

“PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE ONLY ONE SUBJECT POSITION”

EIN SAMTALE MED
CHANTAL MOUFFE

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Illustrasjon: Ane Hem

Belgiskfødde Chantal Mouffe har i ei årrekke markert seg som filosof, diskursteoretikar og feminist. Hennar viktige bidrag til den politiske filosofien og diskursanalyse som felt har særleg kome til uttrykk gjennom kritikk av kapitalismen, samstundes som den økonomistiske marxismen har vore kritisk gjennomgått. Særskild kjent er ho for boka *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* som ho gav ut i 1985 saman med Ernesto Laclau. Dette verket, med eit fokus på kjente post-marxistiske skikkelsar som Antonio Gramsci, har raskt vorte ein klassikar innan politisk filosofi og har gjeve nye reiskapar til kulturstudiar. Heilt sentralt her er utviklinga av omgrepet «agonistisk pluralisme», som ved å kanalisere og artikulere det vellet av konfliktar som pregar samfunnet, kan fungere som eit alternativ til den uløselege «antagonistiske konflikten» vi finn mellom anna hjå Marx.

I samanheng med CULCOMs avslutningskonferanse var ho invitert til Oslo for å halde førelisinga «Human rights, democracy and pluralism». Filosofisk supplement fekk i den samanhengen høve til å stille ho nokre spørsmål om hennar bakgrunn som politisk tenkjar, om agonistisk konflikt og menneskerettar.

How did you get politicized? Were you part of the 68-movement?

It was when I began my studies at the University of Louvain in the beginning of the sixties. What politicized me was the Cuban revolution and the Algerian war. The Cuban revolution was most important, because there were traditionally many Latin-American students at the University of Louvain. That is what really woke my interest in politics. I was not even in Europe in '68. I was in Latin-America, because I had left in '66. I went to Latin-America to participate in the revolution there, because we were absolutely convinced that this was where it was going to take place. Some of my friends went to Algeria, but we all felt that there was really nothing to do in Europe. It was a big surprise for everybody when '68 emerged, but I missed that totally.

*When you wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, was it in continuation with your thoughts from back when you started to be political, or was it more in conflict with your initial encounter with politics?*

In the sixties in Louvain I was engaged with people who were on the left in the socialist party, a group called "La Gauche". I was never in a communist party but I was influenced by Marxism. Later I studied in Paris with Althusser, who was quite an important influence. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* was published nearly twenty years later, so a lot of things had happened in the meantime. It was mainly through my contact with the work of Gramsci that I began to criticize some forms of economic Marxism. Forms of Marxism which would imagine that everything was automatically a question of class interest, and that there was really no need for the creation of what Gramsci would call collective will and what we (Chantal Mouffe og Ernesto Laclau, red. anm.) later, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, called chain of equivalence between different struggles. When we wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, an important objective was to envisage how a left wing project could give room for the new movements which developed after the sixties, like feminism and the range of new social movements which could not be explained in terms of class. This is what we aimed at with *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*: how to integrate all those demands into the socialist project. We wanted to reformulate the socialist project as an articulation of all democratic demands, not exclusively in terms

of class. It is not that we no longer thought that class issues were important. It is rather that we also needed to engage with issues of sexual equality, of anti-racism, of environment, and all those movements which developed in the seventies.

You went to England at some point. Why did you settle there?

In Latin-America I was teaching philosophy at the National University of Colombia in Bogotá, where I had a very good job, but I decided to come back to Europe for a while to study politics. I chose England, because I wanted a different cultural, political and linguistic context, and I had already studied in France and Belgium. This is why I decided to study politics at the University of Essex. I originally wanted to go back to Colombia, but due to personal circumstances I stayed in England, and I'm still there.

You argue in several places that there is need for division and conflict in politics, especially the division between left and right. But if class is no longer a privileged position or privileged place in political analysis, what would then be the difference between left and right?

I don't argue for the need for conflict, I argue that there *is* conflict, and what is needed is the *recognition* of conflict. I'm not saying we need conflict: Conflict is there. What we need to do is to acknowledge it, and allow for conflict to be represented in political terms. This is the role of the distinction between left and right, it's a way to represent the division of society in a political vocabulary. From as early as *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* the centre of my reflection has been the idea that the political has to do with the existence of antagonism and conflict. And we need to acknowledge that – there is no point denying it. For me the distinction between left and right is the recognition that society is divided. The division could be named differently, but since the distinction between left and right has been the way this division has usually been acknowledged in politics, I think it's important to keep it. This does not mean that we need to think of the left in the same way today as we thought of the left fifty years ago. It's important to acknowledge that there are different interests in society, and these antagonisms can take many different forms. There is a class antagonism which determines different economic interests, and different projects on how society should be organized. But there are many forms of subordination in society: This is

why our argument is that we need a left wing politics that can give expression to all forms of antagonism, and not just the antagonism related to class. My concern with the traditional socialist project is that it only recognized class-antagonism. I definitely think class-antagonism is important; I don't want to abandon that dimension. Nevertheless, I think it is as important to recognize other forms of antagonism. The project of radical democracy in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is a strategy to struggle against all forms of subordination, take all antagonisms under consideration, and not only the class-based ones.

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy you argue that the aim of socialism is the broadening of democracy to ever increasing areas of the social. How far can a liberal democracy expand before the expansion itself, to economics, becomes an antagonistic rather than an agonistic conflict?

You must understand that when I speak of liberal democracy, I don't speak of capitalist democracy. I think we need to distinguish liberal democracy as a political form of society - which would include a series of institutions of pluralist democracy - from a certain form of economic organization, which is capitalism. It is true that many people, particularly on the right, but now unfortunately also on the left, seem to believe that in order to have a liberal democratic system you need capitalism. But this is not the case with everyone who defends liberal democracy. For instance, the Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio has argued in favor of what he calls a liberal socialism: a liberal democratic system with a socialist mode of production. Not a kind of Soviet socialism of course, but another kind of socialism. Another liberal thinker, John Rawls, has also accepted the idea that the type of liberal democracy he argues for does not necessarily require a capitalist mode of production. This is why I'm arguing for the need to struggle for the extension of the principles of liberty and equality for all - which constitute the ethical-political principles of liberal democracy - to as many relations as possible. Of course, at some point this extension could enter into contradiction with capitalist relations of production and we can imagine a liberal democratic system in which the relations of production will no longer be capitalist.

Is there room for revolutionary transgression within your system of thinking?

What we are arguing for in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is that when you already have a liberal democratic system you no longer need a revolution in order to develop a socialist project. This is also Norberto Bobbio's position. We should make a distinction between democratic countries and countries in which there is no democracy, and of course in those countries you might need a revolution in order to establish the very basis of democracy. But this revolution does not have to be violent. A revolution is basically a transformation of the principles of legitimacy. This transformation can be made violently if there is a very strong opposition, but it could also be a more peaceful transition. Our argument is that the problem with liberal democratic societies is that the principles of liberty and equality for all are asserted, but not put into practice. What is necessary is an immanent critique, to force them to put their principles into practice. This does not require a revolution.

Would you disagree with the idea that some interests – economic or social or political – are in some way objective?

As I see it, to speak of objective interests is to speak from an essentialist perspective, in which you've got a certain place, be it the relations of production, or the sex-gender-relations, to which there necessarily corresponds a form of consciousness with 'objective' interests. And if it happens that people do not have those interests, then you would accuse them of false consciousness for not having the consciousness that corresponds to what they should have. We are strongly critical of this perspective, because our perspective is a discourse theory perspective. What we criticize in Marxism is what we call economism or epiphenomenalism, which means that consciousness is considered as something epiphenomenal, that it is some direct expression of an objective situation. Our philosophical perspective is that this is the wrong way to think about things, because interests are always discursively constructed. To speak of false consciousness, or people not being aware of their objective interests, does not make sense for us. Of course it happens that workers will in many cases vote for parties that call for a reduction of their salaries, and then you would say that they vote against their objective interests. But these people might be moved by other interests. People do not have only one subject position. For instance, a white, male worker might also be racist or sexist, and he might vote for a right-

wing xenophobic party. But this means that his position as a worker is not the determinant one when he acts in politics. This worker can also be a catholic, and does not want to vote for a party that is in favor of gay marriage or abortion. Consciousness is a very complex process, and it results from the articulation of many different subject positions. To believe there is only one subject position, and that this is the one that should determine the interests or the political way people think and act, is what we criticize as a form of essentialism and reductionism. This is why I think the old discourse of objective interests and false consciousness does not help us understand how political consciousness is constituted.

Is any theory of alienation impossible within this kind of theory? Do you completely dismiss any kind of human nature or any kind of objective interests in this way? Is alienation a fruitless term?

I do find this concept of alienation useful. Alienation and false consciousnesses pertain to the kind of ontology which we put into question in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. We argue that social consciousness and social reality are always discursively constructed. This is why we do not use terms like ideology, false consciousness, or alienation. It's a different philosophical approach.

In your concept of hegemony, is it possible to distinguish between power, dominance and violence?

It is a complex question. There are so many different ways in which power is comprehended. Some theorists distinguish between 'power over' and 'power for'. Basically, I think there are antagonisms, and those antagonisms are structured in hierarchical terms, so that they become power *over*. This 'power *over*' sometimes presents itself in violent forms, sometimes through what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence. One distinction we make in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is the distinction between subordination and oppression. We think that subordination is an objective category. Oppression, however, is a subjective category, because you can have people who are subordinated but do not feel oppressed. For instance, in many societies and even in ours, the situation of women has been such that women are subordinated, but some of them consider this as the natural order, so they don't feel oppressed. Workers can be subordinated, but accept that this is the natural order

of society, that is, that I've been born a worker and it is the natural order of society that we depend on the capitalists. Thus, the question is: How can relations of subordination become relations of oppression? The whole question of left politics is how to transform relations of subordination into relations of oppression, in order to make people act against them. This is something that is done through discursive construction. This is why feminism was so important as a discourse which contributed to a transformation of women's consciousness, because if you live in a society in which all discourses assert that women are inferior, it is likely that women will accept their subordinated position. Once you begin to have a feminist discourse, women can begin to ask questions, and their consciousness will be transformed. What is important in the discourses is the way that people are addressed, and the possibilities available to think of a different order.

According to Simone de Beauvoir sex is not a nominal but an absolute difference. Is it meaningful to speak about absolute difference, and could sex be understood as such a difference?

The ideas to discuss here are those of Judith Butler who affirms that not only is gender constructed, but that sex itself is something that is constructed. I don't agree with that, because I believe in the existence of what is called sexual difference, and you might call that an absolute difference. I think that there *is* in fact sexual difference. That needs to be acknowledged, we can't simply think of a society in which that would not exist. I'm very much influenced by psychoanalysis, and I think Freud and Lacan are right when they say that there is sexual difference. Of course, sexual difference does not need to be expressed in relations of subordination, but it is not simply something that can be eliminated, or a question of performance, as Butler will have it.

David Harvey criticizes postmodernism for being allied to neo-liberalism. Do you feel exposed to this criticism? Is there any good reason for it in your opinion?

First, I've never considered myself a postmodern. By the way, what is postmodernism as a philosophical discourse? What I've often found is that when people criticize postmodernism, they criticize, for instance, some thesis of Baudrillard, and it's very easy to criticize Baudrillard. Then they make some sweeping conclusion in which they include Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, although they

never discuss them. But Derrida is certainly not a postmodern, Lacan is not a postmodern, Foucault is not a postmodern either. The only two authors who use the term postmodernism in philosophy are Lyotard and Baudrillard. I think it's really a bogus construction. What I am revindicating is my inscription into a specific philosophical current, which is post-structuralism. I think there is a very big difference between post-structuralism and postmodernism. Post-structuralism is essentially a philosophical approach which puts into question a certain kind of rationalism and essentialism. You can by the way find a similar critique in other philosophical currents, like the second Wittgenstein, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics or American pragmatism. But I must say that we have in fact not been considered as being post-modern. There have been a few cases, but we've mainly been considered as being post-marxist and post-structuralist, and that is something I have no problem with.

With respect to David Harvey, I think there is a difference between his more recent work - which I find really quite interesting, in that he has been introducing a series of concepts that I think chimes with our ideas of hegemony - and his earlier work. His book *The Condition of Postmodernity* was written in a different context, and at a moment with a very specific conjuncture. It seems to me that he now sees things in a more balanced way than in the critique he made then.

The society is in constant change and development due to conflict in society, but in as much as this is confined, so to speak, within liberal democracy, wouldn't the social change take place within a continuous system of agonistic pluralism, and if this is the case, how is this not the "end of history"?

The "end of history"? You mean the victory of liberal democracy. Here my position is very different from Fukuyama who believed that we were going to witness the universalization of liberal democracy because there was no alternative anymore, because of the collapse of communism. An important part of my work has been to show that liberal democracy is not *the* rational solution to the question of the good regime that should be universalized and accepted by everybody. My argument is very much contextualist, for instance, in *The Democratic Paradox*, I show how the liberal, pluralist democracy is a very contingent historical articulation, that there is nothing necessary in that articulation. It is the result of a series of struggles which are his-

torically, geographically and culturally specific and which results from conditions specific to the western experience, where the Judeo-Christian tradition has played a very important role. This is why there is absolutely no reason to claim this is the model the Chinese or the Africans or the Muslim world should accept. I'm certainly not in favor of imposing it on the rest of the world. So it is definitely not the end of history in the sense where this is the model everyone should accept. In the case of the west, I think this is a model worth defending but that it is important to try to radicalize. This is the aim of our project of radical democracy.

If the west needs to respect this multipolarism, can we criticize or intervene in other cultures and countries? Should we criticize the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia, or the violation of human rights in China? Should we talk about it?

I certainly don't think we should intervene! It's a difficult question. First, there is a real danger in trying to impose our specific conception of human rights, believing that we've got the truth. This is an imperialistic attitude which I want to challenge. On the other hand, I think there are certain instances in which our solidarity with the struggle of women fighting against subordination in other countries is important. But this solidarity should not take the form of intervening by force. It's a question of finding forms of solidarity to help people who are fighting for democratic objectives. I am against the claim that it is our duty to intervene in order to impose our model, because that is certainly not showing solidarity, it's a form of imperialist intervention.

If we are not to intervene, and not to condemn anything, do we really have the tools to provide such a framework as the UN?

I'm very much in favor of a multipolar world. To think the idea that the UN could be a sort of an impartial organization is really an illusion. For instance, we've seen that it's enough for the US to consider that everything Israel does is acceptable to render UN resolutions irrelevant. The US has given complete immunity - impunity - to the Israelis. There are many UN resolutions condemning Israel, but they are never enforced. When there is a situation in which the US *wants* to intervene, they do it anyway. There is really a double standard. Look what happened in Iraq, and look

what happens in Israel. I think that to believe that the UN could play a real role, when you've got one single hegemonic power, is really to fool oneself. As long as the US is the hegemonic power, they will be able to block absolutely everything they don't want to happen. They went to Iraq, with the help of the Brits without UN authorization. Only in a world in which we would have some kind of equilibrium between different regional poles and in which it would not be possible for the US to impose their will, could we start thinking of a different international order. From that point of view it's quite interesting what's happening at the moment. For instance, I find the recent agreement between Lula and Turkey, put in place in order to try to find the most peaceful solution to the question of Iran, a very welcome initiative. Even though it was unsuccessful. The hegemony of the west is increasingly challenged and we are seeing the premises of a multipolar world. This is very positive, even if this means that for instance China, which is definitely not democratic, will play a more important role. There will be some restraints put on the power of the US, and that could only be a good thing.

Isn't it better with a double standard than no standard?

No, I don't think so. In fact I'm convinced it is worse! Look at the consequences of the situation in Palestine, and the fact that there is precisely such a double standard. I understand how Muslims feel enraged. Antagonistic reactions against the west are fostered by this double standard, and this situation is very dangerous. And to say that no standard at all will turn to complete chaos: I don't think

so. For instance, it is absurd to think that if there were no control of nuclear arms, then Iran would be able to have a nuclear arsenal, and then they would start bombing Israel. Though he is aggressive in his rhetoric, even Ahmadinejad is not going to start bombing Israel if he had the bomb. I think we could say that what reinforced the wish of the Iranians to have the bomb is what they saw happening in Iraq. If Saddam Hussein had had the bomb, the Americans would have thought twice before invading Iraq. So it can be seen as a form of protection. To try to impose standards: Who are going to define them? Some hegemonic power will of course define those standards. No doubt, some people believe that the hegemony of the US is a benevolent hegemony and it's good to have it, but most people see it as a problem. As a way out cosmopolitan theorists claim that we need to have a world beyond hegemony. But my theoretical work is aimed at showing that there is no order without hegemony, that every form of order is a hegemonic order. What is the solution, then? If we cannot go beyond hegemony, and we realize that the existence of one hegemonic power is really problematic, the solution is to pluralize hegemony. This is my idea of a multipolar world: instead of having one center of power, you have a plurality of regional powers. Instead of one order imposed by the center, there will be an order based on negotiation between poles that respect each other. We could call that some kind of agonistic world order, in which different regions will accept some negotiated rules. Such a situation would be much better for the world than the situation existing today.