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Title: The Illusion of Purity

Subtitle: Chantal Mouffe's Realist Critique of Cosmopolitanism

Abstract:

Over the last twenty years, cosmopolitan theories have been benefiting greatly from the dialogue between defenders and critics of world citizenship. Yet, the decidedly polemic aspect of this debate, while allowing for intellectual progress, is also responsible for overdrawn generalizations. Instead of entering into the debate directly, this paper attempts to refute a specific anti-cosmopolitan claim raised by Chantal Mouffe. Her realist objection to cosmopolitanism, derived from the conceptual framework of agonistic pluralism, is mistaken at a crucial point: a firm dichotomy between politics and morality cannot provide an alternative to theories of world citizenship, because Mouffe's embrace of *multipolarity* as a principle of global politics must equally appeal to a set of universal norms governing international relations. This paper argues that even the realist model of multipolarity needs to conceive of a *minimal morality* to create the symbolic ground on which various power centres can be held accountable.

Keywords: agonistic democracy, Chantal Mouffe, cosmopolitanism, multipolarity, terrorism;

I. Resisting World Citizenship[1]

The steep career of cosmopolitan theories during the past 20 years can, to a certain extent, be explained by the ongoing, intensive dialogue between defenders and critics of various types of world citizenship.[2] While external and internal objections against 'extreme' forms of abstract universalism have changed the contours of the debate about moral cosmopolitanism[3], the debate about political cosmopolitanism appears to be stuck in a dead-end, notwithstanding the massive amount of publications in the field. Even though the focus in much of the recent literature has noticeably shifted from individual obligations toward distant others to democratic participation and civil institutions, there remain major areas of discord with those who straightforwardly reject the core values of cosmopolitanism.[4]

This paper is intended as an effort in book-keeping, in weighing communicative gains against communicative losses: The decidedly polemic aspect of the – mostly academic – argument between defenders and critics of cosmopolitanism is not only positive as it keeps the discussion going and pushes it forward; it is also responsible for overdrawn generalizations and artificial oppositions.[5] Uncovering these strategies of simplification by no means settles the argument. However, it might help to see where the debate between defenders and critics of world citizenship is unproductive. Once we are aware of these strategies of simplification, we might be better prepared to focus on those positions that are actually controversial and avoid setting up and attacking straw-men.

Most objections raised against cosmopolitanism, be they of the postcolonial, anti-globalization or realist variety, share a deep discontent with *formal appeals to universals*.[6] Their conceptions of the political are, on different grounds and with different

consequences, based on notions of disagreement, conflict and struggle, rather than on ideas of consensus, concord and unanimity.[7] Anti-cosmopolitans usually believe that invoking a universal subject like 'the family of mankind' effectively conceals the presence of power – the racist West, globalized capitalism, the American empire – behind the discourse. It is a common goal of postcolonial, anti-globalization and realist positions to tear away this facade, expose the speaking and acting subject, and reveal that all formal appeals to universal subjects are in fact full of particular content.

In doing so, each critique employs a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'[8] that seeks to reconstruct the traces of power behind allegedly neutral references to world citizenship. Hence, it is vital for the critics of cosmopolitanism to detect evidence for their charge of the manipulative use of universals: if they managed to conclusively show that specific interests drive the actors who make use of universals, then it could be argued that cosmopolitan approaches are fundamentally flawed in their claim against certain localized actors, such as states within a Westphalian system of equal sovereignty.

Instead of entering into this debate directly, by adopting a constructive stance pro or con cosmopolitanism, I will take a detour and look at the logic of a specific anti-cosmopolitan argument. I will try to illustrate how the realist strand of criticism conceives of the *moralizing effects* of cosmopolitanism. My ambition is twofold: (1) to analyze the assumptions on which the hermeneutics of suspicion rests and (2) to speculate about the immanent shortcomings of such a project. I will argue that the realist objection to cosmopolitanism is mistaken at a crucial point: a firm dichotomy between politics and morality cannot provide an alternative to theories of world citizenship. My paper shall

thus contribute to an *indirect defence* of a minimal morality governing international relations.[9]

The realist position I am interested in maintains that moral arguments are not only out of place in a model of global politics, they are even harmful, because they undermine the equal sovereignty of 'poles' of power and exacerbate the legitimation crisis of existing legal mechanisms enshrined in the UN Charter.[10] Contrary to the view that consensus is morally desirable as long as it is the product of rational deliberation among free and equal people, some sceptics submit that morality is not a means to create lasting harmony, but rather a source of harsh controversy.[11] The ongoing 'war on terror' fuels the dissatisfaction of these sceptics, because the American empire frequently makes use of moral and religious terms to denigrate its political opponents.

Therefore, it is essential for the realist position to remain absolutely unaffected by any appeal to morality, lest it becomes internally inconsistent. Moral considerations only serve the purpose of self-elevation: the moral rightness of political group A is always founded on the moral wrongness of political group B. This strict anti-moralism leads the realists from a point about the *priority* of politics to a claim about the *purity* of politics. The creation of pure politics, untainted by any moral considerations, is one of the guiding motives of this version of realism.[12] I will argue that shifting the emphasis from the priority of politics to the purity of politics is ultimately self-defeating. While we might support the idea that politics is prior to morality, it is hardly defendable to conceive of political action in international relations as something that is completely devoid of any moral considerations.

My interlocutor in this paper will be Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe's rejection of moralization as well as her appraisal of multipolarity offer excellent examples of the realist critique of cosmopolitanism. In exposing what I take to be a performative contradiction[13] at the heart of Mouffe's model, I shall assert that resistance to world citizenship cannot be anchored in a firm dichotomy between politics and morality – which is not to say that opposition to an argumentative and political project of world citizenship is altogether implausible.

II. Mouffe's Conception of Agonistic Democracy and Pluralism

In her newest book, Chantal Mouffe attempts, among other things, to apply her domestic conception of agonistic democracy and pluralism to the realm of international relations.[14] To understand her plea for a multipolar world order, we have to begin by reconstructing the underlying rationale.

Mouffe's idea of *agonism* is derived from a critique of deliberative versions of democracy.[15] Since 'deliberative' is broadly construed, it embraces a wide range of thinkers such as John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. What is characteristic of their positions, albeit with more or less subtle variations in detail, is an overarching way of thinking about differences, frequently equated with liberalism as such. Mouffe designs her own alternative against this foil of deliberative accommodations of difference.

Let us briefly consider Rawls' answer to what he took to be the key challenge for present-day liberalism: the fact of reasonable pluralism.[16] In his later work, Rawls was engaged in a defence of justice from a political standpoint, which entailed a re-tuning of his moral pitch in 'A Theory of Justice.'[17] In 'Political Liberalism'[18], Rawls grappled with

the following problem: If we accept that the basic structure of liberal societies must be open to pluralism in the sense that even contradictory conceptions of the good can find a place within it, we might be tempted to see justice as fairness – the first virtue of institutions – as just another 'comprehensive doctrine.' As a consequence, the basic principle of political liberalism would be drawn into rivalry with competing conceptions of the good, religious or otherwise, which might undermine the open foundation of liberal societies.

Rawls did not want reasonable pluralism to turn against itself. By introducing the notion of an 'overlapping consensus,' which all holders of comprehensive doctrines could subscribe to, he tried to set up an institutional framework which guaranteed two conditions: (a) the *protection* of reasonable pluralism and (b) the *overridingness* of justice as fairness. For it is exactly with regard to such an overlapping consensus that the exceptional status and advantageous stability of political liberalism comes to the fore. Political liberalism provides free and equal citizens with the opportunity to carry out their controversies without undermining the basic structure itself.

For Mouffe the approach of 'Political Liberalism' is part of the problem, not part of the solution. She contends that Rawls' reformulation of justice, while being more responsive to the real world of disagreement, conflict and struggle, still falls short of acknowledging what the political is all about. This assessment is not surprising if we look at Mouffe's distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'[19]:

> By 'the political' I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. 'Politics', on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because

they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'. I consider that it is only when we acknowledge the 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 what I take to be the central question of democratic politics. […] The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established.[20]

Mouffe accuses deliberative theorists of cherishing a dangerous illusion when they insinuate that it would be feasible, and indeed desirable, to overcome the primary feature of the political: the us/them-opposition. Deliberative theorists display a desire for cancelling out this inherent antagonism through the establishment of a sphere of uncontested neutrality, just like Rawls' 'overlapping consensus.' The liberal accommodation of difference is based on a disavowal of the political, because it denies the inescapability of exclusionary practices. Therefore, democratic theory needs to think differently about differences.

What Mouffe finds deeply troubling in the liberal tradition is the centrality attributed to consensus. To suggest that consensus can be fully inclusive and totally rational is not only empirically questionable, but also conceptually flawed, because there always has to be a constitutive outside from which the inside is categorically separated. In other words, there can be no inclusion without exclusion. This argument is directed against the very idea of universalism, and we will later see how the heavy weight of this thought bears upon other elements of Mouffe's theory.

The Transcendental Quality of Antagonism

Mouffe deliberately makes a strong foundational claim by conceiving of antagonism as the *condition of possibility for politics*. The we/they-opposition possesses a transcendental quality in politics – it can under no circumstances be surmounted. Without

antagonism there simply would be no politics. Although we cannot leave the space constituted by the opposition between 'us' and 'them,' we can try to reshape it according to the requirements of democracy. This process of transforming antagonism is absolutely essential, because Mouffe does not endorse the outbreak of violence that always remains present in the antagonistic dimension of politics. Although it is impossible, due to the transcendental quality of antagonism, to rule out violence in political relations, Mouffe wants to prevent the articulation of differences from taking a violent form. This is the moment for a metamorphosis:

> Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while agonism is struggle between adversaries. We can therefore reformulate our problem by saying that envisaged from the perspective of 'agonistic pluralism' the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism.[21]

What separates democratic from non-democratic polities is not the fact that consensual agreement through rational deliberation takes the place of conflict and disagreement. If antagonism represents the condition of possibility for politics, then it would be fallacious to assume the *differentia specifica* between a democratic and a non-democratic polity were to be isolated in the overcoming of exclusion. A democratic polity shares with all other forms of polities the feature of being exclusionary, but it distinguishes itself in that it is essentially concerned with a *re-articulation* of the we/they-opposition so that enmity becomes negotiable.

An agonistic political relationship depends on the recognition of the terms of legitimate contestation. This is the crucial distinction between antagonism and agonism. Whereas antagonism describes the potentially violent aspect of the political, agonism aims at containing the emergence of violence. The transformation of antagonism into agonism gives rise to the figure of the adversary. This figure is pivotal to agonistic

pluralism since it navigates between the *Scylla* of liberal consensus and the *Charybdis* of violent enmity.

At one point, Mouffe calls for the democratic enterprise of sublimating antagonism.[22] This psychoanalytical metaphor is employed to underscore the irrevocability of exclusionary practices: we might never be able to surmount them, yet there are mechanisms to work them out. The major deficit of deliberative theories is their false confidence in a realm beyond conflict and disagreement. To use another allegorical phrase from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis: their disavowal of the political cannot but lead to a forceful *return of the repressed*. It is precisely because deliberative theories do not account for profound differences – the antagonistic dimension of the political – that conflicts within societies governed by the search for consensual agreement through rational deliberation will be extremely difficult to contain. If dissent cannot be articulated through suitable channels, it will find its way out by assaulting the democratic system itself. Mouffe's favourite example of the outbreak of violence as an unintended upshot of consensus-oriented societies is the success of radical right wing parties all over Europe.[23]

Mouffe's conception of agonistic pluralism wants to offer an alternative which preserves the irreconcilability of adversarial identities *without* provoking open hostility. The taming of antagonism has as its precondition the demarcation of a symbolic ground – the Greek word 'agon'[24] is quite adequate here – on which legitimate contestation among members of the same political association is achievable. By introducing a measure to hold legitimate from illegitimate forms of contestation apart Mouffe emphasizes that every adversarial identity must minimally comply with the symbolic ground of a democratic polity. Here, the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion constitute the political

space. Without the exclusion of a certain class of illicit contenders, there would be no chance to include another class of proper contenders. The stability of a democratic polity depends on an act of limitation: If every political space needs limits, then non-members have no right to challenge it. Non-members are on the other side of the we/they-opposition.

Moralization and the Neutralizing Tendency of Liberalism

An important conclusion to be drawn from this is that Mouffe charges liberal theory with moralizing politics. Hypothetical devices like the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls) or the 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas) serve the purpose of simulating circumstances under which just societal arrangements can ideally be discovered; they conceptualize morality as an independent arena in which political disputes can be settled after all. Against this view, Mouffe maintains that morality is not able to perform the function of settling political disputes. Since morality is only of instrumental use to politics, introducing moral considerations in political disputes will be motivated by a tactical move to occupy the moral high ground. Thus, moralization is conducive to the implementation of political interests, and its complementary effect is depoliticization:

> There is, in my view, a direct link between the weakening of the political frontier characteristic of the adversarial model and the 'moralization' of politics. By using the term 'moralization' in this context I do not mean, of course, that now people act in the field of politics in search of the common good, according to motives that would be more disinterested or impartial. What I want to indicate is that, instead of being constructed in political terms, the 'we'-'they' opposition constitutive of politics is now constructed according to moral categories of 'good' versus 'evil'. What this change of vocabulary reveals is not, as some would have it, that politics has been replaced by morality but that politics is being played out in the moral register. It is in that sense that I am proposing to understand the 'moralization' of politics – to indicate not that politics has become more moral but that nowadays political antagonisms are being formulated in terms of moral categories.[25]

In this passage Mouffe succinctly expresses her view of the relationship between politics and morality. The fundamental structure is again laid down by antagonism. The relationship between politics and morality can be shaped in a positive or a negative manner: either by sublimating or by moralizing antagonism. We have already seen why Mouffe approves of sublimation. Moralizing, on the other hand, is dangerous, because it creates the false impression that we are able to leave antagonism behind. It follows from the transcendental quality of antagonism that such a moralizing strategy is necessarily treacherous. For Mouffe, it is conceptually impossible to replace political antagonisms with moral categories, and everyone who claims otherwise actually pursues a partisan agenda in which his or her political interests are only 'played out in the moral register,' but are not eliminated.

Moralization serves both the implementation and the concealment of political interests. To put it more precisely: it serves the implementation of political interests *by* concealing them. This complementary effect is called depoliticization. Depoliticization is in itself part of a political struggle if a specific programme is cloaked in purely moral terms. As a consequence, Mouffe's critique of moralization employs a hermeneutics of suspicion to retranslate the moral terms back into political interests. While the moralization of politics leads to de-politicized relations between contenders, the critique of moralization must attempt to illuminate the deceitful appearance and show precisely which political interests are hidden behind which moral claims. In line with her most important source of inspiration, Carl Schmitt, Mouffe believes that liberal ideology promotes a 'neutralization' of the political.[26] Inverting this neutralizing tendency is the main purpose of agonistic pluralism.

III. Transposing Agonism: Multipolarity

Mouffe's reading of the moralizing strand in liberal theory is not only relevant for domestic but also for international and global politics. Consider the notorious slogan of 'the axis of evil.'[27] You do not have to be a radical anti-American to reckon that such a labelling serves a specific purpose: prevailing in a military fight. Designating the political enemy as evil facilitates a claim of authority for one's own intentions and deeds.[28] Political group A articulates its interests in moral terms simply to gain a strategic advantage over group B. (In fact, most of the time both groups reserve goodness for their own cause, respectively.)

Self-empowerment through moral legitimation is a widespread technique of warfare. Once we have identified the fault lines of the political antagonism, this self-empowerment is easy to uncover, since we can retranslate the moral categories back into political interests. But what if we cannot see these fault lines, because the political space appears seamless, free of ruptures or fissures? That is precisely the case with cosmopolitanism where appeals to universal norms address every human being equally. How can the case thus be made that the idea of world citizenship is moralizing? Against various schools of cosmopolitan thought Mouffe maintains:

> [T]he central problem with the diverse forms of cosmopolitanism is that they all postulate, albeit in different guises, the availability of a form of consensual governance transcending the political, conflict and negativity. […] To believe in the possibility of a cosmopolitan democracy with cosmopolitan citizens with the same rights and obligations, a constituency that would coincide with 'humanity' is a dangerous illusion. If such a project was ever realized, it could only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that would have been able to impose its conception of the world on the entire planet and which, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its 'rational' leadership.[29]

It follows directly from Mouffe's foundational claim about the transcendental quality of antagonism that any appeal to a realm beyond hegemony and power – an appeal implicit, for example, in Martha Nussbaum's plea for world citizenship inspired by ancient Stoicism[30] – falls prey to the hermeneutics of suspicion. A global subject like 'humanity' cannot represent the real interests of all human beings equally. Universal norms are not fully inclusive, because they still have to be defined against something that is not part of the all-encompassing family of mankind. Given that a justification of cosmopolitanism would rather not rest on the fantastic vision of an interplanetary opposition between 'us' earthlings and 'them' aliens, the conclusion must be drawn that any consensus on a global level can only be the result of a one-sided usurpation. Subsequently, the unavoidable discrimination between inside and outside will be exercised from within humanity; but now in a way that will amount to excluding the political enemy from the family of mankind. Cosmopolitanism might, in Mouffe's view, paradoxically generate opportunities for dehumanization.[31] As a consequence, theories of world citizenship are deemed even more perilous than straightforward justifications of imperialism, because the former disguise their hegemonic aspirations while the latter embrace them openly.

The current waves of terrorism and counter-terrorism can, in Mouffe's view, be explained by the absence of suitable channels through which dissent from the mainstream of the Western way of life may be articulated non-violently.[32] These channels would be opened up in a world of diverse power centres. For Mouffe it is beyond any doubt that the American empire has narrowed the political perspectives to the extent that the world today is dominated by a single power centre. Cosmopolitan theories are not helpful in

altering this unipolar order, because their affirmation of world citizenship necessarily

fails to be fully inclusive. Hence, world citizenship is actually complicit in advancing and

perpetuating the reign of the American empire.

Mouffe's antiserum against the dominance of the American empire is a multipolar

transformation of international relations. This proposal starts from the assumption that

both unipolar and cosmopolitan models of global politics increase violent tensions

between transnational actors. Mouffe's model is primarily concerned with meeting two

demands: (1) *accounting for the legitimacy* of a deeply pluralistic society of nations and

(2) *devising procedures* to defuse dangerous clashes between members of such a society.

A multipolar world order would thus constitute a political space in which both criteria

were successfully satisfied. Although Mouffe does not fully elaborate on this proposal,

we can think of her alternative as analogous to the concept of agonistic pluralism at

home. With regard to the chances of realizing such a multipolar order Mouffe asserts:

> I do not want to minimize the obstacles that need to be overcome, but, at least in
> the case of the creation of a multipolar order, those obstacles are only of an
> empirical nature, while the cosmopolitan project is also based on flawed
> theoretical premises. […] Once it is acknowledged that there is no 'beyond
> hegemony', the only conceivable strategy for overcoming world dependence on a
> single power is to find ways to 'pluralize' hegemony. And this can be done only
> through the recognition of a multiplicity of regional powers.[33]

Spelling out the Implicit: The Restoration of Symmetry

At this point it would be insightful to draw attention to the empirical and historical

research on the virtues and vices of multipolarity in international relations. What is at

stake in this literature is whether the aptitude of multipolarity to institutionally design

mechanisms for peace-keeping and conflict-resolution noticeably exceeds the capacities

of competing models such as uni- or bipolarity.[34]

It is worthwhile noting that Mouffe must logically endorse a consequence that follows directly from her recommendation; a consequence that she herself does not make explicit in her euphoric understanding of multipolarity. Given that the present state of global affairs is characterized by a military asymmetry, as evidenced by the unipolar hegemony of the US, the goal of multipolarity can only be achieved if this disequilibrium is balanced out. Bluntly speaking, a multipolar world order would have to trigger a massive rearmament of weaker power centres. And rearmament means first and foremost the willingness to develop nuclear weapons capability.

This process has been called the option of 'restoring symmetry' in global politics.[35] By encouraging weaker power centres to arm themselves with nuclear weapons, the asymmetrical structure would be adjusted such that the current moment of unipolar hegemony is broken up and transformed into a system of multipolarity. Without speculating too much about the chances of realizing such an option, it is safe to assume that such a restoration is extremely hazardous. As a matter of fact, the bleak outlook of massive rearmament around the globe involuntarily renders the imperial assurance of a *pax Americana* attractive.

This caveat refers to an implicit corollary of Mouffe's plea for multipolarity. However, Mouffe primarily wants to make a theoretical claim when she accuses cosmopolitan proposals of logically inconsistence; therefore, I shall stick to her abstract argument. One question, then, cannot be fended off: is multipolarity as a model convincing in the sense that it reflects the transcendental quality of antagonism *without* increasing the likelihood of violent conflicts in global politics?

I believe that Mouffe's embrace of multipolarity drives her, against her will, to an impasse. The quandary that any international equivalent of agonistic pluralism faces has two horns: either it relapses into an attenuated version of universalism, or it frankly declares that the envisaged power centres are caught in a state of nature where resorting to aggression always remains on the table.

We can find arguments pointing at both horns. Multipolarity might be pushed back to an attenuated version of universalism as Mouffe's theory aims at sublimating and taming hostility. If the primary purpose of balancing powers in international relations is containing and regulating, not unleashing, violence, then we must be able to circumscribe a symbolic ground on which each of these powers can have an equal standing. Equal standing will be an upshot of reciprocally accepting the terms of legitimate contestation. Such acceptance would then create the realm of a 'global agon.' As we have seen, agonism is a way of manoeuvring between liberal consensus and violent enmity. It is absolutely central for Mouffe's claim about the advantageous stability of agonistic pluralism that it is rooted in a shared, undisputed understanding of the rules determining the adversarial contest. Once this consensual dimension at the core of agonistic pluralism collapses, the adversarial contest will inevitably degenerate into open hostility.

Transposing the model of adversarial contest to international relations would require an analogous acceptance of norms that are exempted from disagreement. This move postulates at least a small number of universal rules of conduct between power centres. Whereas Mouffe is not willing to accept a full-fledged version of world citizenship, she is still obliged, for reasons internal to her approach, to appeal to a sphere that remains isolated from the battlefield of hegemonic struggles. If multipolarity

proposes a system to mitigate the worst excesses of a *pax Americana* – excesses that would effectively be amplified within a cosmopolitan regime – then it must be based on some form of consensus with regard to which power centres are to be included in the global agon and which are to be excluded from it. The very logic of how to transform antagonism into agonism forces Mouffe to make this distinction between proper and illicit contenders for participation in the global agon.

This brings us back to Mouffe's critique of deliberative accommodations of difference. As a general point one has to remark that it is inscribed in the grammar of the word 'pluralism' that it constantly incites a parallel discourse about the *limits* of pluralism. Mouffe herself is pulled into this discourse. The call for a pluralization of global politics has a constant echo: Where should the threshold of legitimacy be set that contenders for the status of a power centre have to surpass? How should we construe mechanisms of access to, and exit from, the global agon?

For Mouffe it is the drawing of a demarcation line, separating the inner space of the agon from its constitutive outside, which enables the republican formation of the 'people.'[36] The importance of preserving political unity becomes evident in Mouffe's rejection of legal pluralism. She is highly sceptical of the suggestion that different versions of the rule of law can coexist within multicultural societies, since this way of practicing diversity would disrupt the uniform space of the agon. In her criticism of legal pluralism Mouffe stresses the significance of keeping the people united:

> A democratic society requires the allegiance of its citizens to a set of shared ethico-political principles, usually spelled out in a constitution and embodied in a legal framework, and it cannot allow the coexistence of conflicting principles of legitimacy in its midst.[37]

Human Rights and the Limits of the Global Agon

These thoughts allow a key insight into Mouffe's concept of multipolarity. Let us

consider what an equivalent to 'a set of shared ethico-political principles' on a

transnational level would look like. For it is only with the help of these principles that we

can define criteria of access to, and exit from, the global agon between power centres of

equal standing. A natural candidate for such a set of values would be *human rights*.

Human rights might be conceptualized as providing the foundation on which peaceful

disagreement between power centres could be exercised. The respect for these rights

might then figure as a limitation clause to appropriate acts of sovereign self-expression.

This view roughly mirrors Rawls' conception of 'decency' in international relations.[38]

How does Mouffe conceive of human rights? It is in her treatment of human rights

that we can see why Mouffe cannot stay the course of consistently refuting universals.

Although she intends to preserve human rights in a multipolar world order, she argues

against a unified conception of human rights:

> I insist on the necessiaty [*sic*] of pluralizing the notion of human rights, so as to
> prevent them from becoming an instrument in the imposition of Western
> hegemony. To acknowledge a plurality of formulations of the idea of human rights
> is to bring to the fore their political character. The debate about human rights
> cannot be envisaged as taking place in a neutral terrain where the imperatives of
> morality and rationality – as defined by the West – would represent the only
> legitimate criteria. It is a terrain shaped by power relations where a hegemonic
> struggle takes place, hence the importance of making room for a plurality of
> legitimate understandings.[39]

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that political interests play a role in

specific formulations of human rights. Legal documents are products of a certain time

and place. But what does it mean to tolerate a 'plurality of legitimate understandings' of

human rights? Apparently Mouffe embraces something similar to legal pluralism when it

comes to regulating international relations. The point I want to emphasize is not that Mouffe commits a mistake in elevating agonistic pluralism to the level of global politics. I would rather raise a more fundamental point about the nature of agonistic pluralism itself: its limits must necessarily be stable, or close to stability, to ensure the peaceful settlement of conflicts between adversaries.

Pluralizing human rights, however, is the wrong strategy for circumscribing the space of a global agon. Opening up the debate about human rights sounds like an attractive idea, but it also deprives the multipolar world order of a chief barrier against the uncontrolled proliferation of antagonisms. The matter of the fact is that a unified conception of human rights, exempted from hegemonic struggles over their meaning, could effectively serve as a yardstick for holding various power centres accountable. The respect for human rights would then fasten the threshold above which violent enmity turns into adversarial contest. This is not to say that human rights are discovered on a 'neutral terrain,' quite on the contrary. Human rights are obviously the objects of fierce controversies, and it would be absurd to assume that debates about their form and content will ever be non-political. But once we have reached a temporary and contingent conclusion about what should count as a human right, we have precisely such a neutral terrain at our disposal on which further disagreement can take place peacefully. From the very viewpoint of agonistic pluralism, human rights actually *should* become an indisputable measure to distinguish between proper and illicit acts of sovereign self-expression.[40]

The tension between the rejection of world citizenship, motivated by Mouffe's critique of universalism, and the promise of peace in global affairs, encapsulated in her

affirmative account of a multipolar restructuring of great power relations, pulls Mouffe's theory in opposite directions. If cosmopolitanism is flawed in suppressing and displacing the antagonistic dimension of the political, Mouffe's conception of a multipolar order is *underdetermined*: unless aggression and violence are acknowledged as acts of sovereign self-expression, a minimal consensus needs to constrain the relations between the various poles. Here, Mouffe's proposal is restricted by her concern for taming and sublimating antagonism.

This dilemma shows why, within the framework of agonistic pluralism, a firm dichotomy between politics and morality is hard to sustain. The transformation of antagonism into agonism is in itself motivated by a *moral judgment*. While the metamorphosis demanded of a democratic polity maintains the priority of politics over morality, it is still conditioned by a decision about the impermissibility of aggression and violence. This decision reflects a moral judgment on the vicissitudes of unrestrained and proliferated antagonism. Favouring the adversary over the enemy follows from a normative assessment; it is more than a political act of prudence. This observation is true even if Mouffe's adversarial contest retains distinctive features that set it apart from liberal accommodations of difference. What I want to stress is that one can, and indeed should, be critical of processes of moralization. At the same time, one can, and indeed should, endorse a consensus that limits the range of sovereign self-expression in the society of nations.

The Terrorist: Enemy or Adversary?

An example will help to see more clearly the dilemma in which Mouffe's critique of cosmopolitanism ends up. Let us turn to Mouffe's own explanation of terrorism and

counterterrorism. We might think of 'the terrorist' – if it makes sense at all to think about him in such an abstract, detached manner – as someone who does not really play by the rules. This is the case of someone who deliberately refuses the agon and consciously intensifies the antagonistic dimension of the political. Mouffe maintains that her proposal of multipolarity would be better suited to cope with this problem, because terrorism is described as resulting from a unipolar world in which, due to the absence of real alternatives to the American empire, discontent with the *status quo* must be voiced violently.

The question we need to ask is what a democratic polity dedicated to agonistic pluralism should do with the terrorist who subverts the realm of legitimate contestation by simply purporting to acknowledge the symbolic ground of the agon, without true allegiance to its communal values. The embodiment of this menace would be the 'sleeper' who acts as if socially assimilated until called to duty. Faced with this challenge, Mouffe's polity has two options: the first one would be to take the terrorist's intentions and deeds at face value and treat him how he treats 'us.' (Again, if it makes sense at all to think about us in such an abstract, detached manner.) This would imply that we have to confront the terrorist as an *enemy*, not as an *adversary*. The sublimating and taming effects of agonism have not had any impact on the terrorist, therefore we simply cannot afford to pretend that he may still become part of a non-violent relation between equals. This thread of argumentation is visible in many vindications of the current 'war on terror.' The point is often made that the standard elements of the law of warfare (*ius in bello*) and of domestic criminal law, such as the unconditional ban on torture and *habeas corpus*, simply do not pertain to the new context of deterritorialized terrorism.[41]

This is, without any doubt, not the route that Mouffe wants to pursue. But the opposite direction, her second option, is blocked by the general suspicion against universal norms. It is not clear *how* and *why* the members of a democratic polity could be encouraged, let alone be obliged, to grant the terrorist the protected status of an adversary, if not by the self-commitment to universal norms that apply to members and non-members alike. The exposure of human rights to hegemonic struggles, however, undermines the potency of universal norms exceeding the borders of particular communities. If Mouffe wants the terrorist to benefit from the taming and sublimating effects of agonism, she needs to conceive of a narrow, yet distinguishable 'set of shared ethico-political principles' regulating international relations. The logic of her argument makes this conclusion unavoidable.

IV. Conclusion

One can, of course, always be more or less charitable in reading an author, and it might be objected to my interpretation of Mouffe's theory that it disrespects the principle of charity. Thus, I have to clarify what conclusions should be drawn from my reading of Mouffe. The tension in her account can plausibly be interpreted as an intentional strategy of polemic. Following this line of reasoning, one might argue that her critique should rather be understood as a 'metaphorical redescription'[42] than as a straightforward rejection of cosmopolitanism. The proposal for multipolarity then has to be interpreted as an intervention into the debate that aims at highlighting blatant gaps in the literature on world citizenship.

It is certainly sensible to remain alert to processes of moralization and depoliticization. Formal appeals to universalism, which are prevalent in some accounts of

cosmopolitanism, can undoubtedly become vehicles for imperialism. Identifying one's own position as universal is a common practice of domination. Pierre Bourdieu called this practice 'egoistic universalism'[43]; keeping an attentive watch over the potential interweaving of the seemingly all-embracing ethics of cosmopolitanism with the specific interests of cultural, economic and political elites is of capital importance.

Yet, to contrast such processes of moralization and depoliticization with an account of pure politics, insulated from the tainting touch of universal norms, is disingenuous unless we approve of the anarchic juxtaposition of power centres. Mouffe's ideal of pure politics might be a reaction to the dominance of moralizing and depoliticizing versions of cosmopolitanism. In that sense, her firm dichotomy between politics and morality is more rhetorical than argumentative; it is the product of overdrawn generalizations and artificial oppositions endemic in academic debates. As I hope to have shown, Mouffe's realist examination of moralizing and de-politicizing forms of world citizenship and her proposal for a multipolar globe have to rely on a moral judgment. Without diminishing the merits of her powerful assessment, I believe that recognizing the unavoidability of this minimal morality could put the debate between critics and defenders of cosmopolitanism on a sounder basis. The most important issue in this debate will arguably be to inquire into the concrete form and content of the minimal morality. Although this paper has not adopted a constructive stance in this debate, it has established that even a realist position supportive of a multipolar adjustment of global politics needs to grapple with the issue.

Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal

[2] A good example for the productivity of the debate is provided by the exchange of arguments in the following volume: Daniele Archibugi (ed.), *Debating Cosmopolitics* (London/New York: Verso, 2003). Throughout this paper, I use the words 'cosmopolitanism' and 'world citizenship' interchangeably.

[3] Samuel Scheffler, 'Conceptions of Cosmopolitanism', in *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–30.

[4] Thomas Pogge's definition of cosmopolitanism is the most constructive attempt to isolate family resemblances between different types of cosmopolitanism. Thomas Pogge, 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty', in *World Poverty and Human Rights. Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (Oxford/Malden: Polity Press, 2002), 168–95, here: 169: 'Three elements are shared by all cosmopolitan positions. First, individualism: the ultimate units of concern are human beings, or persons – rather than, say, family lines, tribes, ethnic, cultural, or religious communities, nations or states. The latter may be units of concern only indirectly, in virtue of their individual members or citizens. Second, universality: the status of ultimate unit of concern attaches to every living human being equally – not merely to some subset such as men, aristocrats, Aryans, whites or Muslims. Third, generality: this special status has global force. Persons are ultimate units of concern for everyone – not only for their compatriots, fellow religionists or suchlike.'

[5] For a far-reaching critique of the polemical baggage burdening the debate about democracy see Mary Dietz, 'Merely Combating the Phrases of this World: Recent Democratic Theory', *Political Theory* 26, no. 2 (1998), 112–39.

[6] For exemplary critiques see Serge Latouche, *The Westernization of the World: Significance, Scope and Limits of the Drive Towards Global Uniformity* (Oxford/Malden: Polity Press, 1996); Craig Calhoun, '"Belonging" in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary', *Ethnicities* 3, no. 4 (2003), 531–68; Danilo Zolo, *Cosmopolis: Prospects for World Government*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

[7] See Andrew Schaap, 'Political Theory and the Agony of Politics', *Political Studies Review* 5, no. 1 (2007), 56–74.

[8] The expression 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was developed by Paul Ricœur in order to distinguish between two types of interpretation. Whereas the positive version of hermeneutics issues a 'vow of obedience', the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is critical by constitution and aims at demystification. See Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 63–100.

[9] For another route to such an indirect defence see Arash Abizadeh, 'Does Collective Identity Presuppose an Other? On the Alleged Incoherence of Global Solidarity', *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 1 (2005), 45–60.

[10] A good test case for this suspicion is the current practice of humanitarian intervention since it clearly conflicts with the *ius cogens*-prohibition of violence between states. Realists fear that any war in the name of human rights might finally lead to a revival of the essentially pre-modern doctrine of 'just war' (*bellum iustum*). Since many critics of cosmopolitanism do not buy into the idea of universals, a 'just war' – as opposed to a legal war (*bellum legale*) sanctioned by the Security Council or founded on the right to self-defence – cannot be vindicated via universal principles. As a consequence, every war that is embellished by moral arguments discriminates against those who are on the other side of the frontline. In this sense, many realists are afraid that 'just wars' might herald an era of unconstrained self-empowerment reminiscent of medieval feuds. For an application of this idea to NATO's war against Serbia in 1999 see Danilo Zolo, *Invoking Humanity: War, Law and Global Order* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002).

[11] On the 'polemogenic' origin of morality see Niklas Luhmann, *Paradigm Lost: Über die ethische Reflexion der Moral* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990).

[12] What I call 'pure politics' resembles Slavoj Žižek's notion of 'ultra-politics.' See Slavoj Žižek, 'For a leftist appropriation of the European legacy', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3, no. 1 (1998), 63–78.

[13] Although Jürgen Habermas is usually credited with coining the phrase 'performative contradiction,' I do not rely on his theory of speech acts in this paper. By claiming that Mouffe's theory exhibits a performative contradiction, I simply mean that she cannot hold to her strictly anti-moral course without betraying the original aspiration of her approach – the establishment of a more peaceful and diverse world order.

[14] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London/New York: Verso, 2005).

[15] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, (London/New York: Verso, 1993); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London/New York: Verso, 2000).

[16] John Rawls, Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 33–4: '[W]e assume the fact of reasonable pluralism to be a permanent condition of a democratic society. […] To elaborate: the diversity of religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modem democratic societies is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy. Under the political and social conditions secured by the basic rights and liberties of free institutions, a diversity of conflicting and irreconcilable yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines will come about and persist, should it not already exist. This fact about free societies is what I call the fact of reasonable pluralism.'

[17] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[18] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[19] The distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' – while clearly owing to Mouffe's *spiritus rector* Carl Schmitt – was also made by another author who influenced Mouffe's theory: Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[20] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 101.

[21] Ibid., 102–3.

[22] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 21.

[23] Ibid., 66–9.

[24] See 'agones' in: Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41–2.

[25] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 75.

[26] Chantal Mouffe, 'Introduction. Schmitt's Challenge', in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 1–6, here: 6: 'The strategy is definitely not to read Schmitt to attack liberal democracy, but to ask how it could be improved. To think both *with* and *against* Schmitt – this is the thrust of our common endeavour.'

[27] United States President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002: http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129–11.html (April 4, 2007).

[28] For a detailed philosophical analysis of the use of moralism by the current US administration see Richard Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil. The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2005).

[29] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 106–7.

[30] Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', in *For Love of Country?*, eds. Martha C. Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 2–17.

[31] Richard Rorty, in his essay on human rights, starts out with the same assumption about the dangers of dehumanizing. His solution, however, to advance an inclusive education of sentiments is directly opposed to Mouffe's project. See Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 167–85.

[32] For a similar, yet slightly more pronounced Schmittian interpretation of terrorism see Sergei Prozorov 'Liberal Enmity: The Figure of the Foe in the Political Ontology of Liberalism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (2006), 75–99.

[33] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 118.

[34] For prominent accounts see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York/London: Norton, 2001); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Addison Wesley, 1979); Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993), 44–79.

[35] See Herfried Münkler, *Empires* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2007), 121.

[36] This nexus between circumscribing an agonal space and popular sovereignty reveals a parallel to Hannah Arendt's view on the polis as public sphere. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[37] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 122.

[38] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[39] Mouffe, *On the Political*, 126.

[40] For an elaborated interpretation of such a pragmatist defence of human rights see Charles Beitz, 'Human Rights as a Common Concern', *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (2001), 269–82*;* 'What Human Rights Mean', *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 132, no. 1, (2003), 36–46.

[41] For a collection of the most important sources see Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel (eds.), *The Torture Papers. The Road to Abu Ghraib* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[42] Richard Rorty, *Irony, Contingency, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

[43] Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 65–73.