Agonistic Democracy

This book delivers a systematic account of agonistic democracy, and a much-needed analysis of the core components of agonism: pluralism, tragedy, and the value of conflict. It also traces the history of these ideas, identifying the connections with republicanism and with Greek antiquity. Mark Wenman presents a critical appraisal of the leading contemporary proponents of agonism and, in a series of well-crafted and comprehensive discussions, brings these thinkers into debate with one another, as well as with the post-structuralist and continental theorists who influence them. Wenman draws extensively on Hannah Arendt, and stresses the creative power of human action as augmentation and revolution. He also reworks Arendt's discussion of reflective judgement to present an alternative style of agonism, one where the democratic contest is linked to the emergence of a militant form of cosmopolitanism, and to prospects for historical change in the context of neoliberal globalisation.

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Agonistic Democracy

Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation

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It is not in the least superstitious, it is even a council of realism . . . to be prepared for and to expect 'miracles' in the political realm

Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?'

Tyranny does not endure, for it cannot root itself in the people; it cannot rely on their strength: it does not endure and cannot expand

Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*

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Preface

Politics in a new century

The conceptual innovations explored in his book have been developed in the context of profound changes in liberal democratic societies, especially since the end of the Cold War. In this preface I outline these transformations under the headings of (i) the politics of diversity, (ii) the politics fundamentalism, and (iii) the politics of globalisation.

The politics of diversity

Contemporary western societies are characterised by a complex diversity of social and cultural identities, and the politics of diversity has become a predominant theme in Anglo-American normative political theory over the latter part of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. The politics of diversity is rooted in the dynamics of social mobility. For example, the widespread migration of people since the end of the Second World War has altered considerably the demographics of former colonial powers such as Britain and France. Historically, these nations negotiated a degree of cultural diversity associated with internal regional and religious differences, but the politics of diversity has been greatly amplified by the influx of significant numbers of ethnically and culturally diverse groups, often from former colonies. Consequently, issues of 'race relations' have been at the forefront of political debate in Britain throughout the post-war period, and this led to the implementation of the Race Relations Acts in 1968 and 1976, which prohibited discrimination in areas such as employment and education. More recently, these debates have given way to discussions about 'multiculturalism', and whether formal parity of opportunity is sufficient to ensure equality or if 'positive discrimination' might be necessary to create meaningful equality in a diverse society.

In the United States, with its past experience of chattel slavery and a much longer history of immigration, issues of racial inequality have similarly been at the forefront of political debate. The violent reaction in the

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southern states in the 1960s to the civil rights campaigns against racial segregation showed that, a century after the Reconstruction Amendments, American society remained deeply divided on the issue of *de facto* equality for African Americans. These campaigns resulted in the implementation of additional civil rights legislation, and, just like in the UK, subsequent debates have turned around the question of whether or not equality of opportunities legislation is sufficient, or if forms of 'affirmative action' may be necessary to create meaningful equality for ethnic minority groups in American society. In those former colonies where Europeans established permanent settlements, i.e. in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and South America, the politics of ethnic diversity is further compounded by the struggles of indigenous peoples for recognition of their traditional authorities and cultural practices. As we will see in Chapter 4, these struggles are especially emphasised by James Tully because they bring to the fore the complex forms of domination that still operate in contemporary pluralistic societies.

Other modes of diversity politics are both cause and effect of the radical changes in values characteristic of post-industrialised societies in the latter part of the twentieth century. This is apparent in the persistent manifestation of social movements from the late 1960s around issues of gender and lifestyle politics. For example, the emergence of second wave feminism has undermined the traditional hierarchical relationships between women and men in western societies and challenged the conventional understanding of gender roles in the family, the workplace, and in public institutions. These struggles have led to equality of opportunities legislation in the workplace, much greater participation of women in higher education and the professions, and to reformist legalisation on issues such as abortion, divorce, and child care provision. Similarly, the struggles of gay rights campaigners – initially for the legalisation of homosexuality and more recently for public recognition of same sex marriages, and for gay rights in institutions such as the armed forces and the Anglican Church – is testimony to a momentous transformation in social values since the 1960s.

Yet another source of the politics of diversity in the new century is the novel forms of risk associated with the ever-quickening pace of technological innovation. Citizens of post-industrial societies increasingly find themselves trying to make sense of a bewildering assortment of issues related to 'manufactured risks', from climate change and nuclear proliferation, to the possibilities of human cloning, stem cell research, genetically modified food, and a whole host of other issues associated with bio-technology. Often, these issues throw the deep diversity of values and opinions in contemporary societies into stark relief.

The politics of diversity has also unfolded in the context of the collapse of state socialism in Russia and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an ever-deepening crisis of the welfare state across Western Europe, the spread of neo-liberalism around the globe, and a massive expansion in material inequality both in the relatively affluent west and also in the 'developing' world. These tendencies have been hugely accelerated by the systemic economic crises that have followed the financial crisis of October 2008, and which threaten a global economic slump on the scale of the 1930s. In this conjuncture, it is important to note the concerns of authors as diverse as Nancy Fraser (1997), Richard Rorty (1999), Brian Barry (2001), and Slavoj Žižek (2006a) who have argued that the Left has become overly focused on questions of cultural diversity and has lost sight of its core priority, i.e. a collective struggle for a politics of redistribution and a reduction of material inequality. All of the thinkers examined in this book see themselves broadly on the Left, and so one of the themes explored here is whether and in what ways agonistic democracy can address the politics of diversity as well as struggles for economic equality.

The politics of fundamentalism

The politics of diversity routinely finds groups and individuals in dispute over issues that bring into play their most fundamental values, associated, for example, with religious doctrine or deep differences in moral norms or lifestyle choices. The issue of abortion and a woman's right to choose would be an obvious case in point, but so too would issues such as gay marriage, experiments with human cloning, and so on. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that cultural diversity often generates seemingly intractable forms of conflict and a polarisation of political debate, and it is significant that the new century has been marked by a rise in domestic and international conflict. Indeed, the optimism of the early 1990s – that the post–Cold War world might be one of a progressive coalescence around liberal values, encapsulated in Francis Fukuyama's notion of the 'end of history' – has given way to a world marked instead by what John Gray calls 'renascent particularisms, militant religions, and resurgent ethnicities' (Fukuyama, 1992; Gray, 2007, 2).

This rising tide of conflict is nowhere more evident than in the emergence of religious forms of fundamentalism around the globe as a backlash against western secular values, i.e. excessive consumerism and narrow forms of individualism. For example, this is apparent in the enormous prominence of evangelical Christianity throughout many parts of the developing world, and of course in the United States where

evangelicalism has been brought directly into mainstream political debate, not just on issues such as abortion, but more generally in support of prominent conservative Christians for the Republican Party. It is also manifest in the intense controversies that have surrounded the campaigns of Islamists in Europe and elsewhere: for example, following the *fatwa* that was placed on Salmon Rushdie by the Ayatollah Khomeini for the publication of his *Satanic Verses* in 1988, and which led to a failed assassination attempt against Rushdie in 1989; in protest against the cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish Newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, which included the firebombing of Danish embassies in a number of Islamic states and the burning of Danish flags in Gaza City and elsewhere; and in opposition to the French Government's decision to ban the display of religious insignia in public institutions and more recently to outlaw face covering in any public arena.

Indeed, wherever we look today we see uncompromising conflict and clashes of reciprocal intolerance: from the ethnic conflicts which have raged in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, to the resurgence of far-Right populism in parts of Europe; to the acts of terrorism carried out by radical Islamists against the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, the World Trade Centre on September the 11th, 2001, and subsequently in Madrid (2004), London (2005), Mumbai (2008) and in many other cities around world; to the neo-conservative 'War or Terror' instigated by the Bush regime and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the heightening of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict following the electoral victory of Hamas in Gaza 2006. One might be forgiven for thinking that we have returned to something like the early modern wars of religion.

Moreover, the diffuse nature of these conflicts has played into the hands of neo-conservative ideologues in Washington, London and elsewhere who have consolidated the post–9/11 security state with its systematic use of extra-judicial executive power. This is evident, for example, in the restriction of civil liberties, increased surveillance, the use of indefinite detention in the Guantanamo confinement centre as well as of simulated torture techniques, special rendition, etc. Giorgio Agamben has brilliantly evaluated these developments in terms of a resurgent mode of 'sovereignty', which is propagated in the form of a 'permanent state of exception' and we return to this idea at several points in the book.

One of the strengths of agonistic democracy has been to address these challenges head on. Indeed, William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe in particular have sought to attend to questions of fundamentalism and uncompromising forms of conflict. Moreover, we will see that the agonistic theorists address the present climate of violence and intolerance in

a manner that is distinct from the more mainstream approaches in con-
temporary political theory. Where liberals and deliberative democrats
typically seek to overcome or transcend conflict by bringing it under a
set of regulative principles (foundational principles of justice or context-
transcending principles of communicative rationality), the agonists insist
that these responses actually serve to exacerbate the problem. Instead,
we should look to sublimate this hostility by transforming it into more
constructive modes of rivalry. Paradoxically, perhaps this is the key to
social cohesion in a world of diverse fundamentals. However, we will see
that it is also crucial to properly understand the causes of these develop-
ments, and Mouffe and Connolly both explain the rise of the politics of
fundamentalism in existential terms, i.e. as a manifestation of a human
propensity for 'antagonism' or of an underlying politics of *ressentiment*.
We will question these analyses in the course of this study, and draw
attention instead to the specific socio-economic circumstances that con-
dition the politics of fundamentalism, and this brings us to the politics
of globalisation.

The politics of globalisation

Over the past few decades the processes of globalisation have intensified
the politics of diversity and of fundamentalism. Globalisation is typically
presented as a set of social and economic processes that have greatly
accelerated the experience of 'interconnectedness' (Held and McGrew,
2002, 1). Driven by technological developments in the communications
industry (especially the Internet and the commercial use of satellites),
globalisation has drastically reduced the mediating effects of physical
distance. Every day I am drawn into a whole series of issues, as graphic
images of physically distant events – such as 9/11, the US Presidential
election, or the latest tragedies in Gaza or the West Bank – are beamed
into my living room as they unfold. In other words, in the era of glob-
alisation the politics of diversity is not only propelled by the physical
movement of peoples around the world, but also by the virtual proximity
of culturally distinct groups and individuals in their networks of instan-
taneous electronic communication and in media-projected broadcasts of
daily events in 'real time'. At the forefront of these processes has been
the impact of economic globalisation, which is manifest particularly in
the escalating volume and velocity of the movement of capital across
state borders, and the increasing tendency of producers to relocate their
operations to the global south where costs are low and where workers'
rights are not adequately protected. These trends have been illustrated
dramatically by the impact of the on-going financial crisis, which has

confirmed what theorists of globalisation have long been saying, i.e. that the 'world is fast becoming a shared social and economic space' (Held and McGrew, 2002, 2).

However, drawing on radical social theorists such as Paul Virilio and Manuel Castells, Connolly and Tully have both argued that the processes of globalisation represent something more challenging than the idea of increasing interconnectedness. Whilst this captures part of what is going on, it fails to grasp the more profound transformations underway in the social experience of time and in the emergence of distinct forms of control associated with the network society. Tully's account of globalisation is additionally finessed by his concern with the impact of globalisation on indigenous peoples and, more generally, on the developing world. Indeed, we will see in Chapter 4 that he has developed a remarkable account of the impact of globalisation on the non-European world in the second volume of his *Public Philosophy in a New Key* (2008). Through an analysis of the deep continuities between contemporary processes of economic globalisation (such as structural adjustment programmes through the World Bank and the IMF) and the former experience of European colonisation (i.e. in the continued exploitation of peoples in the global south, and the gross levels of material, cultural, and political inequality that persist between the Great Powers and their former colonies and dependencies), Tully demonstrates why globalisation must be understood as a continuation of Euro-American imperialism by other means. He is, of course, not alone in this assessment. For example, the idea that globalisation represents a novel form of imperial rule has been popularised by the success of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* in 2000. However, the detail of Tully's account of the operations of contemporary imperialism is highly pertinent, and I take much of what he says as the starting point of my own account of agonistic democracy in the era of globalisation, which is set out in Chapter 7.

Theorists who are broadly positive about the potential benefits inherent in globalisation – such as David Held and Anthony Giddens – nonetheless acknowledge that this is an uneven process, which has generally had a negative impact on democracy at the level of the nation-state. Indeed, it is clear that globalisation leads to a transfer of power away from the peoples' representatives in national parliaments, and towards unelected and unaccountable transnational elites in the World Bank, the IMF, and other powerful institutions (Giddens, 1999; Held and McGrew, 2002). For Held and other cosmopolitan democrats, the solution to these developments is to find ways to democratise international institutions in order to ensure more effective forms of transnational governance. This approach is just one of a variety of conceptions of cosmopolitan democracy which

have emerged in recent years and which I outline briefly in Chapter 2. All of them can ultimately be traced to Immanuel Kant's arguments for a world federation of republican states governed by principles of 'cosmopolitan right' which he articulated at the end of the eighteenth century. For reasons we will see in Parts I and II of the book, each of the agonistic thinkers has explicitly rejected the Kantian conception of cosmopolitanism and the arguments of those who follow in this tradition. Indeed, Mouffe has rejected arguments for cosmopolitanism outright, suggesting instead that we should focus on renewing democracy at the national and the regional level as the best way to challenge the negative impact of the processes of globalisation. By way of contrast, Connolly, Tully, and Bonnie Honig have all sought to offer agonistic forms of cosmopolitanism – what Honig calls 'agonistic cosmopolitics' – as an alternative to the predominant Kantian perspectives, and as a necessary supplement to the regeneration of democracy at the level of the nation (Honig, 2006, 117).

I argue that Mouffe's outright rejection of cosmopolitanism fails to understand the potential in the novel social movements against the institutions which have been at the forefront of propagating market liberalisation and economic globalisation, manifest, for example, in the summit protests in Seattle, Genoa, and elsewhere. These demonstrations have also taken on a more constructive form, with the formation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2000, and subsequent World and Regional Forums which have been attended by large numbers of activists and campaign groups from around the world. In the past few years these struggles have become more intense with the emergence of the Occupy movement, and this escalation of democratic movements across state borders, made possible by the new digital technologies, has been nowhere more palpable than in the series of Arab uprisings that have spread across North Africa and the Middle East since December 2010. Connolly, Tully, and Honig are right to see in these kinds of developments the potential for forms of transnational democratic solidarity. However, I argue that none of them go far enough in the direction of a militant form of cosmopolitanism, one which is committed, above all, to the possibility of the emergence of radically new ideas and practices, and in order to address issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and global inequality.

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