Political Education in Context: The Promise of More Radical Agonism in 2019

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INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to read my 2009 argument for an agonistic approach to political education discussed with such care and from a genuine concern for robust political education. I appreciate that Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Dan Mamlok propose a modification to, and not a dismissal of, my sketch of agonistically oriented political education. In my response, I want to join them in elaborating what agonistically oriented political education could look like in relation to political disagreements and social movements today, but, different from them, I will reaffirm the significance of a more radical understanding of agonistic contestation.

First, I will highlight the significance of the context of my 2009 article, and of Mouffe's work from the early 2000s on which my arguments rest. Then, I will briefly discuss significant changes of the past decade. Third, I will touch on the conceptual distinction between associative and dissociative agonism. Finally, drawing examples from another youth-led social movement, I will argue that the core elements of Mouffe's conception of agonistic politics, namely her insistence on chains of equivalence that contest fundamental divisions in the social order, has taken on a new relevance in global politics today.

POLITICS IN CONTEXT

When Knight-Abowitz and Mamlok write that my argument for educating adversaries is controversial "in an era of visceral divisiveness and advancing signs of fascism in nations like the US, Brazil, and Hungary," they rightly identify the significance of the political moment. The political moment

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in which we live today—acknowledging that "we" live in varying political contexts whose specificity must further inflect the argument—is different from the one in which my argument was written, and from the one about which Mouffe wrote in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In her recent book, *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe is explicit about the significance of context, and details how different "political conjunctures" gave rise to her earlier work.[1] Mouffe's *On the Political*, which is central to the argument in my 2009 article, was a response to "a technocratic form of politics according to which politics was not a partisan confrontation but the neutral management of public affairs."[2] Mouffe witnessed a fading of left/right distinctions, especially in the UK's "Third Way" politics; in the contexts I was most familiar with, Canada and The Netherlands, I saw a similar disappearance of left/right political conflict and a relative political apathy.

Today we are seeing what Mouffe calls a "'populist moment,' … an expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony."[3] After the financial crisis of 2008 and the global recession and austerity measures that followed in various countries, the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011-12, as well as large protests in Greece, Spain, France, and the UK, were a clear sign that income and wealth inequality had the power, once again, to galvanize opposition to a hegemonic order. "Those protests were the signal of a political awakening after years of relative apathy. However, the refusal of those horizontalist movements to engage with the political institutions limited their impact."[4] One of the key questions in the current "populist moment" is:

> how "the people" is going to be constructed. There are many ways in which this can be done. And not all populist constructions of the political frontier have egalitarian objectives, even when the rejection of the existing system is made in the name of giving power back to the people.[5]

The "advancing signs of fascism in nations like the US, Brazil, and Hungary" to which Knight-Abowitz and Mamlok refer are precisely the non-egalitarian

populisms against which Mouffe cautions. In renewing her call for a radicalized agonism, then, Mouffe is calling for an agonistic politics that responds to the populist moment but that aims squarely for egalitarian (not nationalistic or other identitarian) ends, and that involves the articulation of various demands for equality.

#NEVERAGAINMSD AND #FRIDAYSFORFUTURE

Knight-Abowitz and Mamlok focus their discussion on the activism of #NeverAgainMSD, which has, indeed, been inspirational. In particular, Emma Gonzalez's mobilization of silent anger in her March 2018 speech at the March for Our Lives was a powerful political moment.[6] However, for all the courage and indignation in #NeverAgainMSD, and the articulation of the issue of gun control with the larger issue of low voter turn-round and barriers to voter registration, #NeverAgainMSD is not, in my view, a great example of agonistic politics.[7] While it might be perceived as "radical" in the US, #NeverAgainMSD effectively called for policy reform, taking only the sharpest edges off US gun laws.

This is not to say that the gun control laws that were implemented were not an improvement; they certainly were. They just did not go far enough, and are of a different order of magnitude than the more fundamental change to the political order that Mouffe has in mind when she calls for "the creation of a new hegemony."[8] I want to turn, then, to a different youth-led social movement that, I believe, illustrates the promise of more radical agonistic politics in 2019.

The #FridaysForFuture movement has seen tens of thousands of school-age youth around the world take to the streets to protest government' inaction in the face of climate change. The movement was inspired by Swedish teenager, Greta Thunberg, who started her individual "School Strike for Climate" in August 2018; the protests have spread across and beyond Europe, with a large international day of action planned for March 15, 2019.[9]

Thunberg, who has remained a leader and spokesperson for the movement, has explicitly positioned the demands as populist, as they revolve around a

new construction of "the people." For instance, Thunberg ended her December 2018 speech at the UN COP24 climate talks in Poland, with the words, "We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people."[10] I agree with Mouffe that "to face the challenge of the ecological crisis[,] a radical democratic project needs to articulate the ecological and social questions,"[11] and Thunberg has done precisely that. In the COP24 speech, she said:

> Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few.[12]

Thunberg has also described the inadequacy of reformist approaches that shy away from activism and rely on more gradual change via democratic elections:

> Some say we should not engage in activism. Instead we should leave everything to our politicians and just vote for a change instead. But what do we do when there is no political will? What do we do when the politics needed are nowhere in sight?[13]

Thunberg's work has associative aspects, as she is speaking to and engaging with established political institutions; however, she is doing so in agonistic, uncompromising, and dissociative terms.

ASSOCIATION, DISSOCIATION, AND COLLECTIVITY

While Knight-Abowitz and Mamlok follow Robert W. Glover in distinguishing between different "types" of agonism, I find Oliver Marchart's analysis (to which Mouffe refers) more helpful.[14] Marchart writes that he sees "two schools of thought or paradigms within political theory," whose difference lies in which *moment* of political action they emphasize. Political theorists who emphasize "the associative moment of political action" focus on "the rationality

of a polity," whereas those who emphasize "the dissociative moment" focus on "the strategic and conflictual struggles of politics."[15] Marchart further explains that "all politics is collective," and what can be characterized as associative or dissociative is "the way in which the collective is established."[16] For agonistic political activists who emphasize the dissociative moment, the collective is established by linking political demands in relation to a common enemy or external adversary.[17] When Knight-Abowitz and Mamlok suggest that the associative mode of agonism is preferable because new collectivities, lines of communication, or "new political relations" need to be established, they identify features that are not specific to associative agonism.

MORE RADICAL AGONISM IN POLITICAL EDUCATION

For moderate policy reform, more pragmatic and compromise-oriented communication is effective, but Mouffe is not arguing for moderate policy reform; she is arguing for "the establishment of a new hegemonic formation" and I agree this is where we need to set our sights.[18] For political education, then, it matters that we teach, and enable young people to learn, about the creation of political frontiers and chains of equivalence in the articulation of social movements. However, reformist and agonistic politics are not mutually exclusive; it may be the case, for instance, that those who engage in activism for specific policy issues, such as gun law reform, later see potential points of articulation with other political demands and contribute to the creation of an agonistic political frontier. I recognize that not all aspects of agonistic political education are appropriate for school curriculum. Agonistic political education, then, must include out-of-school contexts in which we provide educational and political support for youth initiatives and demands.

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1 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018).
2 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Verso, 2005); Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 4.
3 Ibid., 12.

4 Ibid., 19.
5 Ibid., 23.
6 Dakin Andone, "Emma Gonzalez Stood on Stage for 6 Minutes - The Length of the Parkland Gunman's Shooting Spree," *CNN*, March 2, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/24/us/march-for-our-lives-emma-gonzalez/index.html.
7 See also Claudia Ruitenberg, "Learning to be Difficult: Civic Education and Intransigent Indignation," *On Education* 1, no. 1 (2018), https://www.oneducation.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/10.17899_on_ed.2018.1.5.pdf.
8 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 24.
9 "Events List," #*FridaysForFuture*, https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/events/list. Thunberg herself was inspired by the March for our Lives organized by the MSD survivors.
10 Greta Thunberg, speech to UN COP 24 Climate Summit, in John Sutter and Lawrence Davidson, "Teen Tells Climate Negotiators They Aren't Mature Enough," *CNN*, December 17, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/16/world/greta-thunberg-cop24/.
11 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 52.
12 Ibid.
13 Greta Thunberg, "'Our House Is on Fire': Greta Thunberg, 16, Urges Leaders to Act on Climate," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/25/our-house-is-on-fire-greta-thunberg16-urges-leaders-to-act-on-climate.
14 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 87.
15 Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Differences in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, and Laclau* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 38.
16 Ibid., 40.
17 Ibid., 41.
18 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 79.