

Mouffe's Radical Democracy and Cultural Practice in the Public Sphere

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Introduction

THE QUESTION AT STAKE IS TO MAKE THE FACT THAT WE BELONG TO DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES OF VALUES, LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND OTHERS COMPATIBLE WITH OUR COMMON BELONGING TO A POLITICAL COMMUNITY WHOSE RULES WE HAVE TO ACCEPT.

— Chantal Mouffe¹

American society has experienced a crisis of faith in the existing political system. Architects and planners respond with dismay at the disintegration of traditional public space due to increasing privatization of inner cities and the burgeoning development of edge city environments. Others proclaim salvation in virtual public space, expected to restore a unified *polis* as found in the civic republican traditions of citizenship and community. At the same time “identity politics” have proliferated. Various minority groups, defined in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or religion, are struggling for expanded rights, freedom from discrimination, and political power. These groups have fragmented and reconfigured the political landscape such that it has become impossible to legitimately posit a shared national identity. In response, the notion of “multiculturalism” has been popularized as a strategy for union. I believe that multiculturalism is a flawed attempt to provide cohesion because in constructing commonalities many of the conflicts that attend difference are falsely obscured.

Those who practice and exhibit in the so-called public sphere—as artists, architects or historians—must respond to this complex and conflicted cultural landscape. On what basis can one address the conflict between different identities and the common political community? In this paper, I examine the notion of *radical and plural democracy* as articulated by the French political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. I see this philosophy as suggesting an approach towards recognizing difference without minimizing it. Krzysztof Wodiczko has translated political convictions into a series of “critical vehicles” for compelling public action as an artist. Some of his recent projects are discussed as well as work I undertook while one of his students. Also presented is a design for a federal courthouse that explores the culture of exhibition(ism) in terms of the varied user groups and the contesting “roles” that each are expected to play.

The Critique of Essentialism

Confusions concerning the articulation of difference in the public sphere are surfacing in the context of a major intellectual challenge to long held premises underlying political positions on both the left and the right. To clearly present Mouffe's theory, I must retread some philosophical ground in order to establish points of reference, beginning with the critique of essentialism. This critique stems in part from a larger critique of dominant Enlightenment modes of thought. These modes have been commonly associated with the terms universalism, humanism and rationalism, although the protagonists of the critique contend that this characterization is an oversimplification.²

The critics assert that Enlightenment thought is multivalent. The seeds of the methods used to critique it are consequently to be found within it. Michel Foucault recognized this circular method. He noted that criticism must not be limited by the “intellectual blackmail” of being for or against the Enlightenment. The search for meaning through reason is still valid but the crucial questions must be reformulated. Foucault writes, “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” We must not allow an overarching search for universality (“essential” truths about a given group) to erase each individual's differences. This leads to the necessity to investigate the specific historical events that “led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.” In other words, the recognition that our viewpoints are subjective allows the realization that each of us is a subject of our own varied thoughts and actions.³

Freudian psychoanalysis has also undermined the idea of a unified subject by demonstrating a dual nature model of the mind consisting of the conscious and the unconscious. Recent psychoanalytic theory has furthered this claim by theorizing that personal identity consists of a plurality of layers. At the bottom there is an empty place—a lack—which is nonetheless a condition for the constitution of any identity. Therefore, the essential aspect of the self is its *non-fixity* and state of constant movement towards the establishment of temporary, transitory nodal points. It is these fleeting moments of coherent expression that are recognized by others as identifiers of the self. This observation about the constitution of the self has been logically expanded to an understanding of community identity. Thus any commu-

nity may no longer credibly claim an *essential* core of fixed attributes. Instead, community identity, be it in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or nationality, must be understood as constructed in multi-layers that are in a constant state of flux. Community identities are therefore always contingent.

Philosophical hermeneutics provided fuel for the critique of essentialism by positing poetic language, rather than *a priori* knowledge, as the source of humankind's connection to the world of things. Thus was challenged the notion of empirical descriptions of truth based in the assumption of a unified subjective viewpoint. If meaning in language is not fixed and it is only through language that we can interpret the world of objects and events, then the meaning of the essential attributes of things—so called “facts”—is also in flux.

All of these components of the critique have led to a crisis of the political; the traditional categories of civic discourse require reconfiguration. Chantal Mouffe asserts that *anti*-essentialism must be reflected in any new model of the civic realm or public sphere that is introduced to combat the crisis of the political. In political philosophy, the implications of the de-stabilization of the unity of the political subject (or “citizens”) could lead to the substitution of multiple fragments, each with a fully constituted identity, in the place of the former singular understanding. This would be to misinterpret the critique and to reintroduce the assumption of totality into the discourse of identity. The logical conclusion of this misinterpretation would be a disastrous condition of total *relativism* in which each separate identity is equally sovereign. This is disastrous because within total relativism no basis for judgement exists. Therefore, this condition would encourage the formulation of a superficial basis for judgement, such as the vague mantra of “tolerance” than underlies multiculturalism. Mouffe writes, “It is therefore important not to visualize the dialectics of unfixity as a dialectic of *separation*, but as a dialectic of *subversion* and *overdetermination*.”⁴ One must recognize radical indeterminacy as characteristic of the multiple community identities that constitute the public political body. This recognition will allow for the articulation of a non-relativist view of identity and will act against the establishment of a neutral concept for the political community and the spaces it inhabits.

No longer maintainable are strict separations of public and private domains, in which the public is the political and the private is the personal. By limiting inclusion of many categories of individuals who might upset the paradigm, such as women, into the public sphere, the public/private separation played a necessary role in the formulation of a homogeneous unified political subject. At points in history when participation was limited in this manner and acceptance of equality was applicable only to those already defined as participants in the realm of the public, notions of universal goals and singular definitions of “the common good” were plausible.

This hegemonic viewpoint persisted until the 1970's in the United States, with periodic challenges that expanded the criteria for inclusion. From this viewpoint a cultural practitioner could

legitimately attempt, as did Louis Kahn, to investigate the origins or “Volume Zero” of liberalism, democracy and other institutions. Kahn sought universal order in the archaic; he believed that a timeless essence could be found, and then re-presented in stone and brick.⁵ I confess a nostalgic desire to accept an essentialist paradigm that might allow me, as a cultural practitioner, to participate (after Kahn) in the hegemonic history of Western architecture. Alternately, as a woman I desire to embrace an essentialist feminist perspective that assumes a commonality of interest and experience among women. But I believe that both of these choices are politically irresponsible.

A Multivalent Reading of Modernity

The anti-essentialist critique might suggest that one totally reject modernism because of its seemingly inherent coupling with the universalizing tendencies of the Enlightenment project. This would be to embrace the concept of a new condition—the postmodern. On the other hand, one might adopt, as I prefer to, a multivalent reading of modernity (and, by extension, modernism) that allows for various strains of thought, some of which recognize the radically indeterminate quality of the modern condition. In this light, various modernisms are identified with the democratic revolution. They reflect the struggle of individuals and institutions to accommodate and adapt to a rapidly changing world in which inflexible paradigms are no longer tenable. The epistemological Enlightenment project of self-foundation, in which the inquiry is directed towards universal truth-seeking, then becomes just one of a number of concurrent adaptive struggles, albeit the most dominant one.

In his brilliant book *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman writes of modernity as a dialectic:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.⁶

He likens this condition to Marx's maxim that “all that is solid melts into air.” In other words (as noted above in the discussion of psychoanalytic theory), our knowledge of the environment is limited to the observation of transitory nodal points in the flux of identities with which we are surrounded. These nodes are indeterminate and they are liable to dissolve immediately upon perception. However, the transformative quality of modernity is each person's ability to adapt.

Mouffe recognizes the same paradox when discussing pluralist democracy. The moment that a fully harmonious condition is achieved would mark the beginning of its disintegration. This is so because stasis is impossible in any discourse of difference. She writes, “Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy ‘to come’, as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of im-

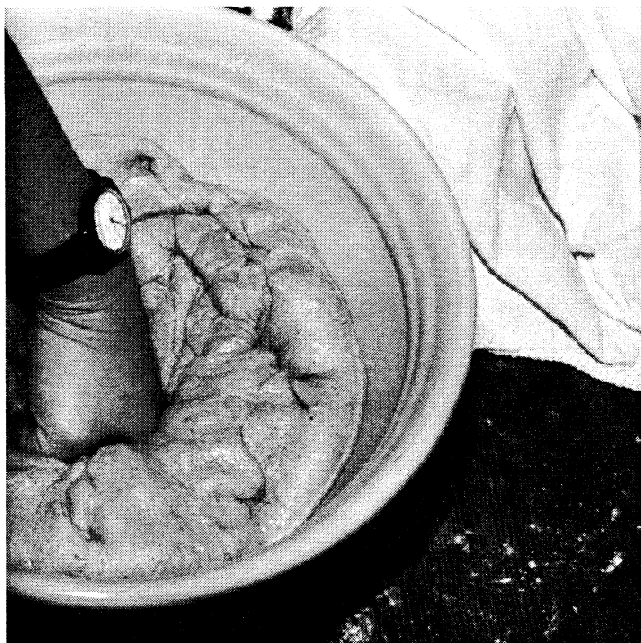


Fig. 1. Video still from *Art Break/Making Bread*.



Fig. 2. Photograph of performance of *Art Break/Making Bread*.

possibility of its full realization.”⁷ I find this assertion about democracy “to come” profoundly affecting. Living and practicing successfully in the public sphere requires active participation in a process without expectation of full realization.

At the same time that Berman makes his observation about the paradox of modernity, he is still able to affirm the democratic struggle. He sees it as a part of the continuing modern process of people “asserting their dignity in the present—even a wretched and oppressive present . . . striving to make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home.”⁸ It is the epistemological project of self-foundation stemming from Enlightenment ideals that must be reconsidered, not the parallel political project of self-assertion.⁹ Mouffe’s project of radical democracy aims to allow a struggle against totalitarianism and oppression to continue *within* the traditions of liberal democracy, and to provide opportunities for its adoption in sites of conflict and antagonism.

The Political and the Stranger

The first task in confronting the aforementioned crisis of political faith is to reconsider definitions of the political. It cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution or specific sphere of society, nor can it be abandoned to the hungry jaws of certain apocalyptic postmodern critics. We must recognize the political as a condition of our very being that is inherent to every human society.¹⁰ In this sense, the principle of the political is universal, though not the content of the identity.

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva presents an interesting analysis of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, adopted in France in August, 1789. This document affirms the natural right of humans to liberty and equality; however, it locates these rights in the realm of political associations and in the sovereignty of the nation. “Thus the free and equal man is, de facto, the citizen.”¹¹ There exists a fused human/citizen at the core of both the French *Declaration* and the American *Declaration of Independence*. The advantage of this hybrid identity is that an “inalienable horizon” was established in human ethics; this horizon is beyond the jurisdiction of national political conscience. But the barbarity of the Holocaust, and the subsequent critique of abstract Enlightenment thought, undermined the sanctity of this inalienable horizon. In order to retain the notion of fundamental rights as defined during the Enlightenment, principle must be separated from content. This splitting is analogous to the previously discussed separation of the political project of self-assertion from the epistemological project of self-foundation. Kristeva writes:

It is only by maintaining the principle of that universal dignity—without scattering it among new national, religious, or private regionalisms—that one might consider modifying its content, taking into consideration what the behavior of human beings reveals as to their humanity . . . Being aware of that infernal dynamics of estrangement at the core of each entity, individual, or group certainly distances one from eighteenth century optimism but without calling the principle into question.¹²

Once again, we find an insistence on the necessity of the expression of *difference* to the assertion of the fundamental rights of liberty and equality.

Kristeva proposes that the modification of the content of the notion of human dignity should not be relegated to courts of law alone, but should fall within the province of ethics and psychoanalysis. This exploration should lead us to recognize the other (or stranger) within ourselves and therefore to be more understanding and respectful of marginalized groups and individuals. Kristeva's formulation is distinguished from multiculturalism in that the connection is sought through *internal* recognition of a specific condition. This is in place of a broad sweeping appeal to "shared humanity" and "tolerance," concepts which evidence suggests are liable to break down and disappear when conflicts emerge. Kristeva suggests that this internal, ethical recognition may lead to a "middle way" allowing democratic societies to achieve "a cosmopolitanism interior to the nation-states."¹³ She suggests the possibility of maintaining separate categories of identity such as "American" without having to fix their definitions with specific (essentialist) characteristics.

Krzysztof Wodiczko is clearly indebted to Kristeva's notion of the ethical necessity of recognizing the stranger within. The idea of the stranger or alien inspired his recent *Xenology* series of projects that includes the *Alien Staff*, the *Mouthpiece (Porte-Parole)*, and *AEgis*. He also pays homage to Chantal Mouffe and the idea of radical democracy. The *Alien Staff* is a storytelling instrument intended for use by a marginalized citizen (resident alien or immigrant) to begin an exchange with strangers, people in the street. The tube of the staff contains relics of the immigrant's life experiences. A monitor at the head of the staff allows its holder to tell a videotaped version of his or her story. When a curious stranger approaches and asks about the staff, there is the possibility of a direct, boundary-crossing conversation between the two people. The *Mouthpiece*, which is either a prosthetic device or a gag, complicates the relationship between the instrument and the user by doubling the voice at its original site—the mouth. It provokes and inspires communication or trans-

lation.¹⁴ Both of these instruments demand an *interrogative* relationship between the participants, including the artist. Of the process of art-making and exhibition Wodiczko writes:

The danger lies in allowing oneself to live . . . the commonplace life of well-calculated choices for navigating through the system by claiming a critical or independent perspective on it. If democracy is to be a machine of hope, it must retain one strange characteristic: its wheels and cogs will need to be lubricated not with oil but with sand.¹⁵

He articulates the danger of remaining removed from "the system" of democracy. The *Alien Staff* proposes a "discursive model of identity" wherein the project instigates conversations that directly impact people's lives and sense of identity. What are the impacts of this model of identity on a given community?

Following Wodiczko, I attempted to interrogate the community of an architectural school.¹⁶ My collaborator Kari Kimura and I staged a ritual performance enacting the act of "building" in the common social space of the school. The project, entitled *Art Break/Making Bread*, juxtaposed the act of baking (and breaking) bread with the processes of design and construction. Pieces of scrap wood were painted pink and arranged in a "sacred" circle to symbolize stereotypes (essentialist characteristics) of the female gender. During the performance the pieces were screwed together into a large, malformed "ark" that was meant to confront the seamless aura of the architectural canon at the school. Like Wodiczko's *Alien Staff*, we used curiosity to assemble a crowd who were then encouraged to participate in the ritual. We hoped that each participant and observer would identify with the restrictions imposed by gendered categories (see Figures 1 & 2).

Pluralism, Citizenship and Social Space

What are the implications of Kristeva's notion of "the middle way" in political terms? Certainly, the definition of "citizen" must be reconsidered to accommodate plural subject identities.¹⁷ In the classical republican tradition, citizenship is empirically given. The community of citizens, then, is founded on an equally shared notion of "the common good." In the liberal tradition, individuality is emphasized and the legal status of citizenship is accepted only to the extent that individual interests are furthered by the association. In both traditions, citizenship is seen as a legal status—a contract—accompanied by a fixed set of obligations and returns. The notion of citizenship that Mouffe puts forward, however, sees citizenship "not as a legal status but as a

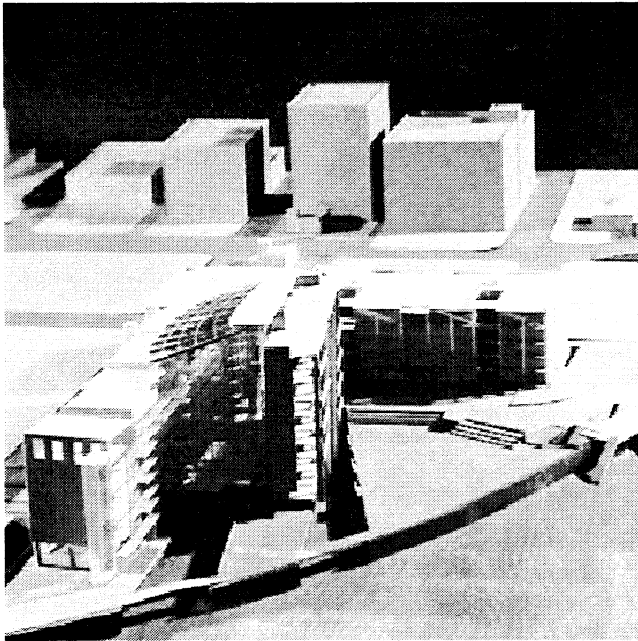


Fig. 3. Model of federal courthouse.

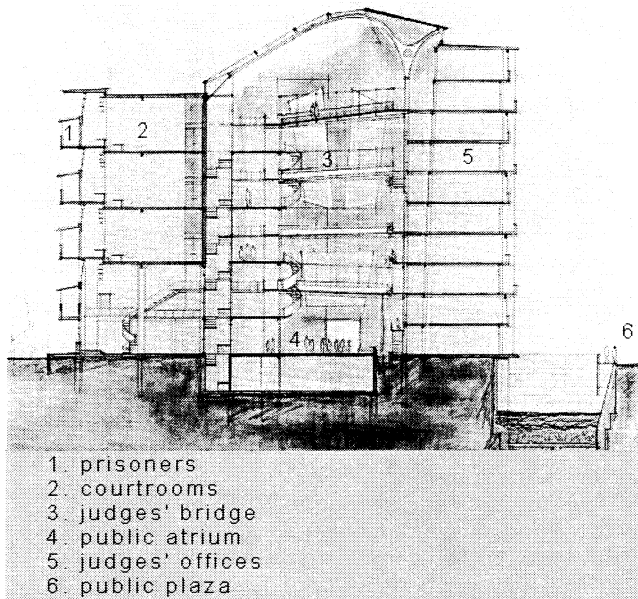


Fig. 4. Cross section through federal courthouse demonstrating antagonistic programmatic relationships.

form of identification, a type of political identity.”¹⁸

There will always be a competition between different interpretations of democratic citizenship. Concurrent with this re-emphasis on citizenship as a *constructed* identity, rather than a pre-given status or a reluctantly accepted condition, must come the re-establishment of the lost connection between ethics and politics. But, once again, this must not be done by emphasizing the classical republican notion of “the common good.” What is sought is a recognition of instrumental ethical bonds in society that suggest shared loyalty without requiring a fixed set of shared purposes or goals.

In the project of radical and plural democracy, citizenship is understood as a common political identity of people engaged with different purposes and goals who accept submission to the rules of political society, guided by a set of shared ethical and political values. In this sense, citizenship is an “articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty.”¹⁹ The notion of citizenship is no longer abstract or universal; it is specific and contingent, requiring issues of difference and morality to be freed from the strict domain of the private. Difference must be actively considered in the public realm. In this way the traditions of citizenship and community may be made compatible with a modern pluralist society.

Radical Democracy and Cultural Practice

I originally developed this theoretical framework seeking a link between the values of democracy and the responsibilities of cultural practice in order to support an architectural design investigation. The project is a federal courthouse. As a building type, the courthouse embodies the dynamics of rules and conflict. The intention was to challenge the traditional authoritative stance embedded in the courthouse typology, both in terms of overall imagery and in terms of program. My design strategy involved subverting the requirements for strict separation of circulation for the various user groups: judge, jury, lawyers, accused prisoners, public audience. I designed opportunities for the expression and exploration of antagonisms: an outdoor plaza for protest that faces (across a moat) the judges’ offices; a public atrium through which judges must pass on restricted access bridges to get to their courtrooms; secured routes for the accused that allows glimpses into the atrium and out to the city (see Figures 3 & 4). These crossings and potential sites of visual and verbal confrontation are intended to retain the individual humanity (and fallibility) of each citizen up until the

threshold of entry into the courtroom. At that point each participant takes on a designated role to play within the legal rules of the political system to which all citizens agree to be bound. I recognize that real and distressing security concerns are increasingly tending to supercede other design considerations in the planning of courthouses and other government buildings; it is precisely because of the fear of terrorism fueling concerns about security that I believe it is important to provide multivalent spaces for open expressions of antagonism, difference, and indeterminacy.²⁰

The frontiers between the public and the private, and between citizenship and individual identity cannot be definitively determined; these distinctions exist in a permanent state of tension that cannot be reconciled. This state of tension is characteristic of democracy and is "the question at stake" with which I opened this paper. Mouffe writes, "Our understanding of radical democracy... postulates the very impossibility of a final realization of democracy. It affirms that the unresolvable tension between the principles of equality and liberty is the very condition for the preservation of the indeterminacy and undecidability which is constitutive of modern democracy."²¹

NOTES

- 1 Chantal Mouffe, "Citizenship and Political Identity," *October* 61 (Summer 1992).
- 2 Theorists and philosophers as varied as Derrida, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, Gadamer, Lacan, Foucault, and Freud have contributed to this critique. See Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993) 75.
- 3 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books) 32-50.
- 4 Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today," *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (London: Verso, 1992) 11.
- 5 Lecture by Stanford Anderson, "Kahn: Reading Volume Zero," conference on Sher-e-Banglanagar (MIT, 1991). See also David B. Brownlee and David G. DeLong, *Louis I Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).

- 6 Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 15.
- 7 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 8.
- 8 Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, 11.
- 9 Discussion of the ideas of Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* in Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 8. In the wake of the collapse of Soviet communism and the reemergence of various nationalisms grounded in long standing ethnic and religious conflicts that have led to several full blown wars, the supposed victories of democracy have proved hollow (and the reality of distinction between democracy and capitalism has been established).
- 10 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 3.
- 11 Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 149.
- 12 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 152-3.
- 13 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 154.
- 14 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) 104-137.
- 15 Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles*, xii-xiii.
- 16 I took the course *Art, Identity and Community* at MIT with Professor Wodiczko in the fall of 1993. He has since evolved the ideas of this course into the Interrogative Design Group at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies within the MIT School of Architecture.
- 17 As Mouffe formulates the problem, "The notions of citizenship and community have been stripped of much of their content by liberal individualism, and we need to recover the dimension of active participation that they hold in the classical republican tradition. Now this tradition needs to be made compatible with the pluralism that is central to modern democracy." Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today," *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, 3.
- 18 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 65.
- 19 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 70.
- 20 Currently, I am becoming involved in research efforts between Georgia Tech and the General Services Administration that address issues of security in the design of federal buildings. Very strict guidelines were developed in the wake of the tragic Oklahoma City bombing.
- 21 Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today," *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, 13.