thomson's article, it is not consensus that stands in the centre of politics but a certain interpretation of it, which enables the opposing parties to alter their starting positions in the course of public controversies. In other words, this compromise – similarly to Ankersmit's ideas – enables change.

To sum up, compromise could be described as moderation of conflicts via political processes with the apparent consequence of change that constructs something new and different compared to the political adversaries' starting positions. Unambiguous, although not always transparent, the aim is to live in the same society, "under the same political roof". What is problematic about the non-foundational but good-policy compromise is that it is constructed as a primary norm, and for its implementation a certain form of consensus must be attained in advance: for example, that the status quo is not right, or that a given policy must be changed. Behind compromise there is consensus, and as a result of compromise-oriented politics, there are parties that can hardly be differentiated from each other. However, blurring differences in compromises can be the right answer when a political regime gains its legitimacy from delimitation of conflicts and from the community's survival, as opposed to constant and devastating strife. However, it seems less appropriate when the political order has lost its legitimacy and needs active engagement for reparation.

These examples suggest that compromise has at least two different meanings. The first concerns the foundation of society and the political regime (let us simply call this 'order' or rather 'democracy'), while the second concerns 'things' or 'matters' (as in the ancient expressions of the Latin 'res' or the Greek 'pragmata') as important for the given political community and of which different interpretations may exist. The plurality of society is expressed and will never cease to exist in the 'common things' – although probably in simplified forms. This suggests that the logic of compromise always entails an element of consensus at the point

of its logical sequence, and that does not stand at the end, but rather on the opposite extreme, at the temporal beginning. As Ankersmit's historical interpretation of democracy suggested, modern democratic order – as we know it today – is the place of compromise, or an order which compromise-based politics fits best.

Although in practice it may be hard to distinguish between compromises concerned with the 'res' or the 'foundations' of society, there must be a moment of 'consensus' in each case. This seems to be true even for Mouffe's conflict-led interpretation of politics. Her theoretical position stands closer to the analytical differentiation of the 'foundations' of democracy. As she suggests, a certain form of normative expectations towards debate or conflictual coexistence, a "consensus on the rule of the game" must certainly exist (Mouffe 2000, p. 4). This may be called, referring to Mouffe's terminology, the condition of "conflictual consensus" (Mouffe 2005, p. 121), which, however, is based on the distinction between the "enemy" and "adversary" in political practice, and places the enemies out of the terrain of democratic politics. Eventually, we may conclude that it is a consensus over the basic values of democracy.

The necessity of a certain form of consensus in an argument on the value of conflict seems to be surprising, because it blurs the difference between conflict- and consensus-based politics, at least from its own perspective. The solution may lie in the origin and value of conflict: conflicts always refer to difference and plurality stemming from outside of politics. Conflicts are valuable for a democracy because of democratic identification, and for the survival of democratic order in the long run. These conclusions may not deny the fact that every political community is based on some sort of cooperation, at least when the participants vote 'yes' for that order. Modern representative democracy certainly plays that role in the eyes of Ankersmit, Gutmann and Thompson, and even Mouffe.

A historical note should be added here. The idea that cooperation and compromise (or a moment of consensus) is always necessary for the existence of a democratic order holds true not just for modern democracy, but for every democracy. The idea appears in the first theory of democracy in the Periclean Athens.³ This suggests that the conflict/consensus problem is fundamental for any form of order founded on the demos. A democratic order cannot be based on the supposition that power can be taken out of the hands of the demos, which means that the survival of the order in the context of citizens' conflicts can only rest on the demos composed of conflicting citizens. In classical democratic theory, two components played this role: mutual respect (*aidos*) and (a sense of) justice (*dike*). Thus, "mutual respect" can be understood not only as a normative ideal, but in a

³ Cf. Protagoras's democratic theory in his great myth. Kerferd 1981, p. 126.

broader view, the expression of the associative character of politics, which is no less universal than the claim that concerns the role of conflicts.

Contrary to the universal claim of mutual respect, all the contemporary authors cited above, Gutmann and Thomson, and Mouffe, whether deliberative or agonistic democrats, emphasise the reverse as well. Mouffe notes that deliberative and consensus-oriented democrats are the inheritors of the Enlightenment. She also condemns them because they are too optimistic about human nature where the idea of mutual respect derives from – which is, as we have seen, a much older, and as I suggest, a much more universal claim. She emphasises that, contrary to this heritage of thought, human nature has its own “dark” side as well, a universal desire for conflicts (Mouffe 2000, p. 130–132). On the other hand, Gutmann and Thomson also note at one point of their argument that “[a]s political theorists and political scientists have long recognized, contestation is at least as important as consensus in a democracy,” (Gutmann – Thomson 2010, p. 1130) even though they do not wish to change their compromise- or consensus-oriented position. Interestingly, here they refer not only to Mouffe, but also to a modern classic of 19th century liberalism, John Stuart Mill.

Mill’s name may sound somewhat odd in this context, although he can be interpreted as a liberal deliberative agonist not standing so far from an idea of public discussion embedded into emotions and interspersed with human conflict. It is certainly true that Mill is less radical in terms of incorporating conflict in political theory than Mouffe. Although he is not a radical democrat, he accepts the relevance of conflict in relation to opinions and convictions (cf. Turner 2010). It is worth stopping here for a moment to analyse his ideas on opinion and conflict, as well as the limits of his thought, because this may serve as a starting point in searching for a theoretical and conceptual tool for the consensus/conflict problem, but this time from the point of view of discussion, discourse and debate.

Colliding opinions and the concept of debate

Current research reveals a more conflict-led vision of politics in Mill than we generally think, highlighting his dependence on the idea of emotions and identity. His starting point in general is the experience or feeling of change in his contemporary society, with the loss of authority to guide people (Turner 2010, p. 41–42). Unlike today, this surely does not lead to the incorporation of radical uncertainty and ambiguity of meanings (cf. Mill 2003, p. 91–92). But he seems to detect a cultural shift (democratic in character) embodied in the widespread occurrence of diverging opinions. As part of this, Mill realizes that his contemporaries are obsessed with discussion almost over everything: “to discuss, and to

question established opinions, are merely two phrases for the same thing.”⁴ The public’s obsession with discussion is based on a general belief that everyone’s opinion may be equally valid. This experience seems to be reflected in the second chapter of *On Liberty* (Mill 2003), where his arguments revolve around the relevance of free speech conceptualized in many places as “collision of opinions” (cf. Turner 2010, p. 49). This *collision* is important for our purposes because it can be connected to contemporary ideas of democracy, both radical and consent-based.

Mill’s first argument on freedom of expression deals with the situation when minority rather than popular opinion expresses “truth”, but is suppressed based on the belief that it is false. In this case, the community needs minority opinion not only on a moral (because of the highly problematic position of infallibility) but also on an epistemic ground (Mill 2003, p. 88ff). In the second argument, Mill analyses the opposite: when popular opinion is right, or we would say, there is consensus over truth. Due to this, the community does not need counterarguments, unlike in the former situation. However, Mill contends that people need counterarguments in this case as well. First, because no one knows what the truth is without its opposite; second, because people need emotional attachment to their opinions (cf. in particular Mill 2003, p. 103–104).

The first case can be labelled as epistemic argument, since Mill’s argument revolves around the proper knowledge over one’s own belief. He refers to Cicero directly with the “*in utramque partem*” – speaking for and against – argument, the idea that one can argue on every side of an issue (Mill 2003, p. 104). The Ciceronian *in utramque partem* argument goes back to its classical Greek rhetorical counterpart, to the Greek dialectic tradition, for example to Protagoras and Aristotle’s idea of the logic of public arguments.⁵

Classical *in utramque partem* and the condition to which it refers entails contingency, rationality and reverence. The idea of speaking on every side of an issue requires listening to the opponents, and in practice, suggests that discussions and debates are always open-ended in the realm of politics, and thus, never have final solutions (cf. Palonen 2008, p. 82–86). Similarly to the logic of mutual respect, *hearing the other side* can emerge only if the other is accepted politically (and morally). This leads to a specific institutional design in which discussion is possible. The pattern of rationality going hand in hand with mutual respect appears not only in Mill, but also in his interpreters, Gutmann and Thompson, when they argue

⁴ Quoted by Turner 2010, p. 41.

⁵ For Protagoras, cf. the idea of “contradictory arguments”, Sprague 2001: p. 21. Protagoras 80 B6a, cf. 80 A1, p. 4, 5; 80 A3, p. 7.; 80 A20, p. 13; and 80 B5, p. 21. For Aristotle (on the condition of rhetoric): Aristotle 2007, 1357a.

for the value of deliberation. One of their reasons for deliberative democracy is that deliberation probably broadens citizens' perspective on issues, because citizens should "consider the claims of more of their fellow citizens, in a process in which moral arguments are taken seriously" (Gutmann and Thomson 1996, p. 42).

Although in various forms, in the latter case having *colliding opinions* serves as epistemic positions to arrive at the solution and entails an element of rationality and impartiality. The second part of Mill's argument concerns the *emotive capacity* of colliding opinions. Free speech and the possibility of one's opinion to be exposed to its opponents are important because "however true [an opinion] may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth" (Mill 2003, p. 103). That is, collision of opinions is crucial in society and politics not only because it can reveal "truth" or on epistemic grounds, but also because it can deepen our personal commitment to that "truth", and may render the ideas vivid. His thought may be relevant for agonistic thinkers, at least when we have Mouffe in mind, since what Mill clearly expresses here is that politics does not exist without emotions, and these emotions arise from the agonistic and conflictual nature of politics.

Mill's thoughts have serious limitations compared to agonism: what he has in mind when he speaks about "living truth" is not simply political ideas and deep-rooted personal opinions but the development of a moral character. This is a highly individualistic conceptualisation. Colliding opinions create better conditions to understand our beliefs and thus, ourselves, but not community. However, even this idea may offer interesting considerations for moderately – perhaps liberal – agonistics. Despite the fact that the *colliding opinions – living truth* connection is conceptualized in individual terms, it entails a striking reference to holding opinion as a way of life. Or in other words, to politics as a personal, emotional and lived experience. Our opinions should be exposed to those of others because "the experience of antagonism is fundamental in developing a more robust understanding of our beliefs" (Turner 2010, p. 40).

To sum up, Mill's "concern is as much with *how* beliefs are held as with *what* beliefs are held" (Turner 2010, p. 47). This suggests an impressive idea of public debate in which everyone is immersed with their complete personality. The idea of politics as lived experience also appears in Mouffe's agonism, but in a non-individual form: conflicts create identities as expressed in the "we/they" distinction, and the parts of the distinction always refer to groups. However, Mill's agonism may suggest an alternative although common concept for theorizing discussion under the notion of conflict: *debate*. The concept and idea of debate appears in Mouffe as well, but *discourse* bears more theoretical weight in her agonism. We can find another conceptualization of debate, although this one also stems from a certain idea of discourse.

Central European political theory is extremely underrepresented, and almost entirely unknown today to Western audiences. Nevertheless, I find it useful to turn to a Hungarian discourse theorist, Márton Szabó, whose theory stems from an experience similar to Mill's: the loss of certainty and the extreme saturation of politics with – open and public – discourse. After the collapse of communism, this has apparently and exclusively a positive tone, even an all-embracing enthusiasm over free politics.⁶

In conceptualizing the experience that freedom and contingency means, Szabó turns to Schmitt, first via Ágnes Heller's reconceptualization of the political (Heller 1993). Heller points out a characteristic of modernity: the dissolution of the quasi-naturalistic character of politics when the criterion of the political – that is, what counts as a political action, political institution etc. – is based only on *who* the state is, that is, on an already given and anchored position in society (cf. Heller 1993, p. 5–6). In modernity, this has changed to the question *what* the state is, and this serves as the moment of the rise of the political. For Szabó, what rises in this dissolution is not only the political but its specific manifestation: discourse. The dissolution of certainty and the opening up of the historical horizon for contingency leads to the reconceptualization of the political and to the realization that legitimacy can be formed only discursively (cf. Szabó 2003). Schmitt's criterion for the political – the distinction between friend and enemy – refers to the autonomy of politics. It is the theoretical expression of the changing nature of politics, where politics draws its own boundaries: the concept of the political “connects the determination of the boundaries of politics and the interpretation of its specificities to the definition-creating practice of political actors itself.” (Szabó 2014, p. 22)

However, this practice is always controversial. Every definition and construction of boundary is conflictual in essence, as Schmitt has shown. Even such hermeneutical concepts as *understanding* (*Verstehen*) or *interpretation* entail the element of conflict; understanding is not a peaceful concord with a tone of finality (cf. Szabó 2003). Based on this assumption, Szabó interprets politics in a threefold manner: Politics is first and foremost, the “care of community” (Szabó 1998, p. 312). Second: politics can never depend on homogeneity and absolute identity, but is the place of “rival interpretations”, which always has a stake, for politics is not just a simple game or play because of the first condition. Third, as a consequence, there is always debate in politics, because in speech there is a stake, and

⁶ Because Szabó's works are written mainly in Hungarian, citing his works in detail would not have added value for the readers; therefore I just refer to some of his main books in the followings. Translations are provided by the author.

because politics always entails an element of identification and decision: “points of view are swirling, perspectives collide, and there is debate in society. One can act only if one makes decisions and chooses among alternatives, and only if one adheres to one’s decision.” (Szabó 2014, p. 60) For Szabó, “debate” stands in the centre of “discursive politics”. Politics mainly consists of debate; but *debate* is a philosophical concept which describes the human condition as the political condition. In an Aristotelian perspective, *logos* is the central element of sociability, and in a similar perspective, for Bakhtin, human existence is dialogical in nature. Following Szabó’s argument, we can transform these ideas into the description of the *political* condition. The human condition is based on *logos* and is dialogical in nature. The political condition, as the specified form of human existence, entails not only *logos* and dialogue, but collision and conflict. In politics, people are connected through *logos* that revolves around rivalry. In other words, debate is a *relation* which connects individuals who take part in politics and forms the identity of political objects, the boundaries of politics, and their common identities. This is the *political* meaning of *debate*; since it involves plurality and conflict, but is not peaceful, deliberative and consensus-oriented communication by nature (Szabó 2014, p. 33; cf. Szabó 2003, p. 209–214).

To sum up, contrary to Mill, debate and collision of opinions are not only elements but are foundational moments in politics. In other words, debate and collision describe the nature of politics. This might mean that the function of debate is not to reach consensus in a rational process, because consensus is only one possible outcome of public discourse.

Nonetheless, Szabó’s conceptualizations seem to stand close to that of Mouffe. However, Mouffe is much more radical than Szabó and even Mill in terms of conceptualizing conflict and the fundamental role of debate in politics. What she emphasises as the crucial trait in debate is the “possible alternatives” for a community (Mouffe 2000, p. 113). As she argues, a well-functioning democracy needs clear political positions because only this can be the basis of debate about “real alternatives”. People can “make their voice heard... [in] agonistic debate”, and what deprives them from this possibility is “consensus at the centre” (Mouffe 2013, p. 119). That is, there is no debate without clear positions with the real chance to differ. What is at stake in debate is making formerly unheard voices heard and expressing real political alternatives. Concerning conflict, Mouffe embraces the radical idea of antagonism, which can be understood in a simplified fashion as the relation between forces who do collide because they are fundamentally different. In other words, political relations are always power relations. This element does not seem to be playing a foundational role in the former conceptualizations of debate, although they embrace conflict in public discussion.

The boundaries of democracy

The acceptance of conflict as an inalienable element of politics suggests a picture of politics in which problems are not solved through discussion but rather through decision making, a practice that always entails a moment of exclusion. However, from a critical point of view concerning mainly legitimacy, this might be seen as an expression of violence, and as “decisionism” with a tendency towards exclusion, which is dangerous for a harmonious – although unpolitical – democratic order (cf. Honig 2007, p. 2). Following the former logic of discussion, but making it more explicit, it is worth posing the question whether there are only the two extremes of consensus and violence, and whether there is nothing in between the two opposites. This binary conceptualization reduces the possible meanings of the relation between democracy and conflict, and as a consequence, the meanings, practices and future directions of democracy. This reflects to the problem which can be called the ‘double boundary problem of democracy’. This is what I will discuss in the following, analysing exclusively Mouffe’s theory.

The double boundary problem, simply put, is the question of what counts as democratic and what does not, that is, what is excluded. This can be envisaged, following a Schmittian logic, in the form of a vertical scale of intensity, which has two limitations, or excluded practices. At the upper limit, we can detect what is described as the ever existing possibility of warlike conflicts in a society. This is a condition to which, according to Ankersmit, parliamentary politics (or democracy) was the historical answer. However, democracy has a lower limit of intensity as well, as the idea of conflict in Mouffe’s theory shows. In my argument, Mouffe’s agonism is theorized standing between the upper and lower limits of intensity.

For Mouffe, conflict is valuable, although we may say that not in itself. Although she points out the normative role of conflict, this means primarily that democracy needs conflicts in order to be truly pluralistic. Without conflicts, i.e., under the condition of assumed consensus, there would be no politics. This is a type of depolitization that can eventually marginalize voices of dissent, while politics “in the centre” may lead to more powerful revolt against non-political conditions and against the presumed consensus. Taking the contemporary example of populism, we can see both exclusive and inclusive forms, but populism’s tantalizing general value might be that it helps formerly unheard voices to be heard in the political realm.⁷ As Mouffe argues, consensus-oriented – or non-political – politics may lead to the return of the oppressed, although in a more turbulent form (cf. e.g., Mouffe 2000, p. 114). Without the chance to clearly and

7 As it was theorized in the late 90s by Nadia Urbinati (1998) as well.

visibly express opinion, discontent, will and identity— i.e., without *real* politics – unheard voices will seek other routes to be express themselves, and there is a good chance that they will be violent (Mouffe 2000, p. 105; 2005 *passim*).

Depoliticizing politics, consensus-oriented political practice, or politics in the centre may therefore be dangerous, but radicalization is only one possible outcome that may urge us to argue against depoliticization. The main point is not simply radicalization but that emotions form the central part of politics, without which democracy could not be maintained in the long run (cf. e.g. Mouffe 2008). Not only does the friend/enemy distinction offer a more realistic view of politics because it sheds light on conflicts, but it emphasises the role of identity formation in politics and their relational character. However the emotional power of the friend/enemy relation might be, it embrace a radical distinction that cannot be put at the centre of politics. Not only because this move would distort the state, but because it is certainly undemocratic. As Mouffe often notes, the “friend/enemy” relation should be transformed into a more moderate form of “friend/adversary” distinction, where democratic institutions can play this role. This suggests, however, that there should be a certain form of consensus over the basic values of democracy in a given political community (e.g. Mouffe 2000, p. 4, or Mouffe 1993, p. 65), although Mouffe is vague at these points, and her theory seems to be undertheorized (cf. Knops 2007, p. 116).

Following the logic of the double boundary problem, this might mean the resuscitation and protection of values that are inalienable for a vivid democracy through truly political practices which entail conflicts but embrace the logic of delimitation. In this case, two statements can be made in relation to democracy. First, for democracy to exist and survive, there should be boundaries (a decision over the democratic and the undemocratic), which need a certain minimal consensus over the values and the role of democracy itself. Second: democracy embraces not only true pluralism but conflicts as well, because, as Mouffe in many places argues, the appearance of conflicts in politics forms the condition of plurality.

Returning to the former argument on emotions, politics based on the idea of consensus does not offer space for identifications that may foster *democratic values* (cf. Mouffe 1993, p. 54, Mouffe 2000, p. 104–105 etc.). The relation between values (consensus) and politics (conflict) is quite the reverse of what it is in the consensus-oriented perspective: we need politics with conflicts and identification in order to protect and maintain democratic order. Politics mainly revolves around emotions, and the practice of politics in the centre. Consensus in this sense expresses a general fear of emotions. But the lack of emotions will lead to alienation from politics, and eventually erodes democratic legitimacy (cf. Mouffe 2000, p. 104, 111). Consensus, in this non-foundational sense weakens, rather than strengthens democracy.

A central form of the boundary problem concerns the upper limits of the intensity of conflicts, and the creation of the legitimate other, i.e., what is acceptable in a democracy and what is not. Political actors construct themselves in relation to each other (that is expressed in the friend/enemy distinction and its variations), and in this case the question is their substantive quality. This question, however, is normative and entails inner, although perhaps implicit norms, since these qualities are judged by the criterion of the survival of democracy. According to Mouffe and others, the decisive question of democracy is whether political actors accept their adversaries as legitimate actors or not (cf. Torfing 1999, p. 121).

It is necessary to draw a distinction between acts that are democratic and those that are not, in order to preserve the condition of plurality (cf. e.g. Mouffe 2000, p. 99–100). However, this means differentiation between enemy and adversary:

the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas but we will not question his right to defend them. The category of the enemy does not disappear but is displaced; it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic ‘rules of the game’ and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community. (Mouffe 2000, p. 4, cf. Mouffe 1995)

That is, democracy has its enemies, but those who are the members of the *democratic* political community and who “live under the same political roof” should treat the – or *their* – political other in a different way. “The category of the ‘adversary’ serves here to designate the status of those who disagree concerning the ranking and interpretation of the values.” The enemies of democracy are those who do not accept the basic values of (liberal) democracy and the democratic way of life. Their political demands cannot be treated as equally legitimate as the others’, “since their disagreement is not merely about ranking but of a much more fundamental type” and, in fact, they do not belong to the democratic “we” (Mouffe 2000, p. 107, cf. Norval 2000, p. 230).

Although differentiation or division is possible in a given community, the political question concerns their form and type. Diminishing conflicts might lead to the devaluation of plurality or they may even cease to exist. Following Mouffe’s critique, liberal theory is formed around the idea of pluralism, but because liberals are oriented towards consensus, they are in practice against pluralism. For Mouffe, “pluralism is not merely a fact (...) but an axiological principle” (Mouffe 2000, p. 19), although she notes that extreme pluralism is unacceptable because it also misses the moment of the political, since everything is possible without difference under such conditions. Pluralism, therefore democracy cannot

exist without antagonism and conflict, or in other words, outside of power relations. At this point, the real theoretical and political question does not concern diminishing differences in reaching a consensus but creating conflicts in a democratic manner. In relation to democracy and conflict, the question should be posed about the boundaries of democracy.

In conclusion, we may say that compromise and consensus are crucial in a democracy, although in the “foundational” sense, or in Mouffe’s theoretical universe, as the “shared... set of political principles specific to [the modern democratic] tradition” (Mouffe 1993, p. 65), which stands in “liberty and equality for all” (Mouffe 1993, p. 65, Mouffe 1993, p. 83). However, this does not diminish the moment of antagonism, but puts it on the outer boundary of the political community, while lets the position of the “adversary” appear, since these values open up space for debate over the diverse meanings of the core values.

This suggests that Mouffe’s agonism does not stand so far from the moderate versions of conflictual politics, from some forms of the idea of compromise or other conceptualizations of debate. Other authors have drawn a similar conclusion (e.g. Knops 2007); however, my argument is slightly different. The theoretical continuum of intensity as it appeared in the ideas from compromise to conflicts shows us two relevant conclusions. First, there is a whole conceptual terrain for the expression of ideas of conflict, and Mouffe’s agonism is just one of them, although an extremely relevant point of reference, since her acceptance of Schmitt’s most radical starting point. Second, almost all the theorists on this continuum, especially Ankersmit, Mill, and Mouffe, might have in common that they could be interpreted as theoreticians who might help to create a theoretical terrain between – radical – consensus and – radical – conflict. This terrain could be theorized on the seemingly existing possibility that the opposites always entail their opposing other as a moderating moment, or as the condition of their existence. For example, although compromise stands closer to consensus than to conflict, it entails conflict as a central element, although not in a pure, but in a contextualized form. To attain a compromise, opponents should agree that they will not agree in the future. This idea can be extended to the whole terrain of democratic politics. Opponents should be in concordance that they will support the common ground of disagreement and conflict. However, the question whether a conflict is proper for a democracy or not will always be a matter of non-neutral, therefore political and normative decision. However, it is always based on the necessary condition of every democracy that the realm of collision should be protected. This suggests that the relation between conflict and compromise/consensus is always dynamic, and both are needed for a democratic politics.

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