Conflict and Community: Radical Democracy and Associationalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the possibility of a radical democratic approach to associational theory. Drawing on the recent work of Chantal Mouffe it centers democratic theory around the impossibility of eradicating conflict in favour of consensus. This approach regards conflict and antagonism as not only possible but vital components in the formation of a democratic community. A radical democratic pluralism, therefore, foregrounds the variety of overlapping and contrasting communities (as opposed to a single, homogeneous community) in any social formation and seeks to account for their articulation in ‘agonistic’ rather than moral terms.

In many respects, Mouffe’s radical democratic approach parallels recent work on associative democracy. Associationalism seeks to decentre democratic decision-making to lower-level, self-organised communities. However, unlike other theories seeking to contextualise democracy by bringing it closer to communal formations (e.g. communitarians) or those looking to decentre power from the state by expanding and enhancing the role of civil society, Mouffe’s emphasis on conflict as ineradicable defeats any reliance upon settled notions of traditional, liberal or civic community. The ontological (rather than simply empirical) presence of power and antagonism eliminates the notion of a stable, fully-consensual basis to politics around which matters of public concern can be attended. The public sphere is conceived not as an island of consensus in a sea of private differences, nor the fuller expression of a pre-existing communal order, but is itself penetrated by conflict and difference.

In Mouffe’s agonistic approach to radical democracy, conflict and community are mutually related not antinomic. An approach to associationalism on such principles is at odds with certain other efforts at revitalizing the civil sphere. Currently popular notions such as ‘social capital’, ‘trust’ or civic-mindedness function as the fetishised currency of consensus, disguising their partiality and particularity behind a façade of evidently incontestable sameness. In such accounts, the pluralism of associationalist principles reduces to a subtle monism. By contrast, radical democracy accepts no such firm guarantee that a plurality of communities can be articulated around any unifying principle as such. The stability of associational orders arises from a hegemonic struggle to fix certain principles as parameters (e.g. equality, liberty, democracy, nation, etc). The value of associationalism from this perspective is that it opens up new sites of conflict for communities to interact and undermines any effort for a singular community to be mobilized as the ultimate container of all others.
INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the relationship between associative principles of democratic organisation and a ‘radical democratic’ political philosophy focused on the centrality of conflict in political community. Both these perspectives share a concern with the opening up of social and economic structures to pluralist organisation and increased democratic control. In each, current liberal democratic thought and practice are believed to be insufficiently responsive to a growing diversity in values and lifestyles within western populations. As a consequence both recommend a respatialisation of the political community, that is, to reorder the scale and direction of liberal democratic practices such that smaller organisational forms can generate a closer proximity of the public to the decisions of government, so that power flows ‘upwards’ from below rather than vice versa. This reflects a concern for diversified spaces of governance as opposed to hierarchically structured relations of government.

Importantly, associative theory highlights the role of self-governing communities in the administration of public welfare. Like many political theories of late, the ‘community’ is believed, because of its decreased scale, to permit (though not guarantee) a greater degree of informed participation by members in their own affairs and, as a consequence, a greater responsiveness to public feelings and choices about their services than do centralised states. Whilst we do not dispute this claim, we do wish to highlight another, important consequence of expanding pluralism: namely, the potential for increased expressions of difference and conflict over shared goods. This is not, we believe, a defect of pluralism so much as one of its advantages, one of which associative principles are able to make positive use.

There is, however, a tendency within political theory and science to assume that community and conflict are mutually incompatible. For some proponents of decentralising democratic powers to lower levels, or enhancing the role of ‘civil society’ in social and economic governance, conflict and antagonism must to a great extent be eliminated by consensus, or at very least a disposition towards achieving consensus (e.g. Habermas 1996; Barber 1984). Whilst agreements of various sorts are clearly important to sustaining communities and democratic structures, there is a danger that consensus is overvalued as the linchpin of democratic order. In many cases this contradicts the value of pluralism and democracy by foreclosing or severely delimiting the openness to difference that decentralising power enables. Our intention here is to map the relationship between associative democratic
principles and a radical democratic political philosophy that makes conflict and antagonism its starting point.

We begin by questioning the value of ‘grounding’ democracy on consensus. Efforts to achieve this grounding can be found in a variety of discussions promoting ‘social capital’ or cultivating norms of discourse in civil society. Rather than eradicate conflict and antagonism, we follow Chantal Mouffe’s lead in recognising power and conflict as the ontological condition of political association itself. This requires that we recognise the intrinsic ‘paradox of democracy’, that is, the ineliminable gap between democracy and liberty that drives democratic practices. We then move on to discuss a key concept in associative discourse, ‘community’. It is this concept above all that needs to be rethought if the radical democratic conception of pluralism is to have any purchase. Finally, we make some tentative connections between associative principles of democratic reform and radical democratic theory.

GROUNDING DEMOCRACY

Associative democracy involves the decentralisation of public services to a plurality of self-governing associations that are voluntarily generated and democratically accountable to their members (see Warren 2001; Hirst 1994, 1997; Carter 2002; Cohen and Rogers 1995). As Hirst presents it, associative forms of governance offer up the possibility of transcending dated liberal political institutions, with their deference to the centralised state as the sovereign body, replacing them with a revitalised civil society undertaking public tasks. Hirst presents a compelling picture of a renewed democratic order, one not restricted to passively legitimating central government legislation but permanently involved in the process of communicating public concerns to service providers and policy-makers. Indeed, Hirst defines democracy as a form of ‘communication’: ‘that is democracy as effective governance based upon an adequate flow of information from governed to governors, and the coordination of the implementation of policy through ongoing consultation with those affected’ (Hirst 1994: 35).

The suggestion that rescaling public institutions to a democratised civil society requires a rethinking of the values and practices of democracy itself is a common one. In contemporary political theory there is often a connection made between the locality, small-scale organisation and the effective functioning of institutions of democratic government. The recent revival of ‘civil society’, for instance, testifies to a perceived linkage between intermediary organisations and the potential for increased efficiency and legitimacy of public institutions
(Keane 1988, 1998; Cohen and Arato 1992; Putnam 1993, 2001; Barber 1984). This linkage relies upon an understanding of democracy as a practice in which cooperation and reciprocity rather than self-interest or competition is the principal theme. In some discourses, cooperation is given substance in notions of ‘trust’ or ‘social capital’—the ‘civic networks’, norms and various social behaviours that promote and embed cooperation—the accumulation of which enables agents (be they civic organisations, economic enterprises or social movements, etc.) to interact as partners in mutually beneficial arrangements (see Putnam 1993: Ch. 6; 2001). Social capital, like economic capital, becomes a currency that is accumulated and exchanged, metaphorically oiling the cogs of social interaction and smoothing the functioning of government. For others, devolving choice enables an increase in ‘communicative rationality’ and deliberative decision-making that increases the inclusivity and hence legitimacy of public decisions (see Young 2000; Habermas 1996; Cohen and Arato 1992).

Grounding democracy on notions such as communication or social capital, however, is open to the criticism that it overstates the effect of decontestation those notions are thought to entail. That is, it is assumed—indeed welcomed—that moral and political conflict is less likely to occur as democratic decisions become more transparent, less burdened by major organised interests with preformed agendas, and so on. Yet social capital or communicative norms are only factors in stabilising democratic relationships around certain values and norms, they do not constitute the democratic relationship itself. What they do, instead, is denote a set of agreed symbolic parameters and mutually affirming principles, a tendential moral space inside which democratic order can be sustained. As Rose (1999: 188) argues, the widespread recommendation to reinvigorate communities, associations, ‘networks’ and civil society, etc. constitute a ‘new “game of power”’ that he calls the ‘community-civility game’. In this game, the ‘community’ is a new site of ‘self-government’ where individuals are encouraged to align themselves with certain forms of ethical conduct that are neither imposed nor entirely spontaneous. The ‘civil network’ or community is presumed to have qualities of ‘natural’, intersubjective transparency that enables stable patterns of conduct where individuals ‘willfully subordinate’ themselves to shared ethical norms.

These ethical norms signify the boundaries of a supposed ‘consensus’. Yet, as with all notions of consensus or consensus-inducing factors (e.g. modernised industry, ethnic ties, cultural traditions, etc.), closer examination suggests the presence or potential for wide disagreement and the possibility of dynamic change. It is entirely possible, for example, that social and political agents may dispute the degree and effectiveness of communication (e.g. its
inclusivity, its fairness, etc.), or the degree of ‘sociability’ of social capital (e.g. the unequal
distribution of capital, ‘preferential treatment’ in cooperative practices, etc). In short, the
substance of consensus, where it exists, may easily and frequently become the object of
disagreement and mutual hostility. Indeed, as non-state sites become the locus of what Rose
calls technologies of ‘ethico-politics’ designed to encourage citizens to exercise ‘ethical self-
governance’, ‘it is likely to be on the terrain of ethics that our most important disputes will
have to be fought’ (Rose: 188).

This need not be a problem for democracy as such; conflict and disagreement are widely
assumed to be a feature of a democratic order. Yet conflict is more likely to be regarded as
destructive of democratic relationships if consensus is believed to be the essential ground of
democracy. In this situation, those who are most vocal and oppositional to a prevailing
consensus or who dispute the validity of certain of its social preconditions, tend to be treated
as willfully undermining democracy and social order itself. Such voices are less likely to get a
fair hearing because they are deemed to stand ‘outside’ the moral consensus or civic norms.

One answer to this problem is to reconceptualise the relationship between conflict, consensus
and democracy. In a number of recent contributions, Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000) has
disputed the value of grounding democracy on relations of consensus at all. In her view, the
importance of consensus has been vastly overstated and this has led to a diminished
understanding of the political—as opposed to ‘rational’—dimension of democracy and a
contraction of its radical potential. For Mouffe, modern liberal democracy consists of a
‘paradox’, a constitutive tension between two, ultimately contradictory, imperatives: the
demand for individual liberty and the rule of law (the liberal imperative), and the demand for
popular sovereignty and equality (the democratic imperative) (Mouffe 2000: 2-5). She argues
that although they may be combined, liberalism and democracy can never be fully reconciled
for the logic of one negates that of the other. The only possible consequence is a perpetual
reformulation of the relationship between the two, a shifting of the frontier that divides them.
This is effectively what debates about the relationship between liberty and equality essentially
are, and such debates are the cornerstone of political argument.

However, Mouffe points out that much of modern democratic theory seeks to overcome this
constitutive tension, to erase its unsettling presence by grounding liberal democratic practices
on supposedly apolitical, sometimes rationalist assumptions. Appeals to a rational moral
consensus in Habermas’ theory of communicative ethics or the narrowing down of agreement
to an ‘overlapping consensus’ in Rawls’s political philosophy are key examples of this
tendency (see Mouffe 2000: Ch. 1; 1993: Ch. 3). What these thinkers do is to drastically limit
the potential for moral conflict and political contest by searching for universal principles on
which every rational individual can agree. In so doing, the scope and boundaries of public
space is deemed to be agreed and disagreements can be contained within a pre-set consensus.
This, however, smooths over the constitutive gap between liberalism and democracy. Such
efforts, argues Mouffe, can only ever result in the marginalisation of groups and individuals
who offer up radically different moral views in which the boundaries and scope of public
space are viewed in radically different ways. The cost of consensus, therefore, is the loss of a
genuine and deep pluralism.

Mouffe, by contrast, recommends an acceptance by democratic theorists of the ineradicable
presence of conflict, division and antagonism in political life (1993: 1-8). In her view
pluralism represents an ‘axiological principle’ not simply an empirical fact (2000: 19): it is
not that people happen to disagree on issues which they might otherwise be expected to agree;
rather, social and political identities are themselves produced through difference and acts of
differentiation. It is not possible, therefore, to have a multiplicity of different points of view
and values without some degree of conflict and division. Social identities are forged through
operations of power and subordination, the traces of which are often visible in a group’s self-
conception and its public representation. When making appeals for recognition or demands
for rights—that is, when defining the ‘objectivity’ of their own identity—groups typically
specify ‘antagonists’ that purportedly limit the full expression of their identity, whether these
be other groups, alternative value systems or ‘social ills’ (see Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 122-
34; Laclau 1996). For Mouffe (and Laclau) it is this ‘blockage’ negating a group’s experience
of its identity that simultaneously generates its agency (see Laclau 1990). By enforcing a
closure upon its otherwise intrinsic heterogeneity, antagonism orients groups in different,
sometimes radically incommensurable ways to public space. Reciprocity and hostility are
therefore inextricably linked; and rivalry and violence are an ‘ever-present possibility’. These
antagonisms and traces of power at the heart of human sociability—what Mouffe calls its
‘dissociating impulse’ (2000: 131)—are what certain theorists deny in their search for
‘neutral’ or ‘universal’ principles. If, however, democracy is not to be grounded on a rational
consensus but is to be open to the conflictual pluralism she claims is fundamentally
ineradicable, how is this to be achieved?
Mouffe’s answer is to recommend the transformation of antagonisms into ‘agonism’ (2000: Ch. 4). Democracy does need to be stabilised in some way for effective deliberation and choice to occur at all. But rather than eliminate difference and antagonism by appealing to the common currency of consensus, antagonistic differences must be domesticated or rendered less destructive than they might otherwise be. This involves building democracy around the treatment of certain antagonists as ‘adversaries’ or ‘legitimate opponents’ (Mouffe 2000: 102). As Mouffe herself puts it:

An adversary is an enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality (Ibid).

We cannot assume the same substantive values or commitments amongst different individuals and social groups, but we can agree that our commitment to common ‘ethico-political principles’ places us on a shared terrain. This is a consensus of sorts, but a ‘conflictual consensus’ (Ibid: 103), one that begins, pragmatically, from the fact of our difference not our sameness. The paradox of democracy rules out in principle the idea that differences can be harmonised such that the parameters of the public sphere can be set once and for all. Rather, we should expect adversaries continually to promote different, sometimes deeply challenging views of the way in which democratic equality and individual liberty can be reconciled. In so far as we can agree that our adversaries have not become our antagonists (that is, seek to eliminate us from the democratic terrain altogether) then we may proceed to accept their legitimacy as opponents.

An agonistic model of democratic pluralism, then, grounds democracy on a pragmatic political rather than a rational moral basis: it begins with the presumption of difference and conflict over the boundaries of the political community itself, and views consensus not as utterly impossible or illegitimate but as an inappropriate first principle in light of the paradoxical character of democracy. What consensus there is arrives as the outcome of efforts to define the parameters of legitimate conflict, not as a principle of reason. It is also highly vulnerable to alternative reorderings and is, therefore, plausibly an object of conflict itself. Ultimately, liberal democratic values can only be grounded in political action itself and must therefore be continually defined, supported and defended by those who uphold them. This perspective suggests that the dynamism of democracy lies in the propensity for change that it encapsulates.
With Mouffe’s agonistic model of pluralism in mind, what possibilities do associative principles offer for radical democratic theory? The essential advantage of associative democracy is, of course, its practical reconfiguration of power in a pluralistic manner. By dispersing power from the centre, central state powers require only a minimal degree of consensus over their functions; the actual provision of public services does not require total ‘national agreement’ and can therefore be delivered in a variety of ways from a number of sources. By ‘publicizing the private sphere’, Hirst’s model removes the possibility of a single public sector being the site of conflict between competing parties and interest groups. However, the dispersal and fragmentation of power also decentres and fragments conflict; it does not eliminate it. Rather than being centred in a single national community, democratic conflict is scattered across a multiplicity of communities. It is essential, therefore, that we survey the role and status of community in associative democracy.

COMMUNITY

One of the most contested concepts articulated in many associationist discourses and related theories of civil society is community. This is problematic on a basic level because of the multiplicity of usages of the term community and the different interpretations of what the appeal to community entails. Elizabeth Frazer notes how there is a slippage between the idea of community as a particular type of entity (the local community, the international community, the gay community and so on) and the notion of community as an expression of a particular set of values such as trust, mutuality, voluntarism, and so on (Frazer 1999). Thus there is often a lack of clarity about what the concept of community actually refers to (Little 2002a). In its less sophisticated form the advocacy of community is little more than a strategy for rebutting liberal individualism, whilst avoiding difficult questions about the role of the state in social organisation. Here the appeal to community tends to be constructing upon a romantic fiction of the traditional community that has supposedly been uprooted in contemporary societies and which needs to be regenerated. This is the view of ‘community as safety’ in which it becomes the mode of grounding individuals in an insecure world (Bauman 2001). In the view of John Gray this amounts to the replacement of one fiction (the abstract individual) with another (the myth of the homogeneous community) and this is ‘what community is not’ (Gray 1998). In the light of these problems it is important to clarify the role of community in associationist theory and identify the ways in which it can both vindicate and undermine the political principles of associationalism.
In Hirst’s *Associative Democracy* (1994) the relationship between community and associationalism is articulated in terms of the differentiation between communities of choice and communities of fate. Hirst wisely steer clear of the simple rhetoric of community for the primary reason that he wants to reinforce individual freedoms rather than override them with the stronger claims of community. He suggests that association furthers individual freedom in terms of empowering individuals to attain a degree of governance over a particular interest they have and in enabling them to further develop as individuals. In this sense ‘associationalism can be said to be about the pursuit of individuation, and its distinctive contention is that this is more effectively accomplished by cooperative rather than by purely private individual action’ (Hirst 1994: 50). The important point to recognise in Hirst’s thesis is that the associations to which he alludes must be regarded as ‘communities of choice’ if they are to fulfil the role he allotts to them. In other words associations can be regarded as communities only as long as membership of these bodies is voluntary and that there is a right of exit (Hirst 1994: 51). Hirst is explicit about the implications of this position for community: ‘communities in an individualistic society must accept that - in form - they are no different from a railway season-ticket holders’ association’ (Hirst 1994: 52). This is a rather minimalist conception of community. It is based on communitarian values rather than the particular nature of the community entity but those values are reduced in Hirst’s thesis to thin, universal liberal values. This begs the question of why Hirst bothers to use the concept of community at all. His understanding of communities of choice suggests that they are bound together by no stronger values than a basic association which individuals may be members of for purely selfish, instrumental reasons (e.g. that they have less power as an individual railway season-ticket holder than they have when they become members of a collective group formed around the same interests). This construction of community doesn’t suppose relations of altruism or obligation between members; what seems more important to Hirst is that individuals can leave communities rather than the actual bonds and behaviour that holds them together.

Hirst is aware that these bonds of community seem somewhat limited in the loyalty and commitment they command from their members. However he refutes the Schmittian criticism that these bonds are insufficiently strong to command support when communities come under threat. For Hirst, the kinds of threats that Schmitt identified in the 1930s do not prevail in contemporary societies and, even if they did, the members of pluralist communities of choice would coalesce around the common purposes required by the state when such threats
emerged. This shows considerable optimism about the commensurability of communities when the polity is faced with external threat and fails to recognise that the very principles and beliefs which separate different communities of choice may well be reflected in the conflicts that emerge between different states. Thus the fact that a society may face external threat does not override the fact that some communities or associations within a society may sympathise more with the external threat than the society in which they live. There is no guarantee that different communities and associations will coalesce against external forces; in many respects such conflicts may make the differences between these groups all the more apparent.

Hirst is aware of the criticism that communities can represent a threat from within a society and that the associational model can be accused of being too weak to contain the kinds of conflict that may erupt between different communities. However his refutation of this criticism is not wholly convincing. He describes the critical position as one where it is assumed that ‘in a multicultural society of conflicting identities, of communities as identities, the public sphere and the freedoms of civil society become nothing more than a medium for different groups to seek to capture the public power for their own purposes’ (Hirst 1994: 53). Here Hirst is disingenuous in assuming that the recognition of incommensurable value pluralism leads to a position where the critic must assume that communities provide all-encompassing identities for their members. However there is no reason why this should be the case. If we accept that all individuals are members of a multiplicity of communities then it becomes impossible for a community to merely provide identity for anyone in a prescriptive fashion. The point is that these communities may be in conflictual relations with one another but in no way should they be regarded as definitively constructing the identities of their members. Moreover there is no reason to suppose as Hirst does that these different communities have to be seen as pursuing ‘public power for their own purposes’. On the contrary, what make them different from one another may be issues of basic cultural practice for example, and the fact that disputes are played out in the public sphere does not necessarily entail the pursuit of public power to further specific ends.

From this perspective the recognition that there may be incommensurable value pluralism within a society does not necessitate the Hobbesian rationality that Hirst imputes to such an approach. In short, there is no reason why the recognition of conflict and difference, and the potentially irreconcilable nature of conflicts, should lead us down the path a prescriptive multiculturalism which is founded on the belief that all communities are ‘communities of fate’ nor does it necessarily imply an all-powerful state. Hirst is right to reject the belief that
individuals are somehow ‘trapped in communities they cannot leave and unaware that exit is possible’ (Hirst 1994: 54) but this does not mean that all communal identities are matters of a pure autonomous, rational individual choice. In short, Hirst attempts to circumvent issues of conflict and contestation by focusing on the voluntary nature of communal relations and the right of exit. Unfortunately this fails to grapple with the fact that different groups may hold incommensurable positions; the right of group members to exit from their communities does not get around the reality that the views of different sub-state communities may be irreconcilable. In this sense there does not appear to be any strong reason to believe that Hirst’s associationalism is capable of overcoming the conflict that can emerge from value pluralism. Such conflicts will frequently be rooted in disagreement about fundamental cultural issues and not merely the issues of property and taxation that Hirst (1994: 51) identifies. Therefore there is a need to recognise that not all conflicts between groups focus on issues of distribution as associationists such as Cohen and Rogers and Hirst imply; we must understand that whilst socially given sources of identity do not lead inevitably to communities of fate, they do contribute to social identity and may be the source of some of our cultural beliefs (Carter 2002: 237).

The danger then in associative democratic theories is that associations, conceived as communities of choice, come to represent a mechanism for avoidance of political dispute. Associationists like Hirst are very well aware of the limitations of the fiction of community in many orthodox communitarian theories (Gray 1998; Little 2002a). The problem in the latter is the construction of the essentialist community as a means of overcoming the multiplicity of differences within contemporary societies. For Hirst, this manifests itself in the pursuit of ‘communities of fate’ as prescriptive providers of identity. He is right that such approaches promote political closure and deny individual autonomy. In order to avoid these pitfalls however, he substitutes ‘communities of choice’ which would be predicated upon a thin set of common values such as individual freedom, toleration of difference and a commitment to social justice. However, as Carter suggests, these prescriptions for thin shared values are perhaps not as narrow as associationists would have us believe. Thus the values which they promote require ‘consensus on full racial and gender equality, on provision of generous welfare, and on the need to sacrifice economic gain to the maintenance of the environment’ (Carter 2002: 241). Clearly these suppositions are sources of conflict in contemporary politics and there is little reason to suppose that the empowerment of associations would somehow do away with dispute over these tenets of social justice. Indeed these are much more substantive, thick claims around which to found democratic regimes.
than more universalist (and more problematic) thin liberal conceptions of justice such as that of Rawls. To this end, rather than promoting the applicability of associationalism by cloaking it behind an unconvincing argument that it is based on a thin set of values, its advocates should recognise that using ‘associations as channels to radical democracy and social justice would surely require clear commitment to egalitarianism and extensive state action’ (Carter 2002: 244). From a radical democratic perspective associative democrats should also recognise that those principles are the source of political disagreement and that we cannot presuppose anyone’s commitment to them. Radical democracy implies a need to re-engage ‘the political’ in the establishment of core principles: associative democracy tries to presuppose some of those principles a priori before associational political engagement begins.

To this end it is important to identify the arguments that differentiate radical democracy from associationist approaches and, in particular, to examine the arguments of those theorists of radical democracy such as Mouffe (2000) who also retain a strong role for community.

**RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND ASSOCIATIVE PRINCIPLES**

Approaching associative principles through radical democratic theory involves accepting the potential for conflict and antagonism even when the venue of public debate and decision has been disaggregated into a plurality of self-governing associations. This point is not simply the banal warning that on occasion people might disagree about how best to organise services or spend public funds. That would assume disagreement is a secondary consequence within the context of a wider consensus. Rather, radical democracy (as it is presented by Mouffe) implies that the pluralised realm of ‘public responsibility’ is itself the site and object of contestation. And it is this ‘dissociating impulse’ that associative democracy needs to take on board. For under associative principles, contestation is likely to occur within, between and across the associations charged with undertaking public functions.

For example, associations will themselves be contested as the proper scope and mode of delivery will be disputed by members, both with each other and between the association and the regulatory state. The extent to which a public function is being properly discharged, the degree to which that function accords with the communal values and objectives of an associative community and the right for minority opinions within the community to influence decision-making are all issues open to dispute. Such disputes are likely to carry intense significance as opinions and beliefs may well be linked to the allocation of funds and thus the mobilisation of ‘identity’ claims will have ‘material’ consequences. Likewise, individuals are
likely to be members of a number of associative communities whose internal principles are not always going to overlap harmoniously. For example, educational associations may be organised along certain principles, such as the centrality of religious commitment, that are not equally respected in forms of economic or health association. Whilst it is plausible to assume that overlapping might not create immense difficulties of practical governance, the uneven mapping of group respect and associative organisation can generate resentments as communal values are reinforced by public finances and the added ‘authority’ of public responsibility. Finally, the overarching role of the state as guarantor of minimal public standards ensures that it remains central to the mobilisation of influence. As Hirst reminds us, associations can function as a counterweight to hierarchical management and bureaucratic control, but that necessarily entails disputes about the proper scope and function of the state. The threat of state institutions being ‘captured’ by certain interests may diminish under associative democracy, but it does not disappear.

Thus associative democracy multiplies the sites of conflict and resistance over public space by pluralising and democratising the organisation of the public sector. For some critics of associative principles, however, this potential for dissonance within an associative system is a sign of its inherent deficiency. Marc Stears (1999), for instance, has argued that associative welfare provision entails two problems: the loss of ‘objective’ public ‘needs’ to the more ‘subjective preferences’ of consumers, and the rise of inequalities between associations as delivery varies according to variations in preferences. Hirst’s response (Hirst 1999) is that the distinction between ‘needs’ and ‘preferences’ cannot be easily sustained in an increasingly diverse culture where needs and standards of provision vary. Nor are inequalities in provision devastating if understood as inequalities within certain already-agreed standards and in light of different patterns of demand. Like all forms of welfare provision, failures may occur. Yet the advantage of associative democracy is that it ‘ensures the survival of difference’ (Ibid: 595).

Hirst’s defence against Stears’ criticism underscores the crucial point that associative principles effectively redefine our understanding of the ‘publicness’ of public goods. No longer understood exclusively as standardisation, or what Hindess (2001) calls the ‘assumption of uniformity’ common to modern democratic states, the public sector is to be infused with a sense of its intrinsic variability. Associative provision of welfare, therefore, involves a redefinition of (certain) inequalities as positive signs of difference. Yet differences are rarely viewed so benignly. Rather, difference is often contested as a failure of public
responsibility, the inability of appointed officials to discharge their function, or the consequence of insufficient funding, etc. To adequately face the potential for these claims to undermine the effectiveness of associative organisation, we would suggest, it is necessary to supplement associative principles with an agonistic theory of democracy designed to negotiate the difference between ‘enemies’ and ‘adversaries’.

This is not the place to outline in detail the full, practical implications of conjoining associative and radical democratic principles. However, Rose’s claim, noted earlier, that ‘it is likely to be on the terrain of ethics that our most important disputes will have to be fought’ (Rose: 188) gives us a clue to how we might begin. For ethics refers us, not to some overarching Good (the object of Moral concern), but to conduct oriented towards moral behaviour. It is precisely the terrain of ethics that Rose suggests forms the object of the ‘community-civility game’. The trouble with many of these efforts to recast governance by ‘technically managing’ individual conduct through the community is that talk of ethics too easily becomes ‘merely a recoding of strategies of social discipline and morality’ (Rose 1999: 192). Rose criticizes Putnam and Etzioni for ‘failing to diagnose [in their approach to community] the power relations in the struggles over cultural diversity and the validity of certain forms of life’ (Ibid: 194). To their approach he counterposes the argument that ‘communities can be imagined and enacted as mobile, as spaces of indeterminacy, of becoming’ (Ibid: 195). Conceived that way, communities can be understood as the basis of a creative and fluid politics in which alternative ways of seeing and acting, dissonance and resistance, are the currency of democratic life, rather than the stability-inducing substance of social capital and civic norms.

Such a view contrasts with the self-conceptions of many communities, particularly (though not exclusively) ‘communities of fate’. The advantage of associative democracy however is that, potentially, it institutionalises an arrangement whereby communities themselves are dislodged from any sense of the fixedness or closure of their communal values. By exposing communities to conflicts of values over the scope and character of their public functions, their responsibilities to others and so forth, associative democracy permits civic norms and other expressions of consensus to be contested and negotiated.

This, of course, is to disrupt the entire notion of a democratic order as a stable, grounded system upon which differences can be rationally settled. But that does not mean effective governance cannot be achieved. If the conflicts between and across communities are to be
accepted as legitimate expressions of difference, then our task is to ensure that difference does not escalate into destructive hostility and social disorder. As Mouffe points out in her discussion of an ‘ethics of democracy’ (2000: 129-40) once we accept that alterity cannot be entirely absorbed into procedures of deliberation (or, for that matter, social capital and civic norms) and so neutralised, the fragility of democracy comes to the fore. But democracy is not simply some postmodern jamboree in which differences co-exist harmoniously. It involves ‘acts of decision’, not only in the sense of executive choices over policy but, more profoundly, the implicit assumption of certain parameters to policy choices, to the degree and extent of debate, etc. Such decisions are themselves political: they invoke a contestable version of the public good by accepting some differences to the exclusion of others. It is not possible, she argues, to escape from this intrinsic exclusivity and so the only viable option is to promote an ethics that recognises the fragility of democracy and undergirds institutional arrangements with an awareness of the legitimacy of dissent, contestation and difference.

CONCLUSION

In so far as associative principles frame democracy as a practice responsive to the inherently diverse and potentially antagonistic nature of human communities, it provides a promising institutional form to an ethics of democracy. Mouffe herself has endorsed associative democracy as an arrangement compatible with the radical pluralism she recommends (Mouffe 1993: 98-100). Rather than justify devolved associations in terms of the stable, consensual order of agreed values they bring to democracy, a radical democratic political theory allows us to see associative principles as disruptive of efforts to close public space around communities. By dispersing conflict across a pluralised space and permitting communities to vent the ‘dissociative impulse’ in more creative ways, associative principles permit us to live with the paradox of democracy.


