

## **Multipolarity or cosmopolitanism?**

A critique of Mouffe from a hegemony-theoretical perspective

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# *Multipolarity or cosmopolitanism? A critique of Mouffe from a hegemony-theoretical perspective.*

Paper for panel **Hegemonic Spaces in a Post-Western World**  
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*Abstract:* In a series of publications Chantal Mouffe (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2009, 2013) has criticized cosmopolitanism for its lack of conceptualization of power, conflict and struggle, in short of politics. Even though this critique is largely well placed, the conclusions drawn from the analysis by Mouffe are flawed. As she puts it, if a cosmopolitan democracy “was ever realized, it could only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that would have been able to impose its conception of the world on the entire planet and which, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its ‘rational’ leadership”. Mouffe, *On the Political* pp. 106–7. I argue that Mouffe paradoxically seems to be using a traditional 'realist' conceptualization of hegemony, signifying simply domination. Against this I argue that a post-structuralist understanding of hegemony – as developed by herself and Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), precisely allows us to see the distance between universal values, such as freedom and equality for all, and their actual interpretation and use. The fact that the West are using democracy and human rights as legitimating devices for non-democratic goals, should not make us abandon the realization of these values on the global scale as the political goal.

# ***Multipolarity or cosmopolitanism? A critique of Mouffe from a hegemony-theoretical perspective.***

Allan Dreyer Hansen

## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this paper is to argue in favour of a post-structuralist or rather post-foundationalist understanding of hegemony and universals. My main argument is that Mouffe – in her later writings on the international realm – fails to do so to a sufficient degree regarding the notion of hegemony and in her understanding of 'values' and human rights. I want to argue that we – i.e. radical democrats – must maintain equality and liberty for all as the most basic – and indeed universal, as Mouffe herself used to put it – values. The fact that they are in tension, never will find their final form and will presumably always be questioned from non-democratic positions should neither lead us to abandon, nor (even) to 'culturalize' them; i.e. as Mouffe has done lately, arguing they are suited only for the 'West'. Most of Mouffe analysis takes human rights as its target, which she claims are tied intrinsically to the 'West'. I want to make two suggestions in this paper.

First, any alternative to human rights, e.g. Panikkar's 'human dignity' must stand the test of the universal principles of equality and liberty for all, which is something I believe Mouffe so far has failed to do. (And even though it is imaginable in principle that alternatives to human rights may show themselves, I for one find it difficult to imagine – but of course the possibility must be kept open.).

Second, my arguments are directed towards *basic* normative principles, which means that it might well be the case that here and now, in our present circumstances, something like multipolarity – i.e. regional blocks with the establishment of negotiation channels for solving their conflicts – is indeed

the most promising way of organising international relations. The absence of actual global democratic institutions might well lead to the conclusion that any action carried out *as if* we were already in a cosmopolitan order (I'm of course thinking primarily of interventions but also e.g. sanctions carried out because of accusations of violation of human rights) necessarily illegitimatises actions, carried out by the 'West' in the name of the globe, or 'humanity' as such'). My point is just, that such a conclusion will be a historical, strategic one, based on an evaluation of how to further the universal values of equality and liberty for all – rather than arguing that they (or at least their manifestation in human rights) are essentially Western and that other cultures should opt for something else. However, this means that something like a cosmopolitical world order remains the horizon for (radical) democratic politics in the international sphere. As I end up concluding – you cannot not be a communitarian.

### **Is Mouffe a realist? A post-structuralist notion of hegemony.**

Thaler (2010) has argued that Mouffe holds a 'realist' position. This is due to her use of *multipolarity*, as an alternative to cosmopolitanism. This however is not completely correct. Mouffe's use of multipolarity is not descriptive one, but rather normatively prescriptive. She inherits it from Carl Schmitt, for whom multipolarity – if an unlikely outcome of the end of the cold war – was to be preferred over unipolarity. For Schmitt, since our world is a *pluriverse*,<sup>1</sup> not a universe, multipolarity was best suited to avoid violent conflicts in the international realm. Mouffe adopts the notion of a pluriverse, since it underlines the impossibility of reaching the universalism searched for by cosmopolitans and liberals.

It is however in her use of the notion of hegemony, one can trace a certain (and surprising) 'realism' in Mouffe's latest writings. To realism, and in the IR tradition in general, hegemony signifies little

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<sup>1</sup> One might consider whether something like a “*pluriversalisation*” could be a way of incorporating Schmitt's points in a post-foundationalist frame articulation both necessity *and impossibility*

more than simple domination, obtained by the strongest power. Now, in order to make my argument, I shall first have to introduce the post-structuralist re-articulation of the notion of hegemony. Post-structuralism (or better, post-foundationalism) starts from the premise that universality is unobtainable. Any identity is by definition a particular identity, defined in its particularity by its differences to other particular identities. True universality as e.g. a universal 'human-ness' constituting the human, is forever going to recede us. No matter what particular content is used to specify the universal instance, is precisely going to be particular. However, as Laclau aptly puts it, the impossibility of universality doesn't take away the need for it. So rather than concluding that we are left with only particularities, what we do have, is an forever on-going game of particular identities trying to occupy the place of the universal (and this is an absolutely unavoidable consequence of the absence of foundations). Now a particular identity which has been able to – for a period – represent itself as a universal 'being more than it is' is precisely a hegemonic identity. Speaking on behalf of a totality is (an attempt of) gaining hegemony. However, and this is where power and politics enters the equation, any hegemonisation always involves the repression of alternatives, also seeking to represent the absent universal. This repression is political.

In her earlier writings Mouffe made a (strong) point out of this. First she underlined how radical, leftist politics was based on the same values as liberalism, namely liberty and equality for all. The fact that these values has been hegemonised by liberalism, does not in it self make them illegitimate. As she stated, one cannot imagine more radical – and universal – values than these. Therefore the task for the radical democratic left was not to look for other values, but to fight for their rearticulation i.e. their re-hegemonisation by the left (Laclau and mouffe, 1985, Mouffe, 1989). The important point is that *this does not in it self question their legitimacy*. It is the very values of *liberty and equality for all* which can be mobilised to criticise all those places where they are not realised.

In her recent writings, however, hegemony is used simply as domination, as the imposition of the West of its interests and values. This leads to two problems in her writings. First, it leads her to identify the universal values with the West, in a way that rather than keeping them open (to hegemonic struggles over their articulations) essentialises them and ties them necessarily to the particular identity, the “West”. Secondly, if the actions carried out by the West in the name of these values are deemed illegitimate – which they very often are – the reason is that other parts of the world 'has other values'. This seems to lead to a general 'culturalisation' of her argument, one that resembles cultural conservatism, as e.g. Huntington's clash of civilisations.

Perhaps this return to a realist notion of hegemony is the implicit reason why Mouffe does not argue in terms of liberty and equality for all. When she criticises cosmopolitanism, her target is primarily human rights, which she claims are tied to the West, due to their individualism and apparent universal moralistic foundations. This leaves the possibility open that Mouffe – implicitly – still is arguing in favour of the universal values of liberty and equality for all, and claims that human rights as – obviously – but *a* specific interpretation of these values can and should be replaced by something else, elsewhere in the world. It is imaginable in principle that alternatives to human rights may show themselves, however, I for one find it difficult to imagine. But of course the possibility must be kept open. However that would imply that the alternatives to human rights – dignity of the person and, perhaps 'harmony', as we shall see – stood the test of liberty and equality for all. A test that Mouffe nowhere explicitly carries out.

Before moving on to the more specific arguments, it should be noted that one of Mouffe's strongest objections to cosmopolitanism, and the universal application of human rights, is that it pertains to speak on behalf of humanity as such. This might be problematic in a sense that affirming universal values such as liberty and equality for all are not, since they are precisely *a* (i.e. particular) set of

(specific, if universal) values. In contrast to fighting for specific values, speaking on behalf of humanity might be intrinsically problematic, since any opponent would be pointed out as in-human. I will leave the case open, but mention in passing, that it seems that we can not do without a reference to something human. Schmitt himself unwittingly affirms this when he states that any war carried out in the name of humanity is particularly *inhuman* (Mouffe: 2004: 77). Probably a radical democratic imaginary for the international realm might fare better if it is cast in terms of *citizenship* – democratic citizens of the world. This would allow us / (radical democrats) to maintain an 'outside', i.e. those who refuse to accept democratic rules of the international game.

## **Mouffe's notion of the Political and the critique of liberal consensus and cosmopolitanism**

Let us now look further into Mouffe's critique of cosmopolitanism. One of her most persistent – and correct – claims is, that we do not live in a post-political or post-hegemonic world. Her main target of criticisms is liberalism, with its pretensions of being rational or neutral. Even in Rawls' political reformulation she points out how political decisions, exclusions and the use of force are inevitable. She makes a good point regarding Rawls' distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' pluralism when she points out how “the function of this distinction ... is to draw a boundary between the doctrines that accept liberal principles and the ones who oppose them. It means that its function is a political one, since it aims at discriminating between a permissible pluralism ... and what would be an unacceptable pluralism ...” Mouffe points out how “this is the expression of an eminently political decision, not the result of a moral requirement. To call the anti-liberals ‘unreasonable’ is a rather disingenuous way of stating that such views cannot be admitted as legitimate within the framework of a liberal democratic regime.” (Mouffe 2005b: 223–4.)

To Mouffe all forms of cosmopolitanism – even in its democratic, political versions as developed by

Archibugi and Held – “share the liberal belief in the superiority of liberal democracy” (M: 2005: 91) and postulate the availability of of “consensual governance” (2005: 106). They are therefore “bound to deny the hegemonic dimension of politics... If such a project was ever realized, it could only signify the world hegemony of a dominant power that would have been able to impose its conception of the world on the entire planet and which, identifying its interests with those of humanity, would treat any disagreement as an illegitimate challenge to its ‘rational’ leadership.” (2005: 106-7)

When scrutinizing Mouffe's arguments a little closer we can identify four different types. The first and most basic is her claim that any imposition of a single model, would in fact not transcend particularity, but would be “the imposition of Western hegemony”. Now this is illegitimate or problematic for three different reasons. First, it is 'impracticable': “how is it to be done”? (2005: 98; 100). Second, “bringing more people directly under the control of the West ... is bound to arouse strong resistances and to create dangerous antagonisms.” (2005: 103). Thirdly, “By justifying the right for international institutions to undermine sovereignty in order to uphold cosmopolitan law, [cosmopolitanism] denies the democratic rights of self-governmen for the citizens of many countries” (101)

Now, a question to be considered is the relationship between those different criticisms. Take the basic claim that cosmopolitans are fooling themselves by believing in the possibility of consensus and the superiority of liberal democracy. Of course, if Mouffe's charges against liberalism stands the test, one might be a bit more careful before demanding international organisations to intervene. however, just as she declares that she has no quarrels with Rawls' limitation of pluralism, a misunderstood self-representation does not in itself jeopardize a normative position.

The same might be suggested against her second argument, that it is 'impracticable'? In a post-



foundational perspective everything is ultimately) 'impracticable'. Actually, Mouffe used to praise liberal democracy exactly because it combined the two – ultimately incompatible – principles of liberty and equality. Impracticability might lead us – which would definitely be welcomed – to greater precautions before demanding the international community to intervene, but again, it does not jeopardize the values as such.

The third argument is perhaps the strongest. The claim that international interventions, by undermining sovereignty, “denies the democratic rights of self-government for the citizens of many countries”. However, there seems to be an implicit precondition, namely that we are dealing with countries in which citizens hold democratic rights. To my view this complicates the rejecting significantly, since international interventions normally are carried out, against non-democratic countries. (Of course Mouffe's counter argument would be, “who is to determine which countries are democratic and which are not?” as she in fact does against Held.) Again the universal values of democracy seem to 'sneak in' again. One can only question the legitimacy of Western actions by basing one self on more general or indeed universal values.

The fourth argument is that to seek one global model, is bound to produce strong resistances, and to create dangerous antagonisms. This is – again – probably true, but two questions should be posed to this argument. The first is, why arousing antagonisms is in self undermining the values. Mouffe has always stressed that any order – inclusive of democratic ones – are based on a basic antagonistic relationship towards political forces *denying* those values. According to Mouffe any domestic democracy is based on a constitutive antagonism towards its (potential) enemies. (I have put potential in brackets, since I believe that there is a logical flaw in Mouffe's argument. She argues that the mere possibility or potentiality of antagonisms turns these into constitutive relations, making the Political ontologically primary. As I have shown elsewhere, this really doesn't stand the

test. But for all practical purposes, when looking at international relations, it is probably safe to assume that the establishment of democracy will be based on antagonistic relations.)

Again, to claim that the attempt of establishing a democratic hegemony leads to antagonisms can not *in self* undermine the pursuit of democracy at the international level – if it did, it would also undermine at the domestic level.

There must therefore be some kind of more basic distinction between the domestic and the international realms.

### **Must antagonistic relations necessarily follow national/ regional borders?**

Even if we grant her the fact of the ever present *possibility* of antagonism is an ontological primacy (which it is not, but this could be disregarded when it comes to IR, since the possibility for a universal peaceful acceptance of equality and liberty for all, seems empirically/historically so unlikely that any viable strategy would have to take (several) antagonistic Others into account. But, the point is that Mouffe seems to essentialize these around national/ regional borders.

What is the argument on which this is based? Even though it seems obvious that there are such basic differences, Mouffe is not quite clear as to in what the consists. She states:

“When we move from domestic to international politics, we encounter a very different type of pluralism ... a pluralism which undermines the claim of liberal democracy to provide the universal model that all societies should adopt because of its superior rationality. Contrary to what liberal universalists would want us to believe the Western model of modernity, characterized by the development of an instrumental type of rationality and an atomistic individualism, is not the only adequate way of relating to the world and to others.” (2005: 123)

But just as – according to Mouffe's own account of – nation-state based democracies also have to come to terms with (the possibility of) antagonistic others, the mere fact of (the likelihood of) antagonisms in IR, would not necessarily lead to an abandonment of the very ideals of liberty and equality for all.

## **Human rights and the culturalization of universal values**

Mouffe doesn't really spell out the constitutive differences between the domestic and the international realm underpinning her multipolar ideal. But when one scrutinises her argument for limits for universal values, it seems that she ends up giving cultural reasons. Universal values are to be questioned because they are not really universal, but specific to one, i.e. the Western culture. To me, the most problematic effect of the error of antagonisms following national/ regional borders is the 'culturalization' of the values which Mouffe used to praise for their universality. Even though she does actually mention equality and liberty for all, at least their current 'interpretations', liberal democracy and human rights, are constructed as Western values.

**3 problems:** 1) The fact that they obviously have a Western history does not tie them essentially and necessarily to “the West” - cf Laclaus notion of a systematically de-centering of the West.

2) The West's hegemonization – and obvious abuse of these values – in no way questions their general legitimacy. Quite the opposite: the very fight against imperialistic aggression – from the West as well as from all other places – are precisely opposed, criticised with im- or explicit base in these very values.

In other words, 3) the question is not to abandon these values – or more precisely – restrict their area of applicability to 'the West', but engage in a 'systematically de-centring of West', fighting for a re-hegemonisation of these values in a profound general, international or global sense.

My argument is there are 3 main problems with Mouffe's lacking discussion of liberty and equality

for all. **First of all** it is a problem for the argument that she never makes explicit whether or not they are universal values. Sometimes one gets the impression that they are no, especially liberty. That is the case when she approvingly quotes Francois Jullien, who has pointed out that “‘liberty’ is the final word in European culture, for the Far East, from India to China, that word is ‘harmony’” (Mouffe 2013: 30).

This leads to a reconsidering on liberal democracy, that used to be presented as the – albeit imperfect – political form of articulating the two universal principles. Now Mouffe presents the matter in a different way:

“The liberal democratic model, with its particular conception of human rights, is the expression of a given cultural and historical context, in which, as has often been noted, the Judeo-Christian tradition plays a central role. Such a model of democracy is constitutive of our form of life and it is certainly worthy of our allegiance, but there is no reason to present it as the only legitimate way of organizing human coexistence and to try to impose it on the rest of the world. It is clear that the kind of individualism dominant in Western societies is alien to many other cultures, whose traditions are informed by different values. Democracy, understood as ‘rule by the people’, can therefore take other forms – for instance, forms in which the value of community is more meaningful than the idea of individual liberty.” (2013: 29-30)

To a certain extent I completely agree with this statement, especially that this model should not be *imposed* on the rest of the world. But this eminently a historical strategic observation, not one of principles. And from a radical democratic perspective, one cannot but worry about what exactly Mouffe means when she states that the value of community is more meaningful than the idea of individual liberty. To me at least, it cannot mean – as certain of Mouffe's formulations might seem to indicate, that individual liberty is a Western value, not suited for the rest of the world. To me at least, this opens up to some not so nice possibilities of alternatives to the 'Western model'.

Second, regarding human rights. Mouffe relates to human rights in slightly different ways.

Sometimes she writes about them as strictly Western values, the 'imposition' of which on the rest of

the world would have strongly negative consequences, since they are tied up with a Western individualism:

“Many theorists have pointed out how the very formulation in terms of ‘rights’ depends on a way of moral theorising which, while appropriate for modern liberal individualism, can be inappropriate for grasping the question of the dignity of the person in other cultures. According to Francois Jullien, for instance, the idea of ‘rights’ privileges the freeing of the subject from its vital context and devalues its integration in a multiplicity of spheres of belonging. It corresponds to a defensive approach which relinquishes the religious dimension and presents the individual as absolute. Jullien notes that the concept of ‘rights of man’ does not find any echo in the thought of classical India, which does not envisage man as being isolated from the rest of the natural world.”

Other times she is more in the positive as when she criticizes the claim that “moral progress requires the acceptance of the Western model of liberal democracy because it is the only possible institutional framework for the implementation of human rights. This thesis has to be rejected, but that does not necessarily mean discarding the idea of human rights. Human rights might, in fact, continue to play a role, but on the condition that they are reformulated in a way that permits a pluralism of interpretations.” (2013: 30)

However, the logic of her argument implies that human rights are but a specific Western interpretation of more general normative principles. She approvingly quotes Panikkar, who in ‘Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept’ asserts that “in order to understand the meaning of human rights, it is necessary to scrutinise the function played by this notion in our culture. This will allow us, he says, to examine later if this function is not fulfilled in different ways in other cultures.” We are urged to “enquire about the possibility of ... functional equivalents of the notion of human rights. Looking at Western culture, we ascertain that human rights are presented as providing the basic criteria for the recognition of human dignity and as being the necessary condition for a just

social and political order. Therefore the question we need to ask is whether other cultures do not give different answers to the same question.”

“Once it is acknowledged that what is at stake in human rights is the dignity of the person, the possibility of different manners of envisaging this question becomes evident, as well as the different ways in which it can be answered. *What Western culture calls ‘human rights’ is in fact a culturally specific form of asserting the dignity of the person and it would be very presumptuous to declare that it is the only legitimate one.* “

To me the thrust of her argument is the culturalisation of human rights, i.e. the claim that not only do they have a Western history, they are more intrinsically tied to the West. If this is so, and if however, we maintain that liberty and equality for all are universal values, it is implied the possibility indeed the necessity of showing how liberty and equality for all might be reached without involving rights. However despite Mouffe's mainly critical attitude towards rights, she hasn't done so far.

Now, if human rights are not a universal standard, and it might well be that they are not, one would have to employ another in order for us to evaluate the alternatives Mouffe presents to human rights. E.g. when Jullien points to 'harmony' the question arises what kind of actions towards individuals would be conceived of as legitimate, in order to restore 'harmony'. It is definitely theoretically possible to think of alternatives to 'rights' (even though I find it difficult to come up with something and I believe that Mouffe has not done so convincingly so far), but my point is, that such possible/ hypothetical alternatives would have to stand the test of '*equality and liberty for all*' – i.e. 'human dignity' might force us to rethink its legitimate equivalence to human rights. This would probably be a good exercise, given the basic contingency of all signifying sequences (their constitutive impossibility of being identical to the universals as such). However, in order to be accepted they would have to be exposed to the *universals* of equality and liberty for all.

Before drawing the conclusions, asking what we should then think of cosmopolitanism, I would like to show how Mouffe's essentialisation of values in national/ regional terms, forces her to

conclusions which strikes one as very odd, coming from a radical democrat.

## **Strange bedfellows: neo-conservatives and the Iranian Islamic Republic.**

In one of Mouffe's latest writings, she argues in favour of being sceptical about an “optimistic, ‘smooth’ view of globalisation” and surprisingly quotes a cultural – conservative thinker, Robert Kagan. However it is more worrying when Mouffe addresses the undeniable difficulties democratizations of Islamic countries face. In line with the argument that the Western model should not be seen as universal, she introduces the role played by religion and is critical of the idea of secularisation as a necessary step towards democracy. Relating to the new Islamic parties she quotes Feldman. ‘...For the constitution of the Islamic state to acknowledge divine sovereignty rather than establish popular sovereignty and then use it to enact Islamic law. On this theoretical model, the people function somewhat as the ruler did in the classical constitutional order: they accept the responsibility for implementing what God has commanded.’ Mouffe comments:

“According to some interpretations, a democratically elected legislature responsible for enacting the provisions of the *sharia* needs to be supervised by a constitutionalized process of Islamic judicial review. Feldman does not ignore the difficulties that the establishment of such a democratic Islamic state will encounter, but he insists that it would be an error for the West to see such a project as a threat to democracy and to undermine the legitimacy of those who are thinking along those lines.” (Mouffe 2013: 37)

Again everything depends upon how we read the last part of the quote. If it is read as argument in favour of the principled support for something like an Islamic pole in a multipolar world, I find it deeply worrying. If it is read as a historical tactical intervention, reminding us that an abuse of democratic values by the West might have worse consequences for the spread of democracy, there might be good political sense in it. The problem is however, that Mouffe does not talk about

multipolarity in these terms. It seems to be the actual goal.

## **6) Conclusion: you cannot not be a cosmopolitan**

As soon as we accept the universal values – and I hope that Mouffe still does – of equality and liberty for all, the 'naturalisation' of national and regional borders becomes very hard to defend.

There is a move “outwards” or upwards inscribed in the very logic of democracy (there is no reason why someone should be denied the effect of these values just because she happens to live on the other side of a national border).

However, the way much cosmopolitanism are actually spelled out, leaves it open for criticisms – even in its cosmopolitical form. But that the struggle for equality and liberty *for all* involves some kind of move beyond nation-states and regional blocks is for me out of the question. How this move will take shape, and how those values get interpreted along the hegemonic way, is of course an open contingent, and eminently political question. But even if cosmopolitanism must be re-thought with an eye for conflicts and power – i.e. hegemony – and even if we draw the conclusion that in the present state of affairs things like 'humanitarian interventions' should be avoided because the institutions able to carry them out in a legitimate, i.e. democratic way, are simply not there, and we should therefore aim for something like Mouffe's multipolarity, the arguments would still have to be posed in universal terms, based on the values of liberty and equality for all – and to me this leads to something resembling cosmopolitics. Being a post-structuralist radical democrat, you really cannot not be a cosmopolitan.

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