

Which Democracy in a Post-Political Age?ⁱ

The question that I would like to examine with you concerns the role that the new media can play in the fostering of democracy. We can discern roughly two opposite answers to that question. On one side there are those enthusiasts who argue that they provide us with the technology that will finally make it possible to realize the ideal of direct democracy under modern conditions, on the other side those detractors who see them as contributing to a further privatization of politics and as replacing rational debate by the instant expression of private prejudices, turning what ought to be public decisions into private consumer-like choices.

I for my part do not believe that there is a simple unequivocal answer to the question "do the new media have a democratizing potential?". It is a complex question that can be approached from several angles and one of the crucial issue concerns which is going to be the driving force in the development of the new technologies. Is their development going to be left to the markets (as it is the case today) or is it going to be checked through political decisions informed by a democratic debate? It is clear that left to the markets, it is very unlikely that those new technologies will be oriented to the enhancement of democratic participation.

But things are more complicated and to assert that for democracy to benefit from technology we must start from politics is not enough. Much more is at stake here because everything hinges on the way democracy is understood and the kind of political theory which this understanding of democracy mobilizes. Which democracy are we talking about: direct democracy, representative democracy, plebiscitary democracy? And if it is representative democracy, which paradigm of representative democracy: the aggregative one, the deliberative one, the agonistic one? All those diverse understandings have very different implications for the kind of technology that is going to be privileged and for the answer to our question. This is, however, a level of reflexion which is often overlooked in discussions about the democratizing possibilities of the new media. This is of course typical of the post-political Zeitgeist prevalent today and I would like to share some thoughts with you about its characteristics. Indeed I have for some time been concerned by the growing incapacity in which we find ourselves of envisaging the problems facing our societies in political terms, that is as requiring not simply technical but properly political decisions, decisions which are made between real alternatives which imply the availability of conflicting but legitimate projects of how to organize our common life. What we are witnessing could be called the end of politics. This is I think the message that, albeit in

different ways, the more recent trends in political theory and in sociology are conveying, not to mention the dominant practices of the mainstream political parties. They claim that the adversarial model of politics has become obsolete and that we have entered a new stage where a politics of consensus can be established at the centre. All those who disagree with this post-political view are dismissed as being archaic or even condemned as evil. As a consequence of this displacement of politics, morality has recently been promoted to the place of master narrative and it is rapidly becoming the only legitimate vocabulary, as instead of thinking in terms of right and left, we are now urged to think in terms of right and wrong.

There are of course many reasons for the disappearance of a properly political perspective, some have to do with the predominance of a neo-liberal model of globalization, others with the type of individualistic consumer's culture which now pervades most advanced societies. But as a political theorist, I am particularly concerned by the role that political theory has been playing in the demise of a properly political vision and this is why I have been engaged in the elaboration of a model of democracy which aims to provide an alternative to the theories which are dominant today. Those theories impede us to properly envisage what is really at stake in democratic politics and this, even when they claim to have a progressive character as it is the case with the deliberative model advocated by Habermas and his followers. In my view the choice between a deliberative and an agonistic model of democracy is a key issue for the future of democratic politics, an issue which has decisive consequences for the question of the direction we should seek to give to the development of the new media if our aim is to bring to the fore their democratizing potentialities. And this is why I will outline the main points of the conception of the agonistic approach, which I am putting as an alternative to the deliberative one.

POWER AND ANTAGONISM

My theoretical starting point is that in order to grasp the nature of democracy, it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of power and antagonism and their ineradicable character. By postulating the availability of public sphere where power and antagonism would have been eliminated and where a rational consensus would have been realized, deliberative democracy denies this dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities.

On the contrary, this question of power and antagonism is at the center of the approach

that I want to put forward and whose theoretical bases have been delineated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. What we attempted to do in that book was to draw all the consequences for the understanding of democracy of the ineradicability of power and antagonism and of the fact that there can never be total emancipation but only partial ones. This means that the democratic society cannot be conceived any more as a society that would have realized the dream of a perfect harmony or transparency. Its democratic character can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself the representation of the totality and claim in that way to have the "mastery" of the foundation. The central thesis of the book is that social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. This implies that any social objectivity is ultimately political and that it has to show the traces of exclusions which govern its constitution. The point of convergence between objectivity and power is precisely what we mean by "hegemony".

When we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values. To acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them, while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power, this is what is specific to the approach delineated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and which provides the theoretical terrain necessary to elaborate the model of democracy which I have called "agonistic pluralism".

AN "AGONISTIC" MODEL OF DEMOCRACY

In order to clarify the basis of this alternative view, I propose to distinguish between "the political" and "politics". By "the political", I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human societies, antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. "Politics", on the other side, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political".

It is only when we acknowledge this dimension of "the political" and understand that "politics" consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations, that we can pose the fundamental question for democratic politics. This question is not how to directly express the unmediated will of the people- or for that matter the desire of the multitude- nor is it how to arrive at a rational consensus reached without exclusion, which is, indeed, an impossibility. Politics aims at the creation

of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an "us" by the determination of a "them". The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them distinction but the different way in which it is established. The crucial issue is how to establish the us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

Hence the importance of distinguishing between two types of political relations: one of antagonism between enemies, and one of agonism between adversaries. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an "antagonism" into an "agonism". This has important consequences for the way we envisage politics. Contrary to the model of "deliberative democracy" the model of "agonistic pluralism" that I am advocating asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs. Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence.

To deny that there ever could be a free and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of common concern is therefore crucial for democratic politics. When we accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that it always entails some form of exclusion, we can begin to envisage the nature of a democratic public sphere in a different way. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body – which is characteristic of the holist mode of social organization – a democratic society makes room for conflicting interests and values. This is why a pluralist democracy needs to allow for the expression of dissent and for the institutions through which it can be manifested. Its survival depends on collective identities forming around clearly differentiated positions, as well as on the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. When the agonistic dynamic of the pluralist system is hindered because of a lack of democratic identities with which one could identify, there is a risk that this will multiply confrontations over essentialist identities and non-negotiable moral values.

The current disaffection with politics which we witness in many liberal democratic societies stems in my view from the fact that the role played by the political public sphere is becoming increasingly irrelevant. Political decisions are increasingly taken to be of a technical nature and better resolved by judges or technocrats as bearers of a supposed

impartiality. Today because of the lack of an agonistic political public sphere where a democratic confrontation could take place, it is the legal system which is often seen as being responsible for organizing human coexistence and for regulating social relations. Given the growing impossibility of envisaging the problems of society in a political way, it is the law which is expected to provide solutions for all types of conflicts.

Such privileging of a supposedly neutral and impartial instance is, in my view, inimical to democracy because it tends to silence dissenting voices and this is why I believe that an approach which reveals the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion is of fundamental importance for democratic politics. By warning us against the illusion that a fully achieved democracy could ever be instantiated, it forces us to keep the democratic contestation alive.

In recent years, as a reaction to this imposition of a neo-liberal consensus which claims that there is no alternative to the present order, new forms of struggle have emerged around what is called- inaccurately in my view- the anti-globalization movement. This is very promising. Indeed it shows that new forms of domination create new types of resistances and that the antagonistic dimension cannot be eliminated. But this movement is very heterogeneous and it is important that it does not limit itself to a negative attitude of rejection of existing institutions, to a pure negation of the current order. It is necessary to understand that there is no guarantee that such a rejection is going to have a democratic outcome. We have in history too many proofs of the contrary to keep such an illusion. Without even the need to going back to the past, we have many examples in front of us of resistances to the prevalent hegemony which do not take a progressive form (right-wing populism, terrorism).

In my view it is the lack of a really democratic political confrontation and of a pluralistic world order which leads to those manifestations of total negation. In order for those resistances to cristallize in a democratic project, a political intervention is necessary which will articulate the different struggles against relations of domination and establish what we have called a "chain of equivalence" between a multiplicity of heterogeneous and often conflicting demands. This is precisely how a project of radical and plural democracy should be envisaged. And it is within such a framework that the role and the possibilities of the new media should be examined in order to visualize, for instance, in which manner they could be developed so as to facilitate the creation of this chain of equivalence.

I think that since the two social forums at Porto Alegre we are beginning to see the start of new stage of the anti-corporate movement, which does not limit itself any more in

denouncing the IMF, the WTO and other transnational institutions, but aims at putting forward concrete alternatives. Such initiatives should be multiplied, following the example of the first European Social Forum which is going to take place in Florence in November. It is indeed through such events that the chain of equivalence to which I have just referred, can become a reality and that the struggle for a new hegemony can get off the ground. No doubt this is another area where the contribution of the new technologies can be crucial.

WHICH ROLE FOR THE NEW MEDIA?

I hope that by now it is clear to all of you why I have spent so much time discussing the way democratic politics should be conceived. Indeed it is my contention that without an adequate understanding of what is at stake in democracy, it is impossible to address the question of the possible role of the new media in a fruitful way. If we start with the wrong assumption that the great advantage of the new media is that they make possible the establishment of a direct democracy, unmediated by representative institutions and that they allow to bypass the traditional channels of politics like parties, and trade unions, then we will not be able to visualize the possibilities which they present for the creation of an agonistic public sphere and their potential to contribute to the process of articulation of democratic struggles.

As I indicated at the beginning, I believe that we should not approach the new media from an optimistic nor a pessimistic standpoint. We should neither see them as the key to a completely new type of politics, nor demonize them as the new trick found by capitalism in order to enslave us. They should be seen as constituting a terrain of struggle that needs to be engaged with, and whose role should be informed by political decisions. We should be aware however that they open a set of possibilities that can be used for very good as well as for very bad objectives. All will depend of the outcome of the hegemonic struggle. I do not want to suggest, though, that this is a neutral terrain because the fact that we live today under a neo-liberal hegemony has of course very important consequences for the way the new media are being developed. But it would be a mistake to believe that for that reason they are purely and simply of new instrument of domination. New forms of power go hand in hand with new kind of resistances and every hegemony allows for counter-hegemonic moves. What is crucial in the hegemonic struggle is to be able to think in a political way and this requires relinquishing a lot of illusions, for instance the idea that there is a necessary direction to history, which would lead to a final reconciliation, or the idea that we could reach a stage beyond politics, where antagonism would be eliminated and a perfect democracy realized. What the experience of totalitarian regimes should have

taught us is the need to take pluralism seriously and the importance of envisaging pluralist democracy as something that can never be fully realized, as a good that only exists as good as long as it cannot be reached, because the very moment of its realization would coincide with its destruction. For the new media to help us improve democracy, it is therefore vital that we have an informed debate about the nature of a democratic society, and this is why political theory constitutes an indispensable point of reference in the kind of discussion that we are having during this conference.

i Abstract of talk at Dark Markets Conference, Vienna, October 4, 2003
<http://nonstop-future.org/txt?tid=136ebee4fd88bfd45a1ebe63f9a1ce51>

Also referred to in 'Reformatting Politics'