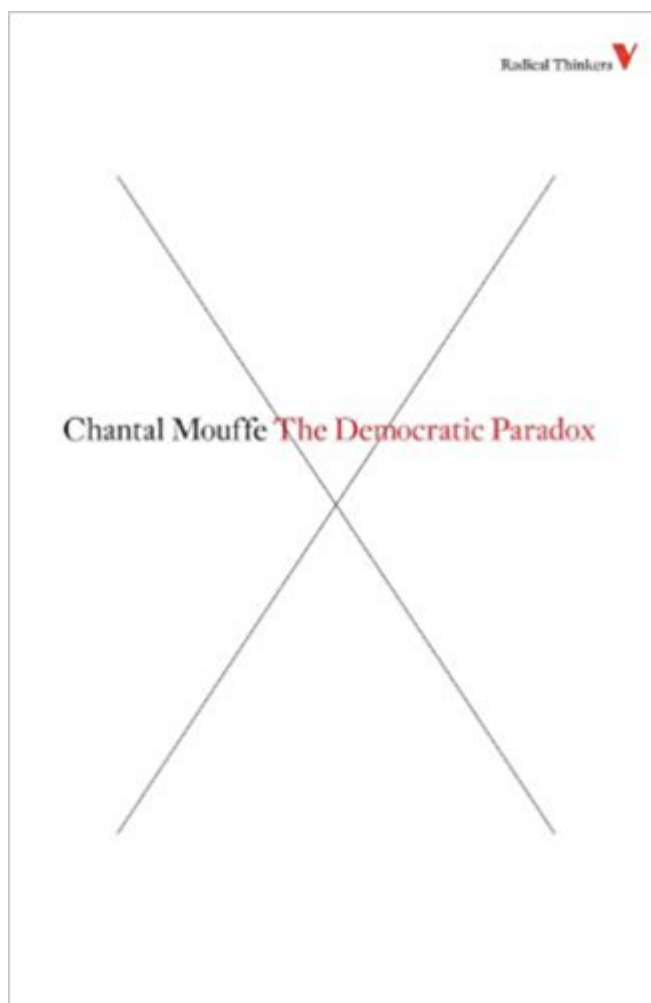


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# The Democratic Paradox (Radical Thinkers)



## Synopsis

From the theory of "deliberative democracy" to the politics of the "third way", the present Zeitgeist is characterized by attempts to deny what Chantal Mouffe contends is the inherently conflictual nature of democratic politics. Far from being signs of progress, such ideas constitute a serious threat to democratic institutions. Taking issue with John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas on one side, and the political tenets of Blair, Clinton and Schröder on the other, Mouffe brings to the fore the paradoxical nature of modern liberal democracy in which the category of the "adversary" plays a central role. She draws on the work of Wittgenstein, Derrida, and the provocative theses of Carl Schmitt, to propose a new understanding of democracy which acknowledges the ineradicability of antagonism in its workings.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Important and timely." "Political Theory

Chantal Mouffe is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. Her books include *The Return of the Political*; *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (with Ernesto Laclau); *The Dimensions of Radical Democracy*; *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*; *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*; *The Democratic Paradox*; and *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, all from Verso.

Really interesting book, I ended up using it for an English lit project, definitely worth reading.

Chantal Mouffe- The Democratic Paradox

Consensus in a liberal-democratic society is- and will always be- the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations. The frontier that it establishes between what is and is not legitimate is a political one, and for that reason it should remain contestable.

- Chantal Mouffe

If you've read Mouffe's landmark work with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony And Socialist Strategy*, you can probably surmise what this work entails: it further elaborates theses presented in that work and Mouffe's *Return Of The Political*. These theses are, coincidentally, central to Žižek's work on the quilting point that unifies an ideological field (for more on this, see Žižek's appraisal of Laclau and Mouffe in the anthology *Interrogating The Real*). I shall try to indicate, for newcomers to Chantal Mouffe, the principal coordinates of her theoretical intervention:

Society does not exist. This, for Žižek, is the central postulate of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, one which he returns to at various points of *The Sublime Object Of Ideology*. When we say that society does not exist, we mean that the sociological (ideological) fantasy of a homeostatic social whole is impossible. Society can never achieve a state of consummate closure, because it is divided from within by an irreconcilable schism. In Marxist theory, this rift assumes the form of the class struggle. There can be no rapprochement between classes, and the truth of society does not lie in a holistic, transcendent judgment that stands above this cleavage (the perspective of an omniscient God) but in this antagonism itself. Antagonism is the Real of every social formation, preventing it from closing in on itself, from forming a consistent totality. Ideology merely displaces this antagonism, assigning it to some object-cause (the Jew in anti-Semitism) instead of confronting it as an inalienable limit.

Every critical theory must therefore abandon its dangerous fetishization of the fantasmatic object, the fascinating thing that ostensibly prevents it from fulfilling its desire. In Marxist theory, this object is the state, and Foucault's extensive analyses of power represent nothing less than an endeavor to traverse the Marxist fantasy and deliver us from the specter of the sovereign. Classical Marxism assumes that revolution is the event upon which desire hinges- once the State is supplanted, antagonism can be done away with through the gradual movement towards communism. This myth of transparency and fullness has been profoundly debilitating in two respects: it simplifies, in an inexcusable fashion, the multiplicity of power relations that constitute the social strata. These power games form the very tissue of social reality, and, as Althusser and Gramsci have shown prior to Foucault, are ultimately

irreducible to a central hub (the State). In accepting this formulation, we abandon the ground of grand, macropolitics in lieu of capillary, molecular politics. Antagonism is, in the conflicts and confrontations it engenders, the political itself. It is here that Mouffe introduces another startling claim. In the introduction to *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe separates politics, which she designates as the administration of the political via the State and its representative parties, and politics, which is the field of irreconcilable, adversarial antagonisms. Politics, then, is the inexorable, pure difference that prevents a State from achieving self-identity. Neither field can be reduced to the other, and the conflation of one with the other (as in Habermas's regulative ideal of pure communication and Giddensian notions of the Third Way) amounts to a foreclosure, an evacuation of the political. If we can think of antagonism as the constitutive outside of every political configuration, the Other that divides the State from itself, then the State's absorption of this field would lead to the disastrous collapse of democracy as an exercise of constituent, popular power. In other words, its disappearance is commensurate with the disappearance of the political: To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism is to aim at a universal rational consensus- this is the real threat to democracy. (22) Alain Badiou, in his stinging *Metapolitics*, has made a parallel claim, though his treatment of the word politics is diametrically opposed to Mouffe's. In Badiou, every politics is a singular sequence of thought that establishes a real distance between itself and parliamentary democracy. It generates, through a subjective process of truth, a real alternative to parliamentarism. The philosophical interest of this lies in the fact that politics is a mode of thought, while the State, as the regulation/administration of interests, does not think. Coextensive with this is Mouffe's statement that liberal democracy is, in actuality, a precarious synthesis of two polarities. Through an incisive reading of Carl Schmitt, Mouffe reveals that there is no intrinsic compatibility between liberalism and democracy. On the contrary, the two are, at the limit, radically antithetical to one another. This antinomy, this democratic paradox is crucial, because it reinforces the fact that democracy is a negotiation between totally heterogeneous adversaries. This negotiation is that which prevents representative, constitutive power from subjecting us to the untrammelled, frictionless tyranny of the Law. If the State is that which demarcates a territory, defining who belongs/does not belong to it through the invocation of a people, we can begin to understand why the preservation of this field is central to the question of immigrant rights: To offer a different answer to the compatibility of pluralism and liberal democracy requires, in my view, putting into question any idea of the people as already given, with a substantive identity. Once we have

recognized that the unity of people is the result of a political construction we need to explore all the logical possibilities that a political articulation entails. Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity. Such an identity, however, can never be fully constituted, and it can exist only through multiple and competing forms of identifications. (55-56) This is a brief, lucid and powerful text which, though repetitious in parts, does justice to the acuity of Mouffe's political thought.

William James identified the metaphysical problem of the One and the Many as perhaps the most pregnant of all philosophical problems. Transported from abstract metaphysical discussion to politics, and you see that he was right. Mouffe's stimulating text centers upon this problem as the theoretical scaffolding behind contemporary debates about the future of democracy. As such, it makes important contributions to current political discourse as well as demonstrate the perennial relevance of metaphysical questions to human experience.

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