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Democracy, Pluralism, and Deliberation

A Review Article by

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Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically
By Chantal Mouffe
London, UK: Verso, 2013. 228 pp.
ISBN: 9781781681039.

The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere
By Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West
Edited by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen
New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 128 pp.
ISBN: 9780231156455.

The Idea of Justice
By Amartya Sen
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 496 pp.
ISBN: 9780674060470.

The challenge of democratic deliberation in a pluralistic world has emerged as one of the most pressing issues of our time. We can gauge the nature and severity of this challenge by considering two competing imperatives: on the one hand, to hold our laws and public policies accountable to neutral standards of truth and justice, and, on the other, to respect diversity and difference by not arbitrarily privileging any one group or culture over another. The problem here is clear: too narrow a focus on one imperative can undermine the other. Both deserve equal consideration. But whether and how we might pull off this rather delicate balancing act remains an open question. Increasing recognition of this challenge has inspired an important literature searching for a meaningful and promising path forward. Among the many contributions to this literature are Amartya Sens's (2009) *The Idea of Justice*, Chantal Mouffe's (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, and Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen's (2011) *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. In what follows, I examine how each of these books envisions a pluralistic democracy respectful of difference without sacrificing accountability.

A renowned economist who won the Nobel Prize in 1998 for his work on famines, Amartya Sen is also a political philosopher in his own right. In *The Idea of Justice*, Sen takes issue with the dominant approach to justice in moral and political philosophy today, namely, that of John Rawls. Sen's central criticism of Rawls concerns the definition of justice as institutional fairness. As Sen points out, a society that treats everyone equally can still suffer from injustice. It does not matter much, for example, if everyone enjoys basic freedoms and liberties if some part of the country is suffering from starvation. Equality of basic rights and freedoms does not automatically translate into equality of *capabilities* for living well. Sen therefore takes issue with Rawls's attempt to define justice in purely institutional terms. In particular, he rejects the idea that we can arrive at universal principles of justice without dialogue and communication. Rawls's mistake, as he sees it, is to impose one idiosyncratic set of principles to the neglect of equally viable alternative principles, thereby failing to respect the plurality of basic reasons of justice. As Sen argues, just social outcomes matter as much as, if not more than, just institutions.

Sen therefore proposes an alternative approach to justice, namely, the capabilities approach, which he developed in conjunction with the Pakistani economist, Mahbub ul Haq, with whom Sen designed the United Nations Human Development Report in 1990. The capabilities approach assesses the well-being of a given society, not merely according to the fairness of its institutions, its GDP, or some other impersonal measure, but rather according to the capability of its people to lead happy, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. Because the capabilities approach focuses on ends, not just means, it necessarily takes into account a wide range of factors that shape social outcomes. To this end, Sen advocates social choice theory as a tool for collective decision-making. Originally developed by the Marquis de Condorcet in the 18th century and redeveloped in the 20th century by the economist Kenneth Arrow, social choice theory uses a range of quantitative tools for prioritizing the diversity of social ends competing for our support. It produces a ranking of these ends based on a number of inputs, including those provided by public opinion and dialogue. Thus, dialogue is central to Sen's alternative approach to justice. The focus on social outcomes—including those of women, minorities, and persons with disabilities—makes the capabilities approach an attractive model for thinking about justice in a pluralistic world. Moreover, Sen's argument about the centrality of communication to the theory of justice will surely appeal to those who find the Rawlsian model lacking in foundational justification.

Despite its many strengths and promises, however, there is at least one key weakness to Sen's project. Sen suggests that we do not need an idea of perfect justice; that rather than theorizing endlessly about what a perfectly just society would look like, we should instead focus on eradicating injustice, thereby making the world more just and less unjust. To this end, concentrating on "manifest injustice" is sufficient. On this view, a formal theory of perfect justice would be superfluous to the task of making the world a better place. The action-oriented appeal of this argument notwithstanding, it raises a serious problem in light of the diversity in our moral perceptions: how do we mediate between different and incompatible judgments of injustice? Sen notably fails to answer this question, relying upon an implicit moral intuitionism characteristic of Adam Smith, one of Sen's intellectual heroes and a key figure recurring throughout the book. While certainly not fatal to his project, this gap would need to be resolved for his otherwise promising approach to justice to be taken seriously. That project would be strengthened by incorporating an empirical theory of the evolutionary character of moral concepts, thereby accounting for differences in moral perception.

Chantal Mouffe takes a different approach to pluralism. Best known for her collaboration with the late Ernesto Laclau on their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, a minor classic for the post-Marxist left, Mouffe has since become one of the leading proponents for the agonistic model of democracy. The agonistic model notably departs from the liberal and deliberative models by emphasizing the ineradicable fact of difference and plurality in any given society. Agonism categorically rejects the goal of consensus, whether achieved through monological or deliberative reasoning. Instead, it envisions a society in a state of perpetual contest, in which different groups and communities vie with each other for political power. Contrary to liberal and deliberative democrats, agonism insists that hegemony is inescapable. It is therefore not a matter of eliminating hegemony altogether, but rather of keeping different hegemonic projects engaged in ongoing rivalry. This has the benefit of respecting difference and preserving plurality by preventing any one group from achieving total power through the false guise of consensus or "rationality".

Agonistics reads like a kind of manifesto for this line of thinking. It outlines the basic principles of agonism for those encountering it for the first time. However, Mouffe goes much further and demonstrates the practical value of agonism for a number of different domains. In a chapter on international relations, she argues for a "pluri-verse", in which the Western model of democracy is no longer seen as the universal standard by which to judge and evaluate non-Western states. She contends, for example, that the Arab Spring reveals complex forces of democracy at work in a part of the world often derided for its supposed incompatibility with democracy. According to Mouffe, it is false and unfair for Western political theorists and commentators to reject the idea that Islamic law can be reconciled with democracy. Those theorists and commentators, in her view, should respect the efforts of non-Western peoples to formulate their own versions of democracy, even if they choose to incorporate their religious law within it.

In a chapter on the future of Europe, she tackles the problem of increasing discontent for European integration. Mouffe criticizes the goal of a politically homogeneous Europe and advances the idea of a "demoi-cracy", in which the various European peoples each retain their distinctive voices and histories, and achieve a kind of unity through conflict. In a chapter on radical politics, she takes issue with Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno for advocating a withdrawal from democratic politics altogether. Mouffe argues that the existing system must be changed by being challenged, not abandoned in the hopes of depriving it of political oxygen. In the final chapter, she asks what political role, if any, art can play under a post-fordist system. One pessimistic view holds that neo-liberalism has so thoroughly saturated the sphere of art and culture that artistic expressions simply serve to reinforce the system. Mouffe vehemently disagrees with this view, arguing that art can play a valuable part in the struggle against neo-liberal hegemony.

Agonistics is short, clear, lively, and very direct, almost to the point of being preachy at times. Its biggest shortcoming, however, is its conspicuous failure to make explicit the standards by which rival groups and communities might engage each other in a fair and constructive contest for power. While there is much merit to Mouffe's critique of the deliberative model and the ideal of consensus, her proposal for ongoing contest between different groups and communities appears idealistic and rather hollow in the absence of a detailed model of fair competition. She has something like a tennis tournament in mind, but provides no actual rules by which one side might defeat another and achieve a fair victory. In the absence of such rules, it is difficult to see how one group might prevail over another except through some decidedly unfair

means. This glaring omission is likely to be off-putting to critical readers seeking a rigorous defense of agonism, especially in light of Mouffe's strong criticisms of the liberal and deliberative models of democracy.

Whereas Sen focuses on justice, and Mouffe on agonistic politics, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen bring together a diverse group of prominent intellectuals to focus on the topic of religion. *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* features a lively and provocative collection of essays by Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West. This slim volume is the outcome of a public event held in New York City in 2009, in which all four contributors met for five hours to discuss the role of religion in public and political life. Because of its origins in a public debate, the volume retains a conversational, collegial, and very spirited feel, while still offering considerable depth and numerous invaluable insights.

As the title suggests, the volume takes Habermas's views on religion as the starting point for discussion. One of the main flaws of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the book for which Habermas became a virtual household name, was its inadequate treatment of religion. In characteristic Enlightenment fashion, Habermas downplayed the significance of religion in public culture and human life, assuming an exaggerated role for disinterested reason. Habermas has since conceded this critical shortcoming and acknowledged the need for democratic theory to engage seriously with religion. In his contribution to the volume, he therefore provides a sort of addendum to his vision of the public sphere. He takes issue with the concept of "the political", which he traces to a much older historical era, in which power and religion were intertwined into a totality. "The political" was a clearly delineated domain separate from the rest of society. Since the Enlightenment, however, the very idea of the political has radically evolved. Put simply, since the break with God, everything is now the political. However, certain political theorists, such as Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, defiantly wish to revive "the political" in its original conception. Habermas understandably warns against this line of thinking, arguing that, contrary to the rhetoric, the revival of an archaic form of "the political" threatens to disempower the people. He therefore proposes a middle path between a secularism intolerant of religion and a political theology that runs the risk of reverting into a totalitarian theocracy. He retains much of the substance of his original vision of the public sphere, but this time incorporates a role for arguments inspired by religion. In keeping with the ideal of accountability, however, Habermas insists that religious arguments be translated into secular terms. While this task of translation might appear to be a burden for religious citizens only, he holds the view that everyone in a truly secular society must translate their views into a universal public language. Presumably, then, the Marxist would be no less exempt from the burdens of translation than the Catholic or the Muslim. Translation is therefore Habermas's key to balancing accountability with respect for plurality.

In his response to Habermas, Charles Taylor argues that the fixation with religion threatens to undermine the very spirit of secularism, which is state neutrality. A secular state avoids playing favourites, not just with religions, but also with non-religious worldviews. Taylor therefore offers an upgraded model of secularism by moving beyond its obsession with religion, which not only gives a free pass to non-religious ideologies, but also fails to respect the dignity and integrity of minority religious communities. In Taylor's view, a secular culture need not feel threatened by religious voices, even if those voices belong to traditions that have historically been implicated in certain forms of intolerance.

Taking a different approach, Judith Butler analyzes the way in which being socialized through language can entail harming others and being harmed in turn. What makes such harm

possible is interpellation: the process by which individuals become constituted as subjects by language. Based on this insight, Butler argues for the necessity of recognizing the practical implications of being subjects of speech; in particular, the power to speak and act in such a way as to mitigate harm to others. She then develops an ethic of coexistence, which she uses to critique Israeli state violence.

In his contribution, Cornel West offers a moving account of how religious speech can play a positive role in the public sphere. West is an unabashed Christian, who synthesizes elements from Christianity and various philosophical traditions in a kind of musical harmony. He sees the role of what he calls "prophetic religion", not as governing human lives, but rather as challenging power. Indeed, West is a living example of what he describes, having publicly and unceasingly criticized the ravages and depravities of American power for the last several decades. West forcefully argues that any secular liberalism that obstructs dialogue by restricting religious speech does more harm than good. A true democratic discourse is one that defends the openness of the human conversation, and includes within it religious voices seeking to challenge injustice. In addition to the individual essays, the volume includes transcripts of dialogues held between the contributors. To see such towering intellectuals, with their unique, and sometimes conflicting, philosophical outlooks, engage each other in a remarkable display of constructive disagreement is a genuine treat and a model of the kind of pluralism, mutual respect, coexistence, and meaningful dialogue that forms the main themes of the volume.

Despite their different angles, all three books provide invaluable perspectives on democratic discourse and civic engagement in a pluralistic world. Sen accomplishes this task moving beyond transcendental conceptions of justice toward a more indeterminate model that requires public discussion about its basic principles. He demonstrates quite convincingly that the transcendental approach has an authoritarian core fundamentally incompatible with the spirit of democracy. Similarly, Mouffe demonstrates that if we reject a foundationalist politics predicated upon consensus, we end up with a politics of perpetual contest. That contest may not give us the satisfaction of resting easy, but it is the necessary alternative to a false consensus. Finally, while communication is a master concept in Habermas' philosophical system, it also emerges as core themes in the contributions by Butler, Taylor, and West, albeit with respective variations. Habermas deserves credit for taking on the anti-democratic projects of Schmitt and Strauss. Butler is far more attuned to the implicit power dimensions of language than Habermas, while Taylor and West are more sensitive to the damage that dogmatic secularism can have upon a democratic culture and the human conversation. Each therefore offers something the rest does not. While none of these books has the last word on what a pluralistic society should look like, they nonetheless go a long way to clarify what is needed if we are to forge a path forward that balances the ideal of accountability with a respect for diversity.

About the Reviewer

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