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Chantal Mouffe

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Citizenship and Political Identity

CHANTAL MOUFFE

It is through the question of *political* identity that I have decided to approach the theme of this conference on "identity." More precisely, I intend to ask the following question: "What kind of political identity should a project of 'radical and plural democracy' aim at constructing?" and I am going to argue that such a project requires the creation of new political identities in terms of radical democratic "citizens."

I want to make clear at the outset that my reflections will be inscribed within an antiessentialist theoretical framework according to which the social agent is constituted by an ensemble of subject positions that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences. The social agent is constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement. The "identity" of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification. This plurality does not, however, involve the coexistence, one by one, of a plurality of subject positions, but the constant subversion and overdetermination of one by the others that makes possible the generation of totalizing effects within a field characterized by open and determinate frontiers. There is thus a double movement. On the one hand, there is a movement of decentering that prevents the fixing of a set of positions around a preconstituted point; on the other hand, and as a result of this essential nonfixity, there is an opposite movement: the institution of nodal points, partial fixations that limit the flux of the signified under the signifier. But this dialectical movement is possible only because fixity is not given beforehand, because no center of subjectivity precedes the subject's identifications. For that reason we have to conceive the history of the subject as the history of his or her identifications, and there is no concealed identity to be rescued beyond the latter.

After having specified those theoretical concerns that are necessary to grasp the nature of my reasoning, I will now proceed with my argument about citizenship. My main thesis is that we need a new conception of the citizen that

is different from both the republican/communitarian and the liberal ones, which are at the moment the only existing alternatives. I believe that the terms of the debate today are far too restricted and that such a situation is at the origin of many false dilemmas and political misunderstandings.

On one side we have those who defend a communitarian view of politics and citizenship that privileges a type of community constituted by shared moral values and organized around the idea of "the common good." On the other side is the liberal view, which affirms that there is no common good and that each individual should be able to define her own good and realize it in her own way. The communitarians want to revive the civic republican conception of citizenship as the key identity that overrides all others, and their approach runs the risk of sacrificing the rights of the individual. For the liberals, on the contrary, our identity as citizens—which is restricted to a legal status and to the possession of a set of rights that we hold against the state—is only one among many others and does not play any privileged role. Politics for them is only the terrain where different groups compete for the promotion of their specific private interests, and the very idea of the political community is thus put into question. In this case it is the citizen that is sacrificed to the individual.

Many communitarian critiques have rightly pointed to the disintegration of social bonds and the growing phenomenon of anomie that have accompanied the dominance of the liberal view. But while it is indeed true that the liberal view has had many negative effects for modern democratic politics and that the current disaffection with political life in Western democracies is one of its products, we cannot accept the solution put forward by the communitarians, for their attempt to recreate a type of *gemeinschaft* community cemented by a substantive idea of the common good is clearly premodern and incompatible with the pluralism that is constitutive of modern democracy. If it is necessary to criticize the shortcomings of liberalism, one should also recognize its crucial contribution to the emergence of a modern conception of democracy. It is therefore important to acknowledge the specificity of modern democracy and the central role played in it by pluralism. By this I mean the recognition of individual freedom, that freedom which John Stuart Mill defends in his essay "On Liberty" and which he defines as the possibility for every individual to pursue happiness as he sees fit, to set his own goals and to attempt to achieve them in his own way. Pluralism is therefore linked to the abandonment of a substantive and unique vision of the common good and of the eudaemonia that is constitutive of modernity. It is at the center of the vision of the world that might be termed "political liberalism," and it is therefore important to understand that what characterizes modern democracy as a new political form of society is the articulation between political liberalism and democracy.

I think that the problem that we are facing can be formulated in this way: How are we to conceive the political community under modern democratic conditions? Or also: How are we to conceptualize our identities as individuals

and as citizens in a way that does not sacrifice one to the other? 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. As against conceptions that stress commonality at the expense of plurality and respect of differences or that deny any form of commonality in the name of plurality and difference, what we need is to envisage a form of commonality that respects diversity and makes room for different forms of individuality. I believe that the crux of the problem lies in the way we conceptualize the political community and the way in which we belong to the political community, i.e., citizenship. In the brief time allowed to me, I can only indicate the main features of the solution to that problem, as I see it.

First, the political community should be conceived as a discursive surface and not as an empirical referent. Politics is about the constitution of the political community, not something that takes place inside the political community. The political community, as a surface of inscription of a multiplicity of demands where a "we" is constituted, requires the correlative idea of the common good, but a common good conceived as a vanishing point, something to which we must constantly refer but that can never be reached. In such a view the common good functions, on the one hand, as a "social imaginary": that is, the very impossibility of achieving full representation gives to it the role of a horizon that is the condition of possibility of any representation within the space that it delimits. On the other hand, the idea of the common good specifies what we can call, following Wittgenstein, a "grammar of conduct" that coincides with the allegiance to the constitutive ethico-political principles of modern democracy: liberty and equality for all. Yet, since those principles are open to many competing interpretations, one has to acknowledge that a fully inclusive political community can never be realized. There will always be a "constitutive outside," an exterior to the community that is the very condition of its existence. It is crucial to recognize that, since to construct a "we" it is necessary to distinguish it from a "them," and since all forms of consensus are based on acts of exclusion, the condition of possibility of the political community is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its full realization.

Second, with respect to citizenship, we find that the previous considerations have important implications for the understanding of our identity as citizens. The perspective that I am proposing envisages citizenship as a form of political identity that is created through identification with the political principles of modern pluralist democracy, i.e., the assertion of liberty and equality for all. By that I mean allegiance to a set of rules and practices that construe a specific language game, the language of modern democratic citizenship. A citizen is not, in this perspective, as in liberalism, someone who is the passive recipient of rights and who enjoys the protection of the law. It is a common political identity of persons who might be engaged in many different communities and who have

differing conceptions of the good, but who accept submission to certain authoritative rules of conduct. Those rules are not instruments for achieving a common purpose—since the idea of a substantive common good has been discarded—but conditions that individuals must observe in choosing and pursuing purposes of their own. I consider that the reflections on civil association developed by Michael Oakeshott in *On Human Conduct* are very pertinent here because they can help us formulate the kind of bond that should exist among citizens in a way that reconciles freedom with authority. For Oakeshott, the participants in a civil association or *societas* are linked by the authority of the conditions specifying their common or “public” concern. These consist in a manifold of rules or rulelike prescriptions that he calls “*res publica*” and that specify not performances but conditions to be subscribed to in choosing performances. According to such a view, what is required to belong to a political community is the acceptance of specific language of civil intercourse, the *res publica*. The identification with those rules creates a common political identity among persons otherwise engaged in many different enterprises and communities. This modern form of political community is held together not by a substantive idea of the common good but by a common bond, a public concern. It is therefore a community without a definite shape and in continuous reenactment.

If we try to put together Oakeshott’s views with what I said earlier concerning the principles of modern democracy as a new regime, we can say that in a liberal democratic regime, the *res publica* is constituted by the political principles of such a regime: equality and liberty for all. If we put such a content in Oakeshott’s notion of the *res publica*, we can affirm that the conditions to be subscribed to and taken into account in the process of acting as citizens are to be understood as the exigency of treating the others as free and equal persons. It is evident, however, that this can be interpreted in many different ways and can lead to competing forms of identification. For instance, a radical democratic interpretation will emphasize the numerous social relations where relations of domination exist and must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply. Therefore citizenship as a form of political identity cannot be neutral but will present a variety of modes according to the competing interpretations of the *res publica* that construe that identity and the type of articulation that is established among different subject positions of the agent. The creation of political identities as radical democratic citizens, for instance, depends on a collective form of identification among the democratic demands found in a variety of movements: those of women, workers, blacks, gays, the ecological, as well as against other forms of subordination. This is a conception of citizenship that, through a common identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and quality, aims at constructing a “we,” a chain of equivalence among their demands so as to articulate them through the principle of democratic *equivalence*. It must be stressed that such a

relation of *equivalence* does not eliminate *difference*—for that would be simple identity. It is only insofar as democratic differences are opposed to forces or discourses that negate all of them that these differences can be substituted for each other. That is, the “we” of the radical democratic forces is created by the delimitation of a frontier, the designation of a “them”; it is not a homogeneous “we,” predicated on the identity of its components. Through the principle of equivalence, a type of commonality is created that does not erase plurality and differences and that respects diverse forms of individuality.

Such a view of citizenship is clearly different both from the liberal and the communitarian ones. It is not one identity among others, as it is in liberalism, nor is it the dominant identity that overrides all others, as it is in civic republicanism. It 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. In the case of a radical democratic citizen, such an approach allows us to visualize how a concern with equality and liberty should inform her actions in all areas of social life. No sphere is immune from those concerns, and relations of domination can be challenged everywhere. The distinction between private and public is maintained as is the distinction between individual and citizen, but these do not correspond to discrete spheres; every situation is an encounter between private and public because every enterprise is private while never immune from the public conditions prescribed by the principles of citizenship. Wants, choices, and decisions are private because they are the responsibility of each individual, but performances are public because they have to subscribe to the conditions specified by citizenship. The identities qua individual and qua citizen are preserved, and none is sacrificed to the other; they coexist in a permanent tension that can never be reconciled. But this is precisely the tension between liberty and equality, which is constitutive of modern pluralist democracy and whose resolution would lead to its destruction. Between the logic of complete equivalence and the logic of pure difference, the experience of a radical and plural democracy should therefore consist in the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics along with the necessity of their articulation.