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'Democracy is in Peril': Agonistic Pluralism after the Greek Election

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HARRY WEEKS, JUL 23 2012

When the Greek electorate went to the polls for the second time in six weeks on 17 June 2012, they were taking part in what was widely heralded by journalists, politicians, political commentators and academics as the most important election in recent history. Simplistically the situation was portrayed by many in the mainstream media as a virtual referendum on the question of whether Greece should remain within the Eurozone, the two leading parties – the incumbent conservatives, New Democracy (ND), and the upstart radical left coalition, SYRIZA – characterised in barely more nuanced terms than the 'yes' and 'no' factions respectively. To many, however, it stood for something rather more consequential, not simply a weathervane pointing towards the future economic condition of Europe, but to its future political condition. As Richard Seymour has suggested, the election has served to question and destabilize the 'systems of political and ideological representation' which control and administer the lives of those not just within Greece, but far beyond its borders.

It is notable that this election has served to mobilize the usually isolated and aloof realm of intelligentsia like no other in Europe since the early 1990s' post-communist tendency for thinkers and theoreticians to stand for political posts in the newly democratic parliaments of Eastern Europe. Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Judith Butler, among many others have all acted as signatories for open statements of support for SYRIZA or the Greek left as a whole, while Slavoj Žižek – who himself stood as President of Slovenia in 1990 – appeared alongside SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipris at an event in Athens on 4 June 2012. It is largely for the second, more political reason that these philosophers have crystalized around the Greek situation. As the conclusion of a 'Statement of Solidarity to the Greek Left' signed by numerous intellectual figures states:

The accusation currently circulated in the European press that the Left threatens to take Greece out of the Eurozone fails to see that the Left is struggling for a different Europe, one governed by and for the people, committed to the open political participation of all its inhabitants in creating equal conditions for work and for a livable life.

DISRUPTING THE EXCESS OF CONSENSUS

Given the contemporary neoliberal hegemony and the increasingly authoritarian tendencies neoliberalism has displayed in its mature form, philosophy as a discipline has recently concerned itself a great deal with reformulating what true democracy might mean. While this, as is often the case with political philosophy, may come across as conjectural, hypothetical or even utopian, the Greek situation has afforded the possibility for a radical shift of democratic ideas in the realm of the real that could mirror the ideas espoused in the realm of political philosophy. One figure whose writings on democracy seem to have gained new currency in the contexts of the Greek election is the Belgian post-Marxist thinker Chantal Mouffe, herself a signatory of a letter of support to the Greek left dated 16 June 2012.

Over the course of the past 25 years Mouffe has trenchantly espoused a rejection of the currently prevalent deliberative model of democracy in favour of what she terms an 'agonistic pluralism,' in which the antagonisms inherent to politics (relations between enemies) are productively converted into agonistic relationships (relations between adversaries). As far back as 1993, in her book 'The Return of the Political', Mouffe suggested that:

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Democracy is in peril... when its agonistic dynamic is hindered by an apparent excess of consensus, which usually masks a disquieting apathy. It is also endangered by the growing marginalization of entire groups whose status as an ‘underclass’ practically puts them outside the political community (Mouffe 1993).

These two perceived perils of democracy are absolutely consonant with the narratives of European neoliberalism which were already underway at the time of Mouffe’s writing, and in the two decades since have become utterly entrenched in the political consciousness of the continent. They are also the two perils which the Greek elections have served to if not eradicate, then certainly render more precarious.

The central importance of the second Greek election of 2012, seen from the point of view of Mouffe’s theory, lies in the spread and array of parties not only participating in the election, but seen as genuine, meaningful and powerful actors. In the staid neoliberal environment of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, citizens have almost without exception been presented with the choice between two conservative centre-right parties (one usually a nominally social democratic centre-left party) whose differences lie more in rhetoric and posture than in political credo. The break from this status quo represented predominantly by SYRIZA was evinced by the panicked endorsements of Angela Merkel and her fellow members of the neoliberal establishment not so much *for* ND as *against* SYRIZA, while parties as disparate as the Leninist KKE and the barely disguised Nazism of Golden Dawn were treated as serious political players for the first time in generations. Both the ‘apparent excess of consensus’ embodied by the centre-right dominance of European politics, and the marginalization of a political ‘underclass’ in the form of parties towards the extremities of the political spectrum, have been profoundly disturbed by the June election.

INSTITUTIONAL AGONISM

The negotiation of these two perils of democracy, however, stands as merely a precondition for Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, a necessary preparatory step before the considerably more difficult leap into a radical democracy can be made. This precondition is fundamentally infrastructural, a result of the realignment of the institutions of democracy so that they are themselves not only permissive of, but positively engineered towards the construction of an agonistic form of political contest. In Greece, such a realignment noticeably took place in the institutions of government. Communists, radical leftists, nationalists and indeed neo-Nazis were admitted by the hegemonic centre-right bloc into the political community in the acknowledgement that their extra-establishment gains were too great (and dangerous) to be ignored. Furthermore, as Žižek has stated, SYRIZA in a sense admitted themselves into the political community, in that they ‘stepped out of the comfortable position of marginal resistance and courageously signalled their readiness to take power.’

Such a realignment of institutions was especially discernible in the media, where indeed, SYRIZA and Golden Dawn arguably received more coverage than ND or PASOK thanks in part no doubt to the novelty factor of their arrival onto the landscape, and at least to a small degree to the photogenic qualities of the SYRIZA leader Tsipris. Whether these are suitably solid reasons for a newly agonistic media institution to become stabilized or not is in a sense irrelevant. What is a matter of fact is that televised debates showcased not simply the two traditional main parties, nor these two plus SYRIZA, but rather the entire spectrum of political organisations from Golden Dawn to the KKE.

Perhaps ironically, or perhaps inevitably, it was in this newly agonistic sphere of the media that it was made most apparent that while the precondition may have been somewhat achieved, any realization of Mouffe’s theory remains distant. This is especially visible in the two minutes of media coverage of the election to have received the most attention and most comment, a televised debate conducted on 7 June 2012 on Antenna TV in Greece. The debate featured, among a panel of 8 discussants, the Golden Dawn spokesperson Ilias Kasidiaris (now an MP), KKE MP Liana Kanelli and SYRIZA MP Rena Dourou.

As discussions amongst the eight participants in the debate became increasingly heated, Kanelli labels Kasidiaris a ‘fascist’, prompting Kasidiaris to return the insult, branding Kanelli as a ‘dirty communist’. Dourou continues the debate, claiming that ‘there are those in parliament who would bring the country back 500 years,’ a comment directed implicitly towards Kasidiaris and his party. Kasidiaris in response throws the contents of a glass of water at Dourou, prompting Kanelli to hit him with her newspaper. Kasidiaris retaliates, striking Kanelli with open palms in the

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face three times before being removed from the studio. The culmination of the debate reached viral status on YouTube almost immediately, and a month later, videos of the event have received cumulatively well over 1 million views.

THE PERSISTENCE OF ANTAGONISM

The size and variety of political allegiances represented by the panel is testament to the fact that, structurally, the underclass have been admitted into the community. However the violence which ensued is utterly demonstrative of a retention of the antagonistic basis of politics which Mouffe’s philosophy seeks to eliminate. In her influential essay ‘Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism’, Mouffe states that:

Envisaged from the point of view of “agonistic pluralism”, the aim of democratic politics is to construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an “adversary”, i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.

At numerous points during the debate the continued prevalence of the ‘enemy’ relation is made explicit. Kanelli and Kasidiaris’ reciprocal barrage of insults betrays an unwillingness on both parts to acknowledge any validity in their opponent’s political views, or to allow the other to defend their position, all nuance being simply crushed under the sheer weight of generic political labels. Likewise, while Dourou attempts to reason verbally with Kasidiaris, the Golden Dawn spokesperson cuts her off by depositing his glass of water over her, disallowing any possible continued negotiation. In a sense, the most shocking moment of the debate, the three slaps Kasidiaris aims at Kanelli, are irrelevant to a discussion of agonism and antagonism, the enemy distinction having been thoroughly cemented by the time this took place.

Such instances of antagonism are by no means isolated. Indeed they are symptomatic of larger antagonisms which permeate throughout the consciousnesses of the political players in the Greek election, in spite of the more agonistic grounds upon which the election was fought. For instance, the KKE refused outright the possibility of forming a broad leftist coalition with SYRIZA and the other left-leaning parties, while all other parties stated in advance that they would under no circumstance ally themselves with Golden Dawn. In both cases parties either refused or were refused the opportunity to partake in the democratic process fully (it was an inevitability pre-election that, given the voting spread, a coalition would be necessary to take power).

The persistence of antagonism as the default psychology of the political process, as evinced here, points towards a monumental problematic at the heart of Mouffe’s philosophy. While the Greek election demonstrated that institutions can be amended – either through circumstance demanding as such, or by their own volition – to be permissive or even conducive to agonistic confrontation, it is far more difficult to amend the consciousnesses of an entire populus. It would seem that at best, a structural agonism changes little (the status quo in the form a coalition comprised of the two traditional dominant parties, ND and PASOK, prevailed), and at worst provides an outlet for the sort of acts of unbridled conflict seen during the Antenna TV debate. Furthermore, is it ever possible for an agonistic pluralism to be anything more than hypothetical when it is, in reality, an inevitability that there will always be parties (in the political and more broad senses) whose mentalities are geared towards a perpetual characterisation of the other as enemy, as is irrefutably the case with KKE and Golden Dawn.

CONCLUSIONS

However, this is to deny the significance of the possibility of real change, afforded by at least a partial shift towards agonism. We have become so accustomed to the scant existence of such possibility that the natural reflex is to dismiss any moment of potentiality as a dangerous opportunity for the extreme to destroy what semblance of democracy exists, a mentality perfectly encapsulated by the US comedian Jon Stewart’s appraisal of the elections. Indeed, in a subsequent broadcast of The Daily Show, he suggested that in voting for the establishment in the form of the ND-led coalition, Greece ‘did the responsible thing.’ Responsible, perhaps, but only if one deems an adherence to the European establishment a positive characteristic.

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What should be taken from the Greek election is that the political institutions of the country offered, and the electorate seriously considered, an alternative. Curiously, considering that the victorious party won the votes of less than 19% of the eligible electorate and installed yet again a semi-technocratic cabinet, the events of June 2012 in Greece must be considered a victory for democracy. In times when democracy has been so globally threatened or even discarded such miniscule steps towards a more open and accessible political sphere should be lauded. And as is so often the case when examining political philosophy alongside really existing political situations, the real significance of Mouffe's theory is not perceived when it is viewed in its entirety as doctrinal, but when particular elements are treated as exegetical of a situation's implications. As Mouffe discerned, democracy is in peril, but amidst the turbulences that have engulfed its place of birth, democracy may yet be saved.

Harry Weeks is a doctoral researcher in History of Art at the University of Edinburgh. His PhD research project is entitled '*Negotiations of Community in Contemporary Art*' and examines the political implications of contemporary community-engaged art practice. He has written and spoken widely on the intersections of art and politics, particularly in relation to post-communism and Eastern Europe. A chapter on the ethics of performance art, in an edited volume published by IB Tauris entitled '*New Interactive Practices in Contemporary Art*', will be forthcoming in 2013.

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