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Guest editorial

Democracy, identity, space

If the integration of individual agency and social structures was a dominant problematic for the discipline of geography during the 1980s (for example, see Gregory, 1981; Pred, 1984; Thrift, 1983), then the current decade can arguably be characterized as one that has taken up the task of theorizing identity. For their part, structure-agency theorists sought to overcome what were seen, on the one hand, as rigid and economistic structuralisms that disciplined much Marxist inquiry, and, on the other hand, as overly voluntarist assumptions of autonomous individuals that lurked in humanistic and behavioral geography. Although this chapter in disciplinary history is by no means fully written, it seems fair at this juncture to offer that the imperatives suggested by these debates seem less compelling now than they were a decade previous. This partially reflects the facile acknowledgment that a middle ground between these positions has been secured. It is also indicative of the difficulty many found in applying the insights of a dialectical understanding of agency and structure in empirical research (Gregson, 1987; 1989; but see Wilson and Huff, 1994). Yet perhaps an even more effective emulsifier has been the steady rise of postmodern and poststructuralist theories in human geography. For in spite of the gains achieved by these debates, it is nonetheless apparent that the discussions over agency and structure retained many of the trappings of modernism, namely: a dualistic construction of the moments requiring dialectical resolution, a sympathy toward modernist forms of empirics, and a grand narrative structure.

Contemporary identity theory, by contrast, has been influenced by a different set of coordinates and their challenges. Among these are: poststructuralist feminisms; psychoanalytic theory; racial, ethnic, and postcolonial critiques; and gay and lesbian theory. Another point of reference—the one addressed in this editorial—concerns the relationship between identity and the still important task of 'theorizing the political'. In the brief space allotted here, we chose to highlight some of these connections through a review of the work of a prominent political theorist, Chantal Mouffe. We limit our presentation to three parts. First, we describe her position vis-à-vis the unfinished project of democracy. Second, we examine Mouffe's identity theory, with special attention to the implications it holds for progressive politics. And, finally, we attempt to extend her work by engaging it with the sociospatial dialectic.

Put synoptically, and in terms that signal the stakes involved, Mouffe's project can be viewed as an attempt to formulate a 'poststructuralist politics'. Rather than judge this to be an incommensurable combination, as others (for example, Wolin, 1992) sometimes do, Mouffe (1988; 1992a; 1993a)—together with Ernesto Laclau (1985; 1987)—deploys elements of poststructuralist thought to inform both theory and praxis along the lines of what they call 'radical and plural democracy'. The twin descriptors reveal not only Mouffe's intellectual debt to Marxism—she was a student of Althusser and author/editor of a major work on Gramsci (1979)—but also her break from an economistic 'determination in the last instance'. Laclau and Mouffe attempt to widen and deepen the socialist project by creating a theoretical and political space in which new social movements are articulated *alongside* those that have traditionally been concerned solely with class. What results from this formulation does not imply the abandonment of socialist principles, but rather a

critique of the presupposition that class-based politics provides the only route to their fulfillment.

Mouffe's understanding of 'democracy' helps to sharpen the reconciliation between radical and plural. She draws attention to two discursive pillars of democracy—liberty and equality—of which she writes "it is not possible to find more radical principles for organizing society" (Mouffe, 1992b, page 1). So rather than simply exposing liberal politics as bourgeois revisionism in an attempt to assert a teleology of class-based revolution, the Left must work to hold existing democracies accountable to these values. To do so requires deploying the 200-year-old discursive resources of that tradition to reinvigorate progressive politics. It also requires integrating an increasingly wider plurality of democratic subjects into the 'we' of democracy so as to broaden the scope of liberty and equality. In this way, the 'surplus of the social' (for example, various feminist, gay and lesbian, ecological, and racial and ethnic movements), will not detract from but strengthen the aims of democracy.

Prominent poststructuralist impulses in Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) include a rejection of the oppositional frames 'material' and 'discursive' and a viligant attention paid to context through deconstructive readings. But what they regard as the central feature of this terrain of thought is its anti-essentialism, particularly when it comes to theorizing an identity politics necessary to achieve radical and plural democracy. For them, the liberal and Marxist traditions presuppose a universal subject, grounded in either rationality or class, respectively. What they discern in both is an essentialism by which identity is conceived as hermetic, substantively structured, and temporally fixed, or, in other words, as *Identity*.

In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe highlight the diverse and often conflicting social constitution of subjects. We can summarize their position by arguing that identities are: *contingent*, in the sense that the construction of difference that defines them is part of an open and ongoing social process; *differentiated*, in the sense that subjects usually occupy more than one system of difference at a time; and *relational*, in the sense that the social powers constructing difference are never fully bound as a system within, but are constructed against and through an always present oppositional moment. To illustrate the latter point, Mouffe employs Jacques Derrida's concept of the 'constitutive outside', wherein vestiges of exclusion—the 'other'—are implicated in the construction of the system of social differentiation we call identity. Following this argument, any 'we' already carries within it elements of the opposition that enable its formulation. As a consequence, no identity can posit a purely self-referential standpoint which hoists itself outside of the social process of difference. Thus, all attempts to ground identity—indeed all Identities—are vulnerable to deconstruction.

The theoretical task that ensues from this position is to bypass two debilitating destinations. On the one hand, radical and plural democracy must avoid the pitfalls of an increasingly fragmented and ineffectual liberal pluralism. As Mouffe puts it:

> "we would have made no advance at all if we were simply going to replace the notion of a unified and homogeneous subject by a multiplicity and fragmentation in which each of the fragments retains a closed and fully constituted identity. As we have argued ..., such an essentialism of the 'elements' remains within the problematic that it tries to displace, because a clear-cut identity pre-supposes a *determinate system of relations* with all the fragments or 'elements'—and what is this but the reintroduction of the category of totality whose elimination was the meaning of the whole operation?" (1992b, pages 10 - 11; emphasis in original).

On the other hand, care must also be taken to avoid a hyper-postmodern position in which politics evaporates into a miasma of incommensurate identities. She continues:

> "a radical-democratic project has also to be distinguished from other forms of 'postmodern' politics which emphasize heterogeneity, dissemination and incommensurability and for which pluralism understood as the valorization of all differences should be total. Such an extreme form of pluralism, according to which all interests, all opinions, all differences are seen as legitimate, could never provide the framework for a political regime. For the recognition of plurality not to lead to a complete *indifferentiation and indifference*, criteria must exist to decide what is admissible and what is not" (Mouffe, 1992b, page 13; emphasis in original).

What enables the negotiation between these destinations? Or, in other words, how can we fashion a progressive political project from a contingent, differentiated, and relational understanding of identity? To answer these questions, Laclau and Mouffe draw upon Lacanian theory to develop the concept of 'nodal points', or temporary fixations around which identities—and politics—are sutured. Nodal points are not processes in themselves, but rather the result of hegemonic processes by which identities come to be conceived as hermetic and stabilized—in short, as natural. To actively rearticulate these points is thus to engage in a counterhegemonic project. And it is precisely from this view that Mouffe sees the possibility of fashioning new and progressive engagements among existing and unfolding nodal points. Importantly, these rearticulations can only be conceived through an anti-essentialist theory of identity, and yet this simultaneously provides the source of their potential strength. In short, the longer the "chain of equivalence" (Mouffe, 1993b) of new social movements, the greater the ability to force constitutional democracies to live up to their purported aims.

Three additional points follow from the above discussion. The first is that Laclau and Mouffe steadfastly reject a teleological destination for radical and plural democracy, because the ongoing social constitution of identities that contain their own opposition makes politics an always antagonistic process. Discarded as a result is a telos that envisions societies without conflict. Rather than look upon the inevitability of conflict as a failure to fulfil the promise of politics, Mouffe shifts this equation by arguing that progressive politics can be invigorated precisely by a lack of guarantees:

> "the idea of radical and plural democracy implies that we accept the possibility of contestation, that we accept that conflict is part of the vitality of a modern pluralistic democracy which, of course, means that it will always depend on the capacity of the radical democratic forces to maintain their hegemony" (Mouffe, 1993b, page 92).

The second point revolves around the viability of practicing radical and plural democracy in postcolonial contexts. Given the contextuality of identity, it should be clear that Mouffe would resist any attempt to force a cross-cultural application of a singular model of democracy. Instead, radical democracy must *itself* be plural, while nonetheless drawing on already existing elements of democracy that are evident in all non-Western societies (Mouffe, 1993b). Thus, the very understanding of democracy, as well as the practices necessary to enable it, are specific to different historical and cultural contexts. This leads one to the conclusion that different combinations of politics—that is, different nodal point rearticulations—will be better suited for enhancing democracy in some places and time periods than in others. Again, the challenge to radical politics is to recognize this contextuality and to seize upon it in the pursuit of counterhegemonic strategies.

A final issue—one which Mouffe has yet to develop (but see Keith and Pile, 1993; Massey, 1995)—concerns the implications of her project for space. As we see it, the stakes are both theoretical and practical. With regard to the former, it seems imperative that our understanding of 'social space' be disassembled so as to incorporate processes of identity construction. Although the sociospatial dialectic has largely been theorized within the same essentialist and modernist framework that Mouffe believes has governed Marxism, it does not follow that insights gained from it are necessarily limited by this contingent formulation. Rather, what remains to be articulated is a sociospatial dialectic that is both anti-essentialist and consistent with its primary claim, namely, that social space is produced by and mediative of social relations. And from this arises a parallel challenge to identity theory: to understand that the social identities produced through social relations are *always* constructed in and through social space. What is required, therefore, is an interrogation of the relationships between the production of space and the construction of identity.

As for politics, the above suggests that space, like identity, is contingent, differentiated, and relational, and that it thus makes little sense to conceive of any space as stabilized, fixed, and therefore outside of the possibility of counterhegemony. In this view, all space-identity formations are imbued with oppositional potential. And thus a practical task for politics is to activate this potential through denaturalization, exposure, and contestation so as to achieve new appropriations and articulations of space and identity.

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The cluster of essays which open this issue of *Society and Space* has its origins in the 1994 San Francisco meeting of the Association of American Geographers. There we invited noted political theorist Chantal Mouffe to speak in a plenary session sponsored by the Political, Socialist, and Urban Specialty Groups of the AAG. Following her paper, which was written specifically for the conference, we approached the editors with the proposition of publishing both her remarks and the reactions of three commentators—Wolfgang Natter, Doreen Massey, and J K Gibson-Graham. Given this genealogy, the collection retains many of the impulses that typically characterize oral presentations, namely, brevity, a less formal style, and the absence of copious referencing.

The challenges that Mouffe's work poses—not only for identity theory, but also for democracy—are taken up in different ways in the comments that follow her essay. By analyzing hegemony, reason, and time/space as contingent articulations, Wolfgang Natter aims to further Mouffe's project of radical and plural democracy. Doreen Massey directs attention to the spatiality of identity with the aim of reconstructing a politics of place whose purpose is the implementation of actually existing radical democracies. The project of rearticulating economic identities is developed by J K Gibson-Graham, who project anti-essentialist theory into the larger discursive terrain of capitalism. Taken together, the essays are offered as an invitation to explore Mouffe's work and to think through some of its implications.

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