

**‘The work of annihilation of an absolute enmity’: The Other as
Democratic Enemy, and the Other Enemies of Democracy in
Contemporary Post-Marxist Discourse.**

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“I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end;
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.”

(William Blake ‘A Poison Tree’)

Introduction

Ever since the ancient Greeks articulated a qualitative difference between native Greeks and foreign barbarians (or *barbaroi*), the other has been effectively condemned to carry the accursed share of collective political enmity. The non-Greek other was the enemy because s/he was different, and the enemy could not enjoy the same rights and privileges afforded to Greeks because s/he was other. The community thus conceived was always already built upon the constitutive violence of exclusion: heterogeneities were identified, excluded, and routinely destroyed so as to enliven the communal bond, and the communal bond survived only for so long as the community

faced a common enemy-other. Carl Schmitt, the renowned conservative political and legal theorist, concludes that the alien other is the political enemy *par excellence* because her particular difference undermines or voids the communitarian values and standards of the society in which she finds herself, and she must be combatted and killed precisely so as to safeguard society against her absencing alterity (Schmitt 1996).

Liberal and Leftist theorists and activists reflexively abhor the exclusionary logic of political institution, and they have sought to develop forms of politics, which include and empower previously excluded others. For instance, J. S. Mill grounds liberal best practice in the 'harm to others' principle: each and every individual, he maintains, ought to enjoy the freedom to think and do as s/he pleases, provided that her chosen actions do not harm others in turn (Mill 1864). The institutionalisation of the means and ends of liberal democracy and the related affirmation of the individual's negative liberty serves to delimit political power whilst simultaneously vouchsafing the other's right to live free from the spectres of political persecution and social violence.

For Marxists, liberal democracy constituted merely the epiphenomenal expression of contingent capitalist forces and relations. The age of democracy was therefore merely a *transient* stage of historical development; when the rotten structures of capitalism collapsed under the weight of their internal contradictions, the ideological legerdemains of liberal democracy would simply melt into air. Marxists resultantly rejected the means and ends of liberal democracy, and they disavowed the liberal institutionalisation of difference. Rather than preserving the negative liberties of atomised, individual others, Marxists instead articulated the world-historical demands of the Big Other; the universal Proletariat.

Liberals typically elect to defend the rights of the isolated other, whereas Marxists champion the necessarily revolutionary goals of the global Other, but the discourses of liberalism and Marxism are equivalently grounded in an anti-political

bias and an almost instinctive revulsion with the systematised exclusion of the other. However, as Schmitt contends, liberal / Leftist *post-politics* remains political precisely to the extent that it is resolutely *anti-political*, and he warns that liberal / Leftist anti-politics can easily terminate, somewhat counter-intuitively, in an absolute repoliticisation over the proper stakes and limits of political engagement. Liberals and Leftists advocate the principled flight from power, but in the process they set themselves *against* the partisans of political power, and the resulting antagonism over the effective meaning of the political threatens to lapse into ‘the work of annihilation of an absolute enmity’ (Schmitt 2004, 67).

Whilst Schmitt’s conceptual intervention was subsequently disavowed because of his active association with the NSDAP in the 1930s, his texts have been recently reread and redescribed by poststructuralist and post-Marxist philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida (2005), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 2005a, 2005b). For their part, Laclau and Mouffe strive to retain a de-essentialised concept of the political, which can be articulated alongside the project of democracy. They readily agree with Schmitt that political antagonism is simply ineradicable, but they believe that antagonisms can be – and should be – demilitarised and democratised, such that enemy-others become democratic adversaries or friendly enemies. However, in the process of redescribing the enemy-other as the democratic adversary, Laclau and Mouffe – perhaps unintentionally – concretise absolute enmities with the other enemies of democracy who refuse to democratise antagonism and rearticulate enemies as democratic adversaries. Thus, it is arguable that post-Marxism terminates in an explicitly anti-political antagonism, which sets democratic dialogists in opposition to absolute enemy-others over the meaning and limits of the political.

In this paper, I will explore Schmitt’s concept of the political, and his critique of liberal / Leftist depoliticisation (according to which political antagonisms are

sublimated into economic competitions and / or dialogic arguments), and I will also evaluate Laclau and Mouffe's attempted postmodernisation of the concept of the political, focusing in particular on their sustained attempt to transform the Schmittian political enemy into a dialogic adversary. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe purport to preserve the concept of the political against the ideological closures of liberalism, I will argue to the contrary that their monological reduction of political enmity to dialogic adversity in fact demonstrates their fidelity to the depoliticising ethicisations of liberalism *as against* the concept of the political properly understood. I will go on to suggest that this attempted post-politicisation or depoliticisation results in a total repoliticisation, and a renewed absolute antagonism over the nature and limits of politicisation itself. Laclau and Mouffe, I will argue, contribute to the work of annihilation of an absolute enmity precisely to the extent that they supplant the political with zero-death democratic dialogism. In their desperate attempt to extricate themselves from the horrors of the political relation *qua* absolute antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe – perhaps unwittingly – articulate an absolute enmity that pits democratic dialogists against enemy-others who, for all intents and purposes, should be ideological allies, if not friends.

Liberalism and the Post-Political Economy

For Carl Schmitt, 'The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy' (Schmitt 1996, 26). While Schmitt accepts that the friend / enemy distinction loosely corresponds to other distinctions in fairly autonomous spheres, such as the moral distinction of good and bad, the aesthetic distinction of beautiful and ugly, and so on, and while he acknowledges also that these other distinctions can be utilised to bolster the friend / enemy distinction, he believes that the political distinction remains autonomous and

irreducible in the final instance. It follows from this that the enemy is not necessarily aesthetically ugly or morally bad, and also that friends are not necessarily beautiful or morally good. While these various other antitheses may prove strong enough to group people according to friend and enemy, this does not mean that the political distinction is reducible to these other antitheses, but rather it demonstrates how any antithesis may become politicised.

The liberal, Schmitt suggests, is someone who attempts to rearticulate the political enemy as an economic ‘competitor’ and a ‘debating adversary’ respectively (28). Schmitt recognises that economic competitors and debating adversaries can become political enemies, but he does not take this to mean that the enemy is merely a competitor or a debating adversary. As Schmitt sees it, the enemy is the *absenting other* who is so radically different that her very existence threatens our sense of ourselves. This enemy-other must be repulsed and / or destroyed precisely so that ‘we’ might continue to be ourselves. In this sense, the political relation is grounded ultimately in the possibility of physically destroying absenting enemy-others. Of course, the liberal vociferously rejects this existential reading of politics, but it could - and will - be argued that her total rejection itself constitutes a total repoliticisation.

While liberals have historically conceived of liberalism as a post-political discourse, Schmitt is of the view that *liberalism is not so much post-political as it is anti-political*. ‘[T]here exists a liberal policy of trade, church, and education,’ he affirms, ‘but absolutely no liberal politics, only a liberal critique of politics’ (Schmitt 1996, 70). The word ‘political’, he suggests, is usually used ‘negatively’ by liberals in invidious contrast to other ideas, such as when it appears in antitheses such as politics / economy, politics / morality (20). Liberal post-politicisation is in this way always already a form of radical anti-politicisation. Political freedom, as the liberal sees it, is precisely *freedom from the political*.

Many liberals have gone so far as to suggest that political freedom is itself an *effect* of economic freedom. In the words of Milton Friedman:

... the kind of economic organisation that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to *offset* the other (Friedman in Held et al 1983, 276).

Of course, though liberals like Friedman believe that economic power and political power effectively offset one another, they consistently decry each and every political attempt to offset sub-optimal economic outcomes. So while the iron laws of free market economics effectively delimit the field of the politically possible, politics cannot influence market outcomes in return. The relationship between economics and politics is therefore not one of mutual delimitation. In practice, economics simply supplants politics.

Walter Rathenau - the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic - once ventured that economics had displaced politics and had become 'the destiny' (Schmitt 1996, 78). For his part, Schmitt realises that the post-political hegemony of economics is always already political precisely to the extent that it actively *displaces* politics and becomes hegemonic. '[P]olitics continues to remain that destiny,' he writes, 'but what has occurred is that economics has become political and thereby the destiny' (ibid.).

Schmitt rejects the hegemony of anti-political liberal economics because he believes that it constitutes an ideological fabrication, which serves to dissimulate the enduring political prejudices of liberal capitalism. 'A domination of men based on pure economics must appear a terrible deception,' he opines, 'if, by remaining nonpolitical, it thereby evades political responsibility and viability' (77).

Whereas liberals typically set economics against political power, and believe

that economic relations are altogether non-political, Marxists realise that political power is always already the expression of (subaltern) economic power, and therefore economics may be said to constitute a form of political power. Stated simply, the economy is for them always already the *political economy*.

However, though orthodox Marxists were arguably right to correct the idealism of liberal discourse, many Marxists overcorrected the seeming deficiencies of liberalism, and they posited an equally unwieldy and one-dimensional form of historical materialism in its stead. If a Leftist adheres to a crude Marxist economism, which treats ideological intuitions as merely the epiphenomenal expressions of subaltern material forces and relations, then she will be inclined to overstate the effects of material redistribution vis-à-vis mankind's ideological development. Indeed, while it is true that masters and slaves have fought one another over the means and ends of production throughout history, it is also true that the satisfaction of the antagonists' material desires did not then, and will not now, bring an end to political conflict and / or exhaust the political energies of the respective antagonists.

Of course, though Marxists have historically conceived of political conflict as the epiphenomenal expression of class struggle, they did not conceive of class struggle as a zero-death economic competition, but as an existential conflict between the Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie, which could not but terminate in the utter destruction of one of the class antagonists. Leninist-Marxists in particular freely embraced the onerous trials and tribulations of politics qua absolute enmity. The Leninist revolutionary, Schmitt explains, 'made an absolute enemy out of the real enemy' in the recognition that 'revolutionary war is true war' precisely because 'it derives from absolute enmity' (Schmitt 2004, 35) In this sense, Leninist-Marxist revolutionary politics was irreducible to liberal economic anti-politics precisely because the

Leninist-Marxist repoliticised economics, and retained a clear and distinct enemy whom s/he resolved to fight and kill in perpetuity of the Marxist revolutionary ideal.

Since the systematic collapse of Leninist-Marxism, it is incredibly difficult to imagine a Leftist alternative to liberal capitalism and / or democracy. The Leftist is now seemingly condemned to borrow the vocabulary of liberal democracy so as to further her political agenda. However, is liberal democratic 'politics' reducible to post-political dialogism pure and simple, as many liberals and New Leftists seem now to think? Moreover, is dialogism a zero-death competition or does hegemonic dialogism in fact terminate, somewhat counter-intuitively, in total repoliticisation and absolute violence? Even though liberal / Leftist economism has not and cannot supplant politics because economism always already remains political, is Schmitt right to claim that ethics has effectively supplanted politics? In the age of liberal / Leftist democracy, are political enemies merely debating adversaries with whom we disagree and agree to disagree? Are political conflicts always already reducible to political disagreements or arguments, or is politics, as Schmitt contends, the existential limit of argument?

The Ethicisation of the Political and the Hegemony of Dialogism

While successive political theorists - Max Weber, the political realists, etc. - have conceived of sovereignty in terms of the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, Schmitt maintains that sovereignty consists rather in the monopoly to decide in the final instance. 'The sovereign,' he writes, 'has the monopoly over the last decision ... the monopoly to decide' (Schmitt 1985, 13). More specifically, the sovereign must decide the identity of the absenting enemy-other. 'The endeavour of a normal state consists above all else in assuring total peace within the state' and 'this requirement for internal peace', Schmitt writes, 'compels [the sovereign] to decide upon the domestic

enemy' (Schmitt 1996, 46).

Liberals, Schmitt maintains, defer the necessary violence of the decisive politicisation in preference for interminable dialogue. The 'essence of liberalism is negotiation,' he explains, and the liberal is someone who valorises dialogism as a rule 'in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate', and the moment of decision proper - conceived here as a form of decisive violence against heterogeneous possibilities - can be 'suspended forever in an everlasting discussion' (Schmitt 1985, 63). Of course, there is still conflict in liberal society, but the liberal believes that each and every conflict is reducible to a dialogic difference or disagreement - to an argument. In the liberal's opinion, the fact of disagreement presupposes the possibility of agreement, because enemies must first of all agree that they differ in order to become enemies. And if they can agree that they differ, then it follows that they can *agree to differ*. Liberal democratic dialogism is a zero-death game precisely because liberal democratic adversaries agree to differ, and they agree to differ because they think, pace Schmitt, that difference is productive of political vitality. As Jean Baudrillard puts it, 'The other is what allows me not to repeat myself for ever' (Baudrillard 1995, 174).

As a result, liberal / Leftist democratic theorists and activists now equate liberal democracy with unabashed dialogism, and dialogism with the principle of non-violence. As Paul Ricoeur writes, 'It is because we, as men, have chosen discourse - that is, discussion, seeking agreement by means of verbal confrontation - that the defense of violence for violence's sake is forever forbidden us' (Ricoeur 1979, 227). However, it should be noted that the simulated duels of liberal democratic dialogism are predicated on the dissimulation of the existential stakes of political engagement, and this dissimulation can easily lapse into a total repoliticisation - an absolute enmity - over the means and ends of political praxis.

For instance, the ongoing war on terror, which is a phobic war against fundamentalist and / or essentialist (re)politicisation, has arguably lapsed into the terror of fundamentalist non-essentialism. Enemy combatants are now routinely criminalised and liquidated precisely because real political enmity has been outlawed. As Slavoj Žižek explains, the ‘war on terror’ is a ‘strange war in which the enemy is criminalised if he defends himself and returns fire with fire’ (Žižek 2002b). The so-called ‘violence of the global’ - of which the terror war is but a symptom - is, as Baudrillard explains, ‘the violence of a society in which conflict is virtually banned and death forbidden.’ It is the violence ‘which, in a sense puts an end to violence itself’ (Baudrillard 2003, 94). The question I would like to ask here is whether post-Marxist radical democrats like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe - who purport to preserve the sphere of the political against liberal depoliticisation or anti-politicisation - are themselves guilty of anti-politicisation inasmuch as they ethicise politics, and arrive at a monological conception of democracy as zero-death dialogism.

The Postmodernisation of the Political Enemy

Karl von Clausewitz famously conceived of war as the continuation of politics by other means. For his part, Schmitt maintains that war is not merely one political instrument among many, but rather it constitutes the *ultima ratio* of the political inasmuch as it comprises the zenith of the friend / enemy distinction. War, Schmitt explains, is the most extreme case of political dissociation wherein the continued peaceful coexistence of differences becomes unfeasible because the existence of a particular difference is deemed to threaten the identity of the State. In such states of exception, the sovereign must declare a state of war against the enemy-other, and the declaration of war effectively establishes a right to kill. For Schmitt and his ilk, this willingness to sacrifice one’s life in an attempt to deprive one’s enemy of the same is the fundamental

attribute of political vitality. As Oswald Spengler put it in *The Decline of the West*:

A people is only really such in relation to other peoples, and the substance of this actuality comes out in its natural and ineradicable oppositions, in attack and defence, hostility and war. War is the creator of all great things. All that is meaningful in the stream of life has emerged through victory and defeat. (Spengler 1918, 363)

In essence, Schmitt and Spengler advance a form of political existentialism wherein I am only to the extent that I am political, and I am political only to the extent that I (am willing to) confront my enemies in a zero-sum exchange wherein there is a real possibility of physical killing. War, Schmitt claims, ‘the readiness of combatants to die, the physical killing of human beings who belong on the side of the enemy - all this has no normative meaning, but an existential meaning only, particularly in a real combat situation with a real enemy’ (Schmitt 1996, 48-9). As Nietzsche once said: ‘You say it is the good cause which hallows even war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows every cause’ (Nietzsche 1977, 74).

Though one might be tempted to accuse Schmitt of glorifying war and proto-fascist struggle, it should be remembered that Schmitt proceeds on the understanding that war constitutes the exception - the outermost case - and while the exception proves the rule in the final instance, the sovereign is compelled in the first instance to avert or diffuse the state of exception so that it will not result in the crisis of open warfare. As soon as a sovereign comes to rely on war in the first instance or pursues war for war’s sake, s/he forsakes political sophistication in favour of the brute simplicities of thanatopolitics. As Schmitt explains in *The Concept of the Political*, ‘The definition of the political here neither favours war nor militarism, neither imperialism or pacifism. Nor is it an attempt to idealize the victorious war or the successful revolution as a ‘social ideal’, since neither war nor revolution is something social or ideal’ (Schmitt 1996, 33). In this way, Schmitt does not glorify war as such,

but only restates the seeming fact that war - the possibility and threat of war - forever remains the *ultimate horizon* of the political. Schmitt is in this sense merely reversing the catastrophic anti-political neutralisations of modern liberalism so that state sovereigns might reacquire their explicitly political energies.

However, Schmitt nevertheless seems to reduce political authenticity to an actor's willingness and capacity to physically destroy her enemies. Whereas Schmitt believes that the sovereign must destroy internal and external enemy-others in a state of exception, post-Marxist radical democrats like Laclau and Mouffe believe that the physical destruction of the enemy-other serves only to subvert the ground of political differentiation, which is always already the ground of ontological constitution. In their view, the enemy-other constitutes not only the condition of impossibility of the self, but also and crucially the condition of its ultimate possibility. For if I must repress the other in order to be myself then I need the other in order to be. Therefore, Nietzsche is quite right when he observes that: 'Whoever lives for the sake of combating an enemy has an interest in the enemy's staying alive' (Nietzsche 1994, 531).

In Schmitt's view, the enemy is the other, and the other is the enemy simply because s/he is other, and her difference threatens - or seems to threaten - our sense of ourselves. The enemy, he writes, is 'the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that his is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien' (Schmitt 1996, 27). Of course, if Schmitt is right and if the enemy is 'existentially something different' and other, then it could be ventured that 'I' am my own worst enemy insofar as 'I' am perpetually in process, and am myself always already other. Nietzsche summed up the thought well in *Human, All Too Human* when he wrote:

By knowing ourselves and regarding our nature itself as a changing sphere of

opinions and moods, thus learning to despise it a bit, we bring ourselves into balance with others again. It is true, we have good reason to despise each of our acquaintances, even the greatest; but we have just as good reason to turn this feeling against ourselves. (Nietzsche 1994, 376)

If a man is a being in time, then he is always potentially other. If every relation (including 'my' relation to myself) is an other-relation, then how can 'I', given my own ultimate absence, determine who is the absencing enemy-other? If identities are always becoming, then how can we isolate certain other-relations and claim that these relations are blocking an identity, which is still only coming to be? In short, how can we ever know the enemy? Quite simply, we cannot. Given the lived reality of multiple being, it follows that an enemy can only ever be today's enemy, and s/he cannot be articulated as the absencing Enemy in the absence of which we would be fully and irreversibly ourselves. Resultantly, no antagonisms are insoluble or altogether necessary. This is because no other is irredeemable or completely unknowable. In the same way that no self can claim total positivity, no particular other can be condemned as the negative absolute. While we can and must repress the other in order to become ourselves, no particular other can carry the accursed share of our deficient being and be excluded once and for all.

Whereas Schmitt believes that the enemy is the absencing other who subverts one's sense of self, Laclau and Mouffe are of the view that *the enemy-other does not so much subvert one's identity as prevent one from completing their identity*. '[T]he presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself,' they write, 'The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 124-5). The other vouchsafes my contingency, which is the source of both my freedom and my torment. As Allen Ginsberg once put it, 'Because I am open, I am vulnerable; because I am open, I am free' (Ginsberg in Harrington 1973, 110). In order to achieve some semblance of coherence and ontological security, 'I am driven to repress the other. However, insofar as the self consists in the active

repression of the other, the other is constitutive of self. So while 'I' must repress the other in order to be myself, I am never fully myself, therefore, I cannot - and ought not to try to - fully repress what is other.

For radical Leninists, class struggle necessarily comprised a zero-sum, absolute hostility between implacable enemies with fully pre-constituted identities. Every local conflict and civil war was for them but a symptom of an overarching and absolute hostility between the Proletariat - as embodied in the various communist parties - and the capitalist Bourgeoisie, which could not but end in the utter destruction of one of the respective antagonists. For the Leninist, Laclau explains, 'the Party becomes the incarnation of an absolute hostility' and class struggle necessarily descends into an exclusively bloody conflict (Laclau 2005, 5). In Laclau's view, the notion of absolute hostility has become problematic, and it should be replaced by the notion 'of a plurality of real enemies whose transition to absolutism will always be essentially incomplete' (10). Political conflicts are non-zero-sum games, he thinks, precisely because the identities of the players and the rules are constitutively contingent, and the identities of the players remain contingent to the extent that the victory of the one over the other remains an objective impossibility in light of the impossibility of objectivity.

What's more, the progression from real hostility between legitimate enemies who must be combated to absolute hostility between illegitimate enemies who must be destroyed is not a teleological destiny, as Lenin and Schmitt seem to think, because if real hostilities can become absolute hostilities, then it follows that absolute hostilities can become real hostilities in turn. Laclau concludes that the political does not consist solely in the physical destruction of enemy-others, but in the discursive (re)construction of the other as friend.

As he explains it:

...hegemonic victories in a trench war are going to involve not only the destruction of an enemy but also the construction of a new order *on the basis of the rearticulation of the very elements that previously constituted the identity of the defeated power (this, obviously cannot happen in the case of a totally exterminated enemy)*. (ibid., emphasis mine)

So while Laclau concedes that hostility has ‘a central structuring role in the establishment of a particular community’ this hostility, he thinks, can nevertheless ‘be contained, under certain circumstances, within certain limits’ (6-7). Laclau goes on to liken political hostility to a game of chess in which players strive to defeat their opponent according to the established rules of the game. The real antagonism between the players will only turn into an absolute hostility, he suggests, if one of the players rejects the rules of the game as such - ‘if one of them cheats or kicks the board’ (7). However, this analogy presupposes that both players always already know and accept the rules of the game. What’s more, it says nothing of those situations wherein the chess players confront a draughts player who does not want to play chess at all.

In her text, *On the Political*, Mouffe argues that ‘the task of democracy’ is ‘to transform antagonism into agonism’, such that the enemy is reconceived as a democratic adversary (Mouffe 2005a, 20). These democratic adversaries are not enemies in the Schmittean sense of absolute adversity, but instead are ‘friendly enemies’ (Mouffe 2000a, 13) ‘whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question’ (102). The democratic adversary is in essence a legitimate adversary, and s/he is legitimate precisely insofar as she identifies with received democratic norms, as expressed in what Mouffe, after Rousseau and Oakeshott, calls the *Res publica* - the public vocabulary of liberal democracy.

While democratic citizens consistently disagree and fight over the meaning of social signifiers, they tend to fight ‘according to a shared set of rules, and their

positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives' precisely to the extent that they are democratic perspectives (Mouffe 2005a, 52). This shared identification with (constitutively undecidable) democratic norms effectively serves to ground a common political identity, but this common political identity will remain contingent and open-ended because the *Res publica* remains the object of political dispute.

In Mouffe's opinion, democratic actors can - and should - disagree over the correct interpretation of the *Res publica* whilst simultaneously respecting the other's right to disagree. If democratic players all play according to - albeit undecidable - rules of democratic propriety, then it follows that democratic antagonisms will rarely if ever take the form of absolute enmities wherein there is a real possibility of physical killing. Mouffe is effectively reiterating the old argument that the democratic process constitutes the best available means to offset the violent energies of conflicting social forces. Quoting Elias Canetti, she suggests that,

[T]he actual vote is decisive, as the moment in which the one is really measured against the other. It is all that is left of the original lethal clash and it is played out in many forms, with threats, abuse and physical provocation which may lead to blows or missiles. But the counting of the vote ends the battle. (Canetti in Mouffe 2005b, 5)

In a similar vein, James Fitzjames Stephen once claimed that 'parliamentary government' is ultimately reducible to an agonistic pact whereby '[w]e agree to try strength by counting heads instead of breaking heads' (Stephen in Muller 1997, 200).

Of course, while Mouffe is at pains to differentiate her democratic friendly enemies from the liberal's 'debating adversaries', she nevertheless elaborates a project of political dialogism wherein conflicts are ultimately reducible to discursive differences, and enemies are merely friendly adversaries with whom we agree to disagree. Accordingly, it could be argued that radical democrats seem to accept

conflict in the premise, only to reduce conflict to argument, and to this extent, they seemingly presuppose what is at stake: a viable agonistic arrangement.

The Spectre of Absolute Enmity in Democratic Dialogism

While Laclau and Mouffe agree with Schmitt and Lenin that conflict is both ineradicable and constitutive, they believe that the friend / enemy distinction cannot be definitively decided, therefore these constitutive conflicts are rarely if ever absolute hostilities wherein there is a real possibility of physical killing. Whereas Lenin and Schmitt advocate the militarisation of politics, Laclau and Mouffe instead champion the ‘demilitarization of war’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 70). Laclau and Mouffe accept that violence is ineradicable, but they reconceptualise this violence along the lines of ‘symbolic violence’ and ‘force of argument’ (Mouffe 2005b, 139). However, it could be argued that dialogic agonism always presupposes absolute antagonism in the sense that there can be a legitimate adversary only if there is also an illegitimate enemy. In the words of Žižek:

...one of the basic features of democracy is the transformation of (political) enemy into adversary, of unconditional antagonism into agonistic competition: an adversary is not a mortal threat to power, since the place of it is originally empty, a place for whose (temporal) occupation different agents can legitimately compete. Whenever we hear that we need to suspend the logic of exclusion or excommunication in the field of politics, however, we should always bear in mind that such an agonistic thriving multitude of adversaries, not enemies, has by definition to rely on some (explicit or implicit) symbolic *pact* which defines the rules of this agonistic competition. For this simple reason, wide as this field of agonistic competition can be, the translation of antagonism into agonism, of enemy into adversary, can never be complete - there will always be some ‘indivisible remainder’ of those who do not recognize this pact. (...) This means that the key political struggle is not so much the agonistic competition, within the field of the admissible, of political subjects who acknowledge each other as legitimate adversaries, but rather, the struggle for the delimitation of this field, for the definition of the line which will separate the legitimate adversary from the illegitimate enemy.

(Žižek 2002a, 269)

Žižek goes on to complain that Laclau and Mouffe's democratic agonism, despite appearances to the contrary, comprises just another post-political *decaffeination*; a form of politics deprived of all the malignant properties of the political (such as the real possibility of physically killing the enemy). What results, according to Žižek, is a 'formal legalism' grounded in the citizen's 'unconditional adherence to a set of formal rules which guarantee that antagonisms are fully absorbed into the agonistic game' (Žižek, 2003). However, there forever remains an indivisible remainder of absolute adversity within this agonistic game. Radical democrats myopically focus upon the institutionalisation of democratic agonism, but they actively dissimulate the extent to which this agonistic pact presupposes a fundamental repoliticisation, which pits the partisans of dialogism and political existentialism against one another in a dispute over the means and ends of the political itself. Laclau and Mouffe would surely point out that the democratic political frontier can be continuously rearticulated so as to include more enemy-others in the agonistic pact, but they here presume that the enemy-other will allow herself to be redescribed as a friendly adversary. The other may - rightly or wrongly, it does not matter - see more virtue in fanatical conflict than in the fanatical democratic disarticulation of the ground of fanatical conflict. The radical democrat would likely defend herself by pointing out that radical democracy preserves the ground of difference against each and every totalitarian reoccupation, but the critic could argue in return that in practice the radical democrat only accepts *acceptable* differences. As Žižek explains:

...the Other is tolerated with regard to customs which hurt no one - the moment we come up against some (for us) traumatic dimension, the tolerance is over. In short, tolerance is tolerance of the Other in so far as this Other is not an 'intolerant fundamentalist' - which simply means: in so far as it is not the real Other. (Žižek 2002a, 174)

As soon as otherness manifests itself in the form of a real singularity, this difference is

effectively criminalised on the grounds that it constitutes an essentialist posture, which threatens the principle of democratic contingency. Seen in this light, Laclau and Mouffe's project of radical democracy is itself an anti-political dissimulation, which persists through the exclusion of the politically attuned other. If the other refuses to become a friendly debating adversary then s/he is not a real political enemy, but a criminal or a terrorist; an illegitimate enemy.

For Žižek, the radical democrat is effectively like the liberal multiculturalist inasmuch as both think that everyone ought to have the right to believe what they want to believe on the proviso that they do not privilege this belief over and above received norms concerning the practical accommodation of inevitable democratic conflicts and differences. Žižek goes on to liken the multiculturalist to Richard Rorty's liberal 'ironist' who believes in nothing save the contingency of belief, and who displaces 'belief on to Others'. Whilst some think that the liberal ironist rejects certain beliefs in preference for others, what the ironist actually rejects is '*the form of belief as such*' (ibid.).

Like Rorty's ironist, Laclau and Mouffe's radical democrat displaces belief onto others, and then excludes these others if they take their particular beliefs too seriously, that is to say if they are essentialising terrorists who are willing to kill the enemy-other, or if they believe that killing the enemy-other is right. So while Laclau and Mouffe maintain that the concept of the enemy must be revived so as to offset the depoliticising neutralisations of liberal / Leftist post-politics, the enemy, they think, is never an absolute enemy unless s/he is herself a political absolutist who conceives of politics in terms of absolute enmity. In this way, the enemy of post-Marxist radical democracy is not the exploitative oligarch who undermines the material basis of democracy, nor the banker who speculates on the fate of nations, but rather, the political fanatic. The enemy of New Leftism is not an opposing class, as Lenin

presumed, but rather, *Lenin is himself the enemy*. The Leninist-Marxist who refuses to sublimate political violence into dialogic adversity thereby excludes herself from the democratic conversation and s/he can be legitimately exposed to absolute violence in defense of democratic dialogism. Rorty - speaking at a public address - maintains along similar lines that, 'we [liberal-Leftists] should treat 'Hitlers' as rattlesnakes since both are bent on our destruction while unable to communicate' (Rorty in Tamernino 1997, 65fn). Rorty here reaffirms the enduring fact of absolute adversity precisely to the extent that he remains absolutely against illiberal absolutists and each and every discourse of absolute adversity - liberal dialogism excluded.

So while there remains an irreducible element of absolute violence within the project of liberal / post-Marxist democratic dialogism, this absolute violence is monologically set against the absolute politicisations of revolutionary negativists and / or essentialists on the grounds that these absolutists resist the dialogical involutions of democratic agonism. However, though New Leftists and post-Marxist radical democrats now readily close ranks with liberal democratic dialogists against the illiberal (re)politicisations of revolutionary negativists and political absolutists, radical democrats and New Leftists should perhaps close ranks with revolutionary negativists and political absolutists against the anti-political postures of liberal democratic dialogists. For while discursive violence is inherently democratic, democratic violence is not solely discursive. In his essay, 'Popular Front in the Street', Georges Bataille asserts that while it is impossible 'to raise a political question without having a debate ... for us (Leftists) having a debate means having it in the street, it means having it where emotion can seize men and push them to the limit, without meeting the eternal obstacles that result from the defense of old political positions' (Bataille 1985, 163). Bataille concludes that, 'The will to be done with impotence implies ... scorn for this phrasemongering: the taste for verbal agitation has never passed for a mark of power'

(162).

Conclusion

So then, is (liberal / Leftist) democratic dialogism radically political or post-political? The answer is that dialogism is post-political, but post-political dialogism is simultaneously political precisely to the extent that it is radically anti-political. Dialogists are absolutely against absolute adversity, but hegemonic dialogism itself terminates in an absolute antagonism over the very destiny of the political. In *The Theory of the Partisan*, Schmitt describes this absolute adversity in the following terms:

Enmity will be so terrifying that one perhaps mustn't even speak any longer of the enemy or of enmity, and both words will have to be outlawed and damned fully before the work of annihilation can begin. Annihilation thus becomes entirely abstract and entirely absolute. It is no longer directed against an enemy, but serves only another, ostensibly objective attainment of highest values, for which no price is too high to pay. It is the renunciation of real enmity that opens the door for the work of annihilation of an absolute enmity. (Schmitt 2004, 67)

Schmitt here contends that the liberal dissimulation of real antagonism opens the door for absolute antagonists to pursue the work of annihilation, but I am of the view that the liberal / Leftist valorisation of real antagonisms as against absolute adversities in fact culminates in an absolute antagonism over the proper nature and extent of political commitment. Stated differently, the dialogist's absolute rejection of absolute political violence itself terminates in absolute political violence. The dialogist - who tries to sublimate absolute political violence into argument and discursive violence - effectively finds herself locked into an absolute (anti-) political antagonism with absolute antagonists over the very stakes of political engagement. The dialogist would do well to acknowledge the possibility that the unlimited rejection of absolute political violence itself constitutes a greater violence than limited absolute political violence. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud opines

along similar lines, 'What a potent obstacle to civilization aggressiveness must be, if the defense against it can cause as much unhappiness as aggressiveness itself' (Freud 1961, 90).

It is this author's opinion that the political relation - the existential conflict between friends and enemies - is quite simply ineradicable. Each and every attempt to eradicate the concept of the political will serve only to revitalise and reaffirm it. As Bataille puts it: 'Violence is as stubbornly there just as much as death' (Bataille 1987, 187). While democratic dialogists have seemingly triumphed over absolute antagonists, I believe that the political victory of dialogism constitutes a Pyrrhic victory which serves to reaffirm the enduring primacy of the political, and indeed the ineradicability of absolute enmity.

Though Mouffe rejects what she calls 'politics in the register of morality' (Mouffe 2005a) according to which political enemies are little more than evil-doers who must be extirpated so as to preserve the good, she nevertheless champions a form of dialogic fundamentalism according to which political enemies are either real enemies - that is friendly adversaries - or absolute enemies who must be extirpated so as to preserve the effective political good. While Laclau and Mouffe know how to deal with democratic enemy-others, they cannot conceive of a way to deal with the other enemies of democracy without relying on the very same logics of absolute adversity against which their project of radical democracy is set. The problem is not so much that radical democrats like Laclau and Mouffe retain the means and ends of absolute adversity. After all, this is inevitable. The problem is rather that they dissimulate the enduring element of absolute adversity present within the project of radical democracy, and in the process they magnify the stakes of each and every act of absolute political violence.

If the good democrat is not a political absolutist, then s/he would do well to

refrain from being always and everywhere absolutely against political absolutists. So the Leftist democrat must now either concede that one can be absolutely against and still remain a democrat or else s/he must continue 'the work of annihilation of an absolute enmity' in bad faith. Either way, the democrat is condemned to wield a sword. However, if s/he is honest about the intractable nature of absolute political violence, then s/he may yet wield her sword against her proper enemies, and not those fellow travellers who ought to be her friends.

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