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| Institution: University of Westminster |
| Unit of Assessment: UoA 21; Politics and International Studies |
| Title of case study: Agonism and politics: theory meets practice |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Chantal Mouffe's insights on agonistic democracy have had significant impact on political discourse, policy and political strategy, most obviously as an intellectual resource for the approach to governing instigated by the Argentinian President, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, often referred to as the <i>National and Popular Model of Democracy</i>. The actions of key actors in the governing regime have been influenced by reading her work and interacting directly with Mouffe. This is the subject of heated discussions in news media of all political persuasions. Mouffe's analysis of right-wing populism has also affected the political position and strategy of politicians in Belgium, informing debates on how to resist the growth of extreme right-wing parties. Beyond mainstream politics, she has shaped the work of artists: for example, through her invited residency at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Chantal Mouffe is one the key intellectual figures in the development of the agonistic conception of democracy. Her insights were formulated through a series of books and essays during the period that she worked at the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) at the University of Westminster, a research centre that is internationally recognised for its work on contemporary democratic theory. The intellectual culture of CSD has played a significant role in the development and dissemination of Mouffe's ideas, in particular her interactions with significant political theorists such as John Keane who established CSD and the hosting of major international theorists for the prestigious <i>CSD Encounters</i>, such as Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty and Judith Butler. This tradition of critical and politically-engaged democratic theory continues to be central to the mission of CSD, with recent appointments such as Paulina Tambakaki (who completed her PhD under the supervision of Mouffe), and Ricardo Blaug (see REF 3a for examples of impact activity). Chantal Mouffe continues to contribute to the intellectual life of CSD as an Emeritus Professor.</p> <p>Mouffe's most prominent publications include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Return of the Political</i> (Verso, 1993): 1843 citations on Google Scholar (as of 4 October 2013); 'Evocative and challenging' (<i>Radical Philosophy</i>); 'An indispensable read' (<i>Harvard Educational Review</i>). • <i>The Democratic Paradox</i> (Verso, 2000): 1991 citations; 'Important and timely' (<i>Political Theory</i>) • <i>On the Political</i> (Routledge, 2005): 1506 citations. 'Mouffe represents a position that every serious student of contemporary political thought must acknowledge' (<i>The Philosophers' Magazine</i>) • And most recently <i>Agonistics</i> (Verso, 2013) <p>In these works – which have been translated into Spanish as well as many other languages – Mouffe develops the agonistic model of democracy as an alternative to the two currently dominant approaches: the aggregative and the deliberative. Mouffe's research seeks to move pluralist conflict from 'antagonism' (a struggle between enemies) to 'agonism' (a struggle between adversaries). For Mouffe, the construction of an 'us' and a 'them' is constitutive of politics: the crucial issue for democracy is how to establish this us/them distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of pluralism. A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation of democratic political positions. If this is missing there is always the danger that democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications.</p> |

In developing the practical political implications of this agonistic approach, Mouffe has shown the negative consequences for democratic politics of attempts to assert that the partisan view of politics had become obsolete and that the left/right distinction should be (or has been) overcome. If conflicts cannot take an agonistic form, they are more likely to emerge in an antagonistic manner that represents a danger to the very survival of liberal-democratic societies. For Mouffe, the lack of a real difference between the politics of centre-right and centre-left parties is at the origin of the growing success of right-wing populist parties.

Chantal Mouffe's work has itself been the subject of two book length treatments, most recently the edited collection *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy and the Political* (edited by James Martin, Routledge, 2013).

3. References to the research

Mouffe, C. (1993) *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2005) *On the Political*, London: Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2013) *Agonistics*, London: Verso.

Tambakaki, P. (2010) *Human Rights or Citizenship*, Birkbeck University Press.

Blaug, R. (2010) *How Power Corrupts*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

4. Details of the impact

Chantal Mouffe's ideas on agonistic democracy have had an impact most profoundly on the governing strategy of the current Argentinian president and the surrounding public debate, but also within Belgium where she has affected both the political response to far-right parties and the work of the artistic community.

The work of Chantal Mouffe (together with Ernesto Laclau) is widely credited by both political actors and the media within Argentina as being one of the main intellectual resources for what has been termed the *National and Popular Model of Democracy* (NPMD) that has dominated Argentinian politics over the last decade. Both the current president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (elected December 2007; re-elected 2011) and the previous incumbent Nestor Kirchner (20003-2007) have publicly recognised that they have read and been influenced by Mouffe and many journalists report on her frequent visits to the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace in Buenos Aires (1).

An article in *Clarín* (the largest newspaper in Argentina; centre-right; and recognised as a leading element in the opposition to Kirchner) states that 'Chantal Mouffe is Cristina's [Kirchner] favourite intellectual... Mouffe has been sustaining a theory to which the President adheres' (2). Similarly, the more conservative newspaper *La Nación* (second largest circulation; anti-Kirchner) emphasizes that 'the Kirchners are admirers' (3). Across newspapers of varying political perspective, there is recognition of the particular importance of the book *On the Political: Página/12* (main progressive left newspaper) states that it is 'a book that the President has well read' (4). *La Nación* goes even further: '*On the Political* altered Kirchner's life as a politician forever, according to what close acquaintances of the President told *La Nación*' (5).

Mouffe's particular influence, highlighted by opponents and supporters, relates to the highly contested political strategies and policies of the Kirchner presidency in the field of human rights, social protection and civil liberties. Commentators draw a direct relationship between Mouffe's work on agonistic democracy and the way in which the Kirchners constructed an idea of the *pueblo*

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in active opposition to 'the elite', supporters of neoliberalism and/or the 'old politics' in Argentina. *Página/12* goes as far as to directly quote a passage from *On the Political* to prove its point (4). Such a confrontational strategy can be witnessed across a range of legislative and policy issues that goes back to 2003 with the legislation annulling the amnesty laws (from 1983) that had benefitted members of the military government of the last dictatorship. In the 2008-13 period, the government has engaged in a number of confrontational strategies that are explicitly linked to NPMD and thus influenced by Mouffe's political philosophy, including:

- the attempted reform in the export taxes of agricultural products implemented by Presidential Decree in the beginning of 2008 (later narrowly revoked by the Senate). The government built a strong alliance of forces and popular mobilizations against agricultural producers that were presented as associated with the elites and defenders of a system that benefitted only a few. The lively debate in Parliament was followed on public screens in the main cities.
- the reform of the National Broadcasting Law in 2009 followed a similar logic with the government setting itself in direct opposition with Media Grupo Clarín that controlled large proportions of the radio, TV and newspapers in Argentina. The strategy included massive mobilisations, public consultations across the country and, again, public viewings of the parliamentary debates.
- the reform of the Civil Code to allow same-sex marriages in 2010, which in this case led to direct confrontation with the Catholic Church, generated extremely high levels of political mobilization, particularly amongst the young.

In explaining the political strategy of the NPMD, commentators are quick to make the link with Mouffe's ideas: 'Far from the discourse that insists on the need to achieve a great national consensus – without establishing what for – Kirchnerism prefers to explore the agitated waters of antagonism, and the results are evident' (5). A second article in *La Nación* similarly explaining how Mouffe's ideas have been influential on Kirchner's political strategy: 'the existence of antagonism is fundamental, the demarcation of an 'us' and 'them as a necessary condition for the exercise of democratic rights... permanent conflict enables the constitution of an hegemonic power that breaks with the status quo and breaks the power of deadlock' (6).

Beyond the direct influence on the presidency, Mouffe's ideas are widely publicized in Argentina: an interview with *Página/12* (7) in which Mouffe discusses the way in which Europe can learn from the politics of Latin America was then picked up a few weeks later in an article by *La Nación* (8). The Argentinian Ambassador to the United Kingdom has provided personal testimony as to the impact of Mouffe's work on both the President and contemporary Argentinian political culture more generally and is willing to speak to the REF panel to confirm this account (1).

The impact of Mouffe's work is not only in Latin America, but also in her native Belgium. Here political actors have again referred to the way that her work on agonism has shaped their response to the rise of the extremist right. She has contributed to the public debate on the far right through radio (Radio Klara) and magazine (*Knack* and *Le Vif*) interviews and *De Standaard* ran an article 'Viva Chantal' in November 2011 (9). Her influence is not simply on political debate, but also contemporary cultural activities. Mouffe has frequently given talks on the relationship between agonistic democracy and the arts (often at museums and art galleries), culminating in 2012 with an invited month-long residency in the annual *Kunstenfestivaldesarts* in Brussels where she interacted with artists (in particular a dance company that drew inspiration from her work on agonism) and gave a keynote public lecture (10).

While critics often contend that contemporary democratic theory is divorced from political practice, Mouffe has clearly demonstrated its relevance to contemporary political life.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Impact case study (REF3b)

N.B. Titles of Argentinian and Belgian newspaper articles have been translated into English

- (1) The Argentinian Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary can corroborate the extent to which Chantal Mouffe's work on agonistic democracy has influenced the political thought and strategy of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, President of Argentina and the extent to which this has been a subject of debate in the Argentinian media. Contact details are provided in the 'Corroborative Individuals' document that accompanies this submission.
- (2) 'Power and Conflict'. September 5th, 2010. Ricardo Kirschbaum (Newspaper Editorial) *Clarín* http://www.clarin.com/opinion/conflicto-poder_0_329967101.html?print=1
- (3) 'Journey to the Kirchners' theoretical heart'. September 27th 2010. *La Nación* <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1308735-viaje-al-corazon-teorico-de-los-kirchner>
- (4) 'Youth, divine treasure'. March 17th 2012. Fernando Cibeira. *Página/12* <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-189827-2012-03-17.html>
- (5) 'A philosopher who writes the script for the K power'. December 16th, 2012. Mariano Obarrio. *La Nación* <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1537126-un-filosofo-que-escribe-el-guion-del-poder-k>
- (6) 'Going for everything'. August 25th 2012. Newspaper Editorial. *La Nación* <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1502306-ir-por-todo>
- (7) 'Europe should *Latin Americanise*'. October 21st, 2012. Javier Lorca - Interview with Chantal Mouffe. *Página/12* <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/elpais/1-206036-2012-10-21.html>
- (8) 'A sophisticated legitimisation for polemic democracies'. November 28th, 2012. Vicente Palermo. *La Nación* <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1531049-una-sofisticada-legitimacion-para-democracias-polemicas>
- (9) 'Viva Chantal' by Joel de Ceulaer in the daily 'De standaard'. 12 November 2011. <http://www.standaard.be/cnt/j33i775l>. Interviews: Jean-Pierre Rondas for Radio Klara, 1 February 2009; in the political weekly magazine 'Knack' (October 2009, No 41) <http://www.knack.be/nieuws/wetenschap/in-een-democratie-heb-je-altijd-populisme/article-1194688564435.htm>; in the political weekly magazine 'Le Vif' (December 2009, No 51) <http://www.levif.be/info/inscription/?layout=ThemisRegistration&method=restricted&sCode=LV&rCode=CLUB&returnUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.levif.be%2Finfo%2Fmagazine%2Farticles%2Fprintarticle-2430340.htm>
- (10) <http://vimeo.com/10375165>;
<http://www.passaporta.be/index.php?q=passaporta/en/archives/event/747/language/en>