

Democracy Revisited (In Conversation with Chantal Mouffe)

From December 2006 until the summer of 2009, Markus Miessen conducted a series of meetings and one-on-one conversations with political theorist Chantal Mouffe. In a series of ongoing discussions in London, Vienna, and Berlin, of which this chapter presents an edited volume of selected material, Miessen implicated his current investigation into conflict- and non-consensus-based forms of participation as an alternative spatial practice and point of departure to discuss democratic life and Mouffe's understanding of what she calls "conflictual consensus."

PART 1

MARKUS MIESSEN — Chantal, you have written extensively on the struggle of politics and the radical heart of democratic life. Could you explain the main thesis of your latest book, *On the Political*?

CHANTAL MOUFFE — My objective in *On the Political* consists of two aims: The first one is from the point of view of political theory. I am convinced that the two

dominant models in democratic political theory—the aggregative model on one hand, and on the other, the deliberative model, represented, for example, in the work of Jürgen Habermas—are not adequate to grasp the challenge that we are facing today. I wanted to contribute to the theoretical discussion in political theory by proposing a different model, one which I call the agonistic model of democracy. My second aim corresponds to my central motivation, which is a political one. I have been trying to understand why in the kind of society we are living in today—which I call a post-political society—there is an increasing disaffection in democratic institutions. I have for some time been concerned with the growing success of right-wing populist parties, and particularly with the recent development of Al Qaeda forms of terrorism. I feel that we do not have the theoretical tools to really understand what is happening. Of course I do not claim that political theory is powerful enough to explain everything, but I think that there is a crucial role that political theory can play in helping us to understand our current predicament. So far, however, it has not been helpful at all. In fact, one could even say that it has been counterproductive. We have been made to believe that the aim of democratic politics is to reach a consensus. Obviously, there are different ways in which this consensus is being envisaged, but the common idea is that the distinction between Left and Right is not pertinent any more, which is what we find in Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. They argue that we should think beyond Left and Right, and, according to Beck, that we need to reinvent politics

in terms of “sub-politics.” This is of course typical of liberal thought, which, as Carl Schmitt indicated, has never been able to understand the specificity of the political. When liberals speak about politics, they either think in terms of economics—and that would definitely be the aggregative model—or in terms of morality, which represents the deliberative model. But what is specific to the political always eludes liberal thought. I consider this a serious shortcoming because to be able to act in politics, one needs to understand the dynamics of the political.

MM—Would this constitute the book’s main thesis?

CM—Yes. This is why, in the book, I insist that the dimension of the political is something linked to the dimension of conflict that exists in human societies, the ever-present possibility of antagonism: an antagonism that is ineradicable. This means that a consensus without exclusion—a form of consensus beyond hegemony, beyond sovereignty, will always be unavailable.

MM—Could you explain the relationship between your theory and the work of Carl Schmitt?

CM—I think that the strength of Schmitt’s critique of liberalism lies precisely in its having shown that liberalism is, and must be, blind to this dimension of antagonism, and that it cannot acknowledge that the specificity of the political is the friend and enemy

distinction. Schmitt is definitely right when he insists on this point. My main disagreement with Schmitt concerns the consequences that he draws from that. Schmitt believed that liberal pluralist democracy is an unviable regime, and that—because of this dimension of antagonism, which exists in human societies—the only kind of order that can be established is authoritarian. According to him, pluralism cannot be accepted within the political association because it would necessarily lead to a friend and enemy struggle, and therefore to the destruction of the political association. This was really a challenge for me because, on the one hand, I agree with Schmitt on the ineradicability of antagonism; while on the other, I want to assert the possibility of a pluralist democracy. This is why I developed this model that I call an “agonistic model of democracy,” in which I am trying to show that the main task of democratic politics is, to put it in a nutshell, to transform antagonism into agonism.

MM — How is this model being expressed?

CM — What I mean by this is that there are two ways in which this dimension of antagonism can be expressed in society. One is what we could call “antagonism proper,” which is the friend and enemy relation. Schmitt was right to claim that this is something that will lead to the destruction of the political association if it is allowed to be played out inside a political community. But there is another way in which antagonistic conflict can be played out, and this is what

I call agonism. In this case, we are faced not with the friend-enemy relation, but with a relation of what I call adversaries. The major difference between enemies and adversaries is that adversaries are, so to speak, “friendly enemies,” in the sense that they have something in common. They share a symbolic space. Therefore, there can exist between them what I call a “conflictual consensus.” They agree on the ethico-political principles that inform the political association, but they disagree on the interpretation of these principles. If we take these principles to be “liberty and equality for all,” it is clear that they can be understood in many different, conflicting ways, which will lead to conflicts that can never be rationally resolved. You can never say, “This is the correct interpretation of liberty or equality.” This is how I envisage the agonistic struggle: a struggle between different interpretations of shared principles, a conflictual consensus—consensus on the principles, disagreement about their interpretation.

MM — You have argued that democratic processes should aim to supply an arena in which differences can be confronted. Could you clarify how “agonism” as a constructive form of political conflict might offer an opportunity for a constructive expression of disagreements?

CM — I think it is very important to envisage the task of democracy in an agonistic form, in terms of creating institutions that will allow for conflicts, which will necessarily emerge. In other words, conflicts

that would be between adversaries, not enemies. If that agonistic form is not available, it is very likely that, when conflicts emerge, they are going to take an antagonistic form.

MM — In this context, what exactly do you mean by “institution”?

CM — I use “institution” in a very wide sense—in terms of an ensemble of practices, language games, discourses. But also traditional institutions as parties, as well as other political institutions as different forms of participation of a diversity of people at local and other levels.

MM — I am interested in your critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Could you elaborate on your distinction between their idea of an “absolute democracy” and what you call “forms of construction of a ‘we/they’ compatible with a pluralistic order”?

CM — The institutional aspect that Hardt and Negri put forward in *Empire*, and later in *Multitude*, is something with which I disagree. Theirs is a very anti-institutional view. They are against all forms of local, regional, or national institutions, which they declare to be fascistic. They think that belonging to specific places is something that should be overcome, and that we should propel some kind of cosmopolitan view and understanding. The multitude should not have any form of belonging. I think this

is completely inadequate theoretically because they do not acknowledge—and in this sense, I think they do share something with most liberals—the importance of what I call “passions” for political collective identities. They do not realize the importance of the passions, what Freud calls the “libidinal investment” [an attachment of strong, intense emotional energies to an issue, person, or concept], which are mobilized in the creation of local, regional, or national forms of identities. They think that these attachments can and should be overcome. In fact, in this view, they are not so far from Habermas’s idea of post-conventional identities and his notion of post-national Europe. From the point of view of a philosophical anthropology, I find this completely inadequate. My main disagreement with Hardt and Negri is in the possibility of an “absolute democracy,” a democracy beyond any form of institution. It is even difficult for me to imagine what this could be. There is a messianic tone in their view. They think it is possible to reach a perfect democracy in which there will no longer be any relation of power—no more conflict, no more antagonism. It goes completely against the point that I want to defend, and is the basis of most of my work, which is precisely the fact that antagonism is ineradicable. It can be tamed, which is what agonism tried to do, but we will never arrive at the point where it has definitely been overcome.

MM — Is there someone in this context that you feel more sympathetic with than Hardt and Negri?

CM — When I think of democracy, I am much more interested, for example, in Jacques Derrida and his notion of a “democracy to come.” Insisting on the fact that this democracy will always be “to come,” there is never a point in which we can say that democracy has been realized.

MM — While Hardt and Negri are waiting for this to happen.

CM — The moment we say democracy has been realized, we pretend to be in a situation in which we can say: What exists at the moment is a perfect democracy. Such a democracy would have ceased to be pluralistic because there would no longer be any possibility for discussion or conflict. This is an idea that is absolutely contrary to my idea of an agonistic democracy. For me, there is democracy as long as there is conflict, and if existing arrangements can be contested. If we arrive at a point where we say, “This is the end point, contestation is no longer legitimate,” it means the end of democracy. I have another problem with Hardt and Negri. I see their entire theory as some reformulation—even if it is in a different vocabulary, one influenced by Deleuze and Guattari—of the Marxism of the Second International. It is the same type of determinism in which we basically don’t have to do anything, just wait for the moment in which the contradiction of Empire will bring about the reign of the multitude. All the crucial and fundamental questions for politics are automatically evacuated. To give you an example, they see the alter-globalization

movement as one of the manifestations of the power of the multitude. I also think it’s an interesting movement, but the problem with this movement is that it is very heterogeneous. Within the alter-globalization movement, we can find many groups with many very different and often-conflicting objectives. For me, the political task is to create a chain of equivalence among these different struggles, how to make them converge into a movement that presents some form of unity. This is, of course, something that Hardt and Negri disagree with completely. They believe that the very heterogeneity of the movement is its force. They argue that, these groups within the movement are not linked on a horizontal level, but instead go straight, vertically, to the power of Empire, and so their capacity for subversion is much greater.

MM — What is your feeling towards this?

CM — I think it is completely inadequate. One of the main reasons why this alter-globalization movement is, at the moment, encountering difficulties is precisely because they have not yet managed to establish enough forms of coordination between the different forms of struggle.

MM — How does that relate to institutions?

CM — The people who, in this movement, are influenced by Hardt and Negri do not want to have anything to do with existing institutions such as parties or trade unions. They want a pure movement of civil

society, because they are afraid—and here I can see they have a point—that if you enter into contact with established institutions, they will try to neutralize or recuperate you. This danger exists. I would not want to negate this. On the other hand, without a form of synergy between the alter-globalization movement and those institutions, I don't think important advances can be made. For instance, they very much celebrate the piquetero movement.

MM — The movement of unemployed workers in Argentina.

CM — Yes. This is exactly the kind of movement of civil society opposed to any form of institution that Hardt and Negri advocate. To be sure, such a movement managed to bring down the government of de la Rúa [Fernando de la Rúa, President of Argentina from December 10, 1999 to December 21, 2001]. Their main slogan was “Que se vayan todos” [They must all go, we do not want anything to do with politicians]. The problem, however, is that when it came to reestablishing some kind of order at the time of the elections, the piqueteros were absolutely impotent because they had no relay at all with the institutions or the parties. So when the elections took place, it was a struggle between traditional parties, between Menem [Carlos Menem, President of Argentina from July 8, 1989 to December 10, 1999, representing the Justicialist Party] and Kirchner [Néstor Kirchner, President of Argentina from May 25, 2003 to December 10, 2007]. Thank God Menem was

defeated. Kirchner won and turned out to be much more radical than expected. He tried to establish contact with the piqueteros in order to bring them into his government. He managed to work with one part of that movement. There are still parts, however, that want nothing to do with the government, and those people are now very isolated. I think this example shows that, when those movements of the so-called multitude are not articulated with more traditional forms of politics, they cannot go very far.

MM — Would this “one voice”—or, in your words, a “more traditional form of politics”—not require some form of consensus? It seems to me that it requires a certain negotiation to bring these different voices together.

CM — Well, I mean it will be a conflictual consensus, you see? Some kind of articulation—I prefer this term—between the different movements so that they manage to have some common aim. I don't like to use the concept of consensus in this case, because it carries more than I think is necessary. A conflictual consensus suggests that we are working together towards a common aim. This is enough.

MM — Could you describe more precisely what these practices and institutions could potentially be, or how they would come into being? I am particularly interested in the formation of alternative institutions and knowledge spaces here.

CM — The essential differences and conflicts are going to remain, but there is at least articulation. In regards to Hardt and Negri, what needs to be put into question is the idea of a necessary process. I am not sure whether capitalism is its own gravedigger. This is what they claim and this is what the Second International claimed as well. They believe that Empire will bring itself down. It's the traditional Marxist argument that the productive forces will reach a stage in which they are necessarily going to create an emergence of forces—which is the multitude—that will bring the prevailing system down. Unfortunately, I cannot share this optimism. I do not believe that this process is a necessary one. I think it is a possibility, but only a possibility—and that, in order to take place, a political intervention is necessary. This is what they don't see. I saw a film made in Germany called *Was Tun?* It's about the alter-globalization movement and the influence of Hardt and Negri on it. At the end of the film, the filmmakers ask them, "So, what is to be done?" And Negri answers, "Wait and be patient." And Hardt's answer was, "Follow your desire." This is their kind of politics, and I seriously do not think it is enough. "Just wait, the development of capitalism is going to bring about the reign of the multitude." This is not the way in which we can envisage radical politics today. In fact, I have many more points of contention with Hardt and Negri, but we cannot possibly go into these today.

MM — Since, as you have said, we are now facing a situation in which it is crucial to think about a

commonality that allows for conflict as a form of productive engagement, could a model of "bohemian participation," in the sense of an outsider's point of entry, allow for the "outsider" to become a role model for the future?

CM — According to me, what is really necessary today is to create an agonistic public space, an agonistic type of politics. This is really what is missing. We are living in a situation that, in *On the Political*, I call "post-political," in which we are constantly being told that the partisan model of politics has been overcome, that there is no more Left and Right: There is this kind of consensus at the center, in which there is really no possibility for an alternative. We are told that, given the state of globalization, there is nothing we can do. And this is why most Socialist-parties or Labor parties have moved so much towards the center. What they offer is really not fundamentally different from what Center-Right parties offer. There is now a general consensus that there is no alternative, which I think is extremely dangerous. In my view, such a situation has created the terrain for the rise of right-wing populism in Europe. They are the only parties that say, "There is an alternative to this consensus at the center, and we will offer it. We will bring back to you, the people, the voice that the establishment has taken away from you. We will provide you with the possibility to exercise popular sovereignty." Of course, the alternatives they present are inadequate and unacceptable because they are usually articulated in a xenophobic language. But

given that right-wing populist parties are often the only ones that pretend to represent an alternative, I don't think it is surprising that they are attracting more and more people. They are also the only ones trying to mobilize passions, and offer forms of identification with a strong affective component. It is very important for the Left to understand that, instead of reacting with moral condemnation, they need to understand the reasons for the success of these parties to be able to provide an adequate answer.

MM — In this context, what is your specific understanding of dissensus?

CM — I think that what is important is to subvert the consensus that exists in so many areas, and to re-establish a dynamic of conflictuality. And so, from that point of view, I can see that what you call "the outsider" could play a role. Personally, I would put it differently, because this is more the person who disagrees, who will have another point of view. It is not necessarily an outsider. It could be somebody from within the community who is not part of the prevailing consensus, who will allow people to see things differently.

MM — Yes, but is this not precisely the outside voice that is entering the arena? It depends on those who will be able to access existing debates and discourses untroubled by their disapproval.

CM — Of course. In some cases it can be somebody

from the outside who suddenly opens up the view and says, "Look, there are also these other things that you are not taking into account." So, yes, it can be an outsider, but it need not be an outsider. There are also some voices within communities that have been silenced. But I agree, you could say that it is an outsider to the consensus. I think it is important to hear most of the voices that have been silenced or that have not been able to express themselves. I am not necessarily saying that they have not been granted the right to speak, but maybe a voice that has not yet emerged, because the whole culture of consensus simply does not allow for people to envisage that things could be different. This is what I like in the slogan of the alter-globalization movement: "Another world is possible." I think it's really important for all of us to begin thinking in these terms. Another world is possible. And the present neoliberal hegemony has tried to convince us that things can only be as they are. Fortunately, this is not the truth. All forms of what we call the "productive engagement to disturb the consensus" are crucial in order to bring to the fore the things that consensus has tried to push aside. In the creation of what I call an agonistic public space, there are many different voices and people that all play a role. For instance, I think this is definitely an area where artists, architects, or people who are engaged in the entire field of culture at large, play an incredibly important role, because they provide different forms of subjectivities from the ones that exist at the moment.

MM—It seems to me that there is an urgent need to undo the innocence of participation, which is precisely the *modus operandi* that we find in so many “socially relevant” practices today? It is interesting how particular practices have hijacked the notion of participation as an unquestionably positive, user-driven means of engagement. In this context, it could be useful to think in terms of “conflictual participation” as a productive form of interventional practice.

CM—I think that is an important point. Today, we are in a phase that I call the post-Washington consensus phase. Of course, the Washington consensus is still in place. It is fortunately more and more challenged, particularly in Latin America, where what is happening is quite interesting. More and more countries simply say that they no longer want to obey the IMF or the World Bank, but instead organize things in their own ways. The power of globalization has begun to realize that it needs to use a different strategy, a strategy of participation. And this is why participation has become such a buzzword. But, in many cases, participation consists simply in people exploiting themselves. They do not just accept things the way they are, but actively contribute to the consensus; but they accept the consensus. And this is why I find your notion of the “violence of participation” very interesting. We need to realize that participation can also be very dangerous.

MM—What constitutes the danger?

CM—I was in a discussion at LSE [London School of Economics] where there were people who participated in the Davos [World Economic] Forum, as well as people who participated [in the World Social Forum] in Porto Alegre. They were all bringing to the table their different experiences. One person who had been in Porto Alegre was telling a story about the event, and then a person who had attended the Davos Forum would say, “But that’s incredible, because it’s exactly the same thing that was discussed in Davos. It’s exactly the same thing.” This was understood as something optimistic, and I was saying, “But wait a minute, they cannot possibly be talking about the same thing.” The fact that there is the same vocabulary is because the people at Davos have realized that they need to transform their vocabulary. They need people to feel that they are part of this movement. I am very suspicious of this notion of participation, as if participation by itself was going to bring about real democracy. Of course, there are many different forms of participation. If it’s some kind of agonistic or conflictual participation, as you call it, in which there is a real confrontation between different views, then, yes, I think it’s very good. But participation can also mean participating in some form of consensus, which nobody is really able to disturb, and in which some agreement is presupposed. I would definitely not see that as something positive. Participation really depends on how you understand it. It is certainly not an innocent notion.

MM—Any form of participation is already a

form of conflict. In order to participate in any environment or given situation, one needs to understand the forces of conflict that act upon that environment. How can one move away from romanticized notions of participation into more proactive, conflictual models of engagement? What would you refer to as micro-political environments, and where do micro-political movements exist?

CM — Concerning the issue of space, I don't think that there is such a big difference between what you call micro-political, macro-political, and geo-political, because I think that this dimension of the political is something that can manifest itself at all levels. It is important not to believe that there are some levels that are more important than others. In a way, it is coming back to what I have said before in regards to Hardt and Negri. When we began to organize the European Social Forum, they were against this idea, because they were saying the struggle should be at a global level. There is no point in having a European Social Forum because it automatically privileges Europe. But I think that it is very important to have social forums at all levels: cities, regions, nations— all these levels and scales are very important. The agonistic struggle should take place on a multiplicity of levels, and should not privilege either the geo-political or the micro-political, but instead realize that the political dimension is something that cannot be localized in a privileged space. It is a dimension that can manifest itself in all kinds of social relations,

whatever the specific space may be. As many recent geographers have insisted, space is always something that is, to use an expression that Deleuze and Guattari criticized, striated. What they were thinking of was a smooth and homogeneous space, while Doreen Massey argues that every form of space is always some configuration of power relations. It means that what I would call the hegemonic struggle, or the political struggle, needs to take place on all these levels. There is a multiplicity of levels where the agonistic struggle needs to be launched. This is why I think that there is a potential for politization on multiple levels, and it is important to engage with all these levels and not just simply say, "Oh well, the global struggle is the most important one." This is not the case. We need to really try to transform and articulate power relations on all levels.

PART 2

CHANTAL MOUFFE — Since our first discussion about participation, I have developed this issue in other directions, which I would like to discuss. I was already kind of critical or skeptical about the notion of participation last time. I think one of problems I have with this notion has to do with the type of understanding of democracy and of the political that is normally implied when people speak of participation. Usually, the idea of participation connotes that, if everybody were included and would participate, then consensus could be reached and full democracy realized. There is also usually some kind of opposition

between the ideas of participatory and representative democracies—a valorization of participatory democracy, participation in general, and other things that indicate that, in fact, representative democracy is something that normally works in the interest of the elite, while participation is more progressive. So it presupposes a certain understanding of the political, which is precisely what I have been challenging in my work.

MARKUS MIESSEN — Can you please elaborate on the political in this context?

CM — I think there are in fact two ways in which this issue of the political is being addressed in different theories today. The first could be called the associative view of the political. The second, the dissociative view of the political. The associative view understands politics as acting in concert. It is, for instance, the view that one finds in Hannah Arendt, as well as in many thinkers who are influenced by Arendt. It is when we all act in concert, and I think it is what participation indicates. The dissociative view of the political, which is the one that I identify with, has to do with the dimension of conflict, the dimension of antagonism and hostility that exists in human societies.

MM — How does this relate to the notion of pluralism?

CM — What is at stake is how you understand pluralism. And here again, we have two positions. There

is the liberal view of pluralism, which is based on the idea that pluralism has to do with multiplicity—with the recognition of plurality. It is what I call a pluralism without antagonism, in the sense that it acknowledges that there are different points of view, different interests, different values, and that we will never be able to embrace all of them. But it postulates that, when all these values are put together, they constitute a harmonious ensemble. This is also the view of pluralism that we find in Hannah Arendt's work. For example, when she advocates the use of Kant's notion of "enlarged thought," the need for putting ourselves in the shoes of other people, to imagine occupying the position of the Other.

MM — What is the other position?

CM — There is another conception of pluralism—the one that I identify with—which we find, for instance, in Max Weber or Friedrich Nietzsche. It is an idea that pluralism necessarily implies antagonism, because all these different and multiple views cannot be reconciled. Some of them require the negation of other views. So you can never imagine all these views put together, as composing a harmonious ensemble. Accepting the fact and existence of pluralism implies, therefore, accepting the fact of antagonism, of conflict. Conflict that is ineradicable, that cannot be reconciled. In fact, this is exactly what I understand as antagonism.

MM — Antagonism as a productive conflict?

CM — Antagonism is a specific type of conflict, a conflict for which there is no rational solution, simply because the two positions are irreconcilable. And I think this is important to stress when we speak of pluralism: to understand it along the lines of what I introduced as the second conception, the view of Weber and Nietzsche. This is the view that goes together with the dissociative conception of the political. We could also address this issue from the point of view of the model of democracy “We the People,” which is meant to underline the sovereignty of the people. But how do we envision “the People”? I think the specificity of modern democracy—let’s call it Western pluralist democracy, because I have a problem with the term “modern,” which we might want to discuss later—is, in fact, the recognition that the people is not one. What does it mean that the people is not one? It can mean that “the people” is multiple, and this is exactly what one finds in the associative view of pluralism. You can also think of the people as not one because it is divided. This is the view of “the people” that goes with my understanding of the dissociative mode of the political, of pluralism in its conflicting mode: “The people” is divided. This is the view that we already find in Niccolò Machiavelli, who stated that there is always a conflict and an antagonism at play between “i grandi” and “il popolo.” When we take into account all these different dimensions—the dissociative view of the political, the conflictual view of pluralism, and the division of the people—then we are led to understand participation in a very different way. So if we want to keep this term “participation,”

we will need to redefine it and understand it in terms of what I will call an agonistic mode of participation.

MM — Which is what I am trying to propose and develop within spatial practices.

CM — Precisely. Thinking of participation along these lines will always require the choice between different alternatives. So you participate, but for you to do so, you need to have the possibility of choosing, and not simply participating in the creation of a consensus. It’s necessary to have an alternative that implies a decision between alternatives that can never be reconciled.

MM — And one that implies responsibility. When I talk about the de-romanticization of participation, I am also referring to the fact that not everyone can always be included, can play a role.

CM — Yes, it also means—and this relates to the question of inclusion versus exclusion—that there will necessarily be a moment of exclusion. If you have opposing alternatives, you participate in the decision about which alternative should be adopted. It means that there will be some alternatives that will not be adopted, which will in fact be negated. This is something that is absolutely central. Consensus is only possible on the basis of excluding something that cannot take place. This is what the idea of a conflictual pluralism implies. My critique of a certain understanding of participation is also linked to my

critique of deliberative democracy. I am not against deliberation, but for deliberation to be meaningful, people who deliberate need to have a choice of alternatives. If only one alternative is presented, what are they really going to deliberate about? This problematic is also linked to the question of participation.

MM — When you say that participation needs choice, who produces or presents this choice?

CM — This of course depends on which level of participation we are talking about. For instance, I am particularly interested in political participation, which is why I have always insisted on the importance of the Left-Right distinction in my work. To give an example: Contrary to Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, I do not believe that the blurring between Left and Right represents a progress for democracy at all. We already touched on this issue in our last conversation.

MM — Could you, this time, relate this to third-way consensus and frameworks of participation as tools for political legitimization?

CM — Yes. My critique of third-way consensus politics and its central model is fairly simple: If there is no alternative to neoliberalism, what are we going to deliberate about? What are we going to participate in? And if we cannot really choose between alternatives, what is the benefit? Coming to the question of participatory versus representative democracy,

I honestly think it is a false opposition. I know that there are many new currents on the Left that want a non-representative form of democracy—Hardt and Negri with their absolute democracy being one of them. Representative democracy is something that some people on the Left consider negative. I disagree with such a view, and I think that, in a pluralistic democracy that acknowledges that the people is divided, it is important to have parties that represent different positions, and that require the existence of a representative system. Of course, this should be accompanied in other contexts with grassroots, direct forms of democracy. But one should not oppose them—an agonistic conception of democracy envisages them as complementary.

MM — Just before we continue, I have one question about this issue of modern democracy that you mentioned. What does it imply within the construct of your argument?

CM — I have often used the term “modern democracy” as opposed to ancient democracy, but I am more and more convinced that it is a fairly dangerous rhetorical move. The term “modern” has been appropriated by the West in order to establish an exclusive privilege as its model. When we speak of Western democracy, we tend to call it modern, which automatically implies that other forms of democracy are inferior. Of course, such a claim is completely in line with the majority of Western democratic theorists. They affirm that Western liberal democracy

is the most rational one. Theorists from different political orientations agree that “we in the West,” we the enlightened ones, have established the more advanced and modern form of democracy. We have to realize that this theoretical and political move is highly dangerous. The post-colonial critique is very important here. For instance, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in his book *Provincializing Europe*, we should recognize that Europe’s appropriation of the adjective “modern” for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism.

MM — Which is essentially what you are saying.

CM — I had begun to analyze the problem myself, but when I read Chakrabarty’s book, I said, “Yeah, he is exactly right.” Currently, my work about multipolarity is leading me to think about forms of democracy that are different from the Western one. I am not interested in keeping the term “modern” to refer to Western liberal democracy. Nevertheless, it might be useful to refer to the specificity of a form of democracy, which has been elaborated on in the Western world. We should, however, be aware of the rhetorical power of the term “modern,” or “modernization,” and of its political implications.

MM — The buzzword of New Labour.

CM — Yes, modernization is the buzzword of the “third way.” Tony Blair was always speaking about modernization. Tony Blair the modernizer. We are

the modernizers. Presenting yourself as the modernizer not only automatically implies that other people are undeveloped and backwards-looking, but also establishes your superior rationality and privilege.

MM — Could you please give an example?

CM — In this context, for instance, there is a discussion about alternative modernities that I find extremely interesting. Not only in Japan, but also now in India and many other places, people are questioning the idea that historical progress requires adopting the institutions of European modernity. They are showing that, in fact, modernity should not simply be identified with the Western model, and that there are different forms of modernity. This is what Chakrabarty calls “provincializing Europe.”

MM — How can we relate this back to the issue of participation?

CM — To return to participation, there is another way to think about it and maybe address the question of why it has become such a buzzword. With the development of new forms of production, the term “participation” has become more and more fashionable. In our first conversation, I was making a reference to the fact that, in Davos, the business elites had adopted the language of participation. This should be understood in the context of a new mode of regulating capitalism—the abandonment of the Fordist, assembly-line production, and the transition

to the new mode of organization of labor called post-Fordism. What is particularly interesting is to examine the different interpretations of this transition because it will also give us a different take on the idea of participation. I think one could use many theories, but I want to single out two approaches. One is the approach of the Italian Operaismo, or “Workerism”—the one that we find, of course, in Hardt and Negri, but also in other thinkers like Paolo Virno. According to the Operaists, the Workers’ Struggle of the 1960s and 70s forced capitalism to reorganize production in a different way because all of a sudden there was a movement of desertion from the factories. Operaist theorists reflect on what happened in Italy in those years. The young workers did not want to remain in the factories, so it forced the capitalists to find a new mode of organizing work, which was to be more collaborative, more flexible, and more participatory. Among the Operaists, we nevertheless find different views about the political potential of this transformation. Hardt and Negri, as always, view this optimistically: they see it as the development, within capitalism, of an emerging form of communism, which is linked to the development of what they call “immaterial labor.”

MM — Do you think that, to a certain extent, this is naïve, or at least problematic?

CM — I am no the only one to think that. Virno, for instance, is much more skeptical about the consequences of post-Fordism. He sees it as a sort of

“communism of capital,” and acknowledges it as a new form of collaborative production that represents a form of the workers’ auto-exploitation, of turning themselves into agents of their own exploitation. But there is another way to envisage the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. We find it in Luc Boltanski’s and Eve Chiapello’s book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, in which they bring to light the way capitalists managed to appropriate the demands for autonomy made by the movements of the 1960s, and transform them through the development of the post-Fordist, networked economy into new forms of control. They show how what they call “artistic critique” in reference to the strategies of the counterculture—the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency—was used to promote a new mode of capitalist regulation, and replace the disciplinary framework of the Fordist period. What is interesting in their approach is that it shows how central the rearticulation of existing discourses and practices was in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Such an interpretation allows us to visualize this transition in terms of a hegemonic intervention. In fact, although they never use this vocabulary, Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s analyses provide an example of what Gramsci calls “hegemony through neutralization,” or “passive revolution.”

MM — His proposition of a slow march through the institution.

CM — No, a passive revolution is not a slow march

through the institutions. It consists in neutralizing the demands that could be subversive to an existing hegemonic order by satisfying them in a way that undermines their subversive potential. In French, the word for this is *détournement*. It refers to a strategy of appropriating a term in order to give it a new meaning with a different message, one opposed to the original. I think this is a really interesting approach that chimes with my view of hegemonic struggle. It allows us to see this transformation as a hegemonic move by capital in order to neutralize demands that call its domination into question, using them to re-establish its hegemony. The aim was to create in people the feeling that their demands have been satisfied. But, in fact, it is a satisfaction that makes them dependent on capital.

MM — And during New Labour in the UK, this same strategy was used in order to make people believe that they could in fact participate in the political processes.

CM — Yes, one could say that. But such an approach helps us to understand why this question of participation was so popular in Davos. In the discussion at the LES, which we spoke about earlier, one woman was talking about how big multinationals are becoming much more democratic and open. But, in fact, this is exactly the type of *détournement* that Boltanski and Chiapello had indicated. They are trying to use the demand for participation in a way that will allow them to reassert their hegemony.

MM — The same way in which—on a cultural scale—capitalism appropriates any kind of dissenting subculture, and turns a tactic into a systematic strategy.

CM — There is clearly a hegemonic struggle today around the issue of participation. It depends on which meaning is going to become the one that will be accepted. Some understandings of participation can be subversive, while others are, in fact, completely complicit with capitalism because they end up making people participate in their own exploitation. This is why we have to be really careful in this discussion, and realize how participation can be used in opposing ways. We should not dismiss it because it can be formulated in a radical way, but it can also be an expression of passive revolution.

MM — I think the issue of flexibility, which you mentioned earlier, is very interesting because it could be used as a tool, a productive critique of participation. It seems to me that it is important not to get stuck within a particular reference of participation, but to be able to react to what is happening. When you stay flexible you can also adapt to changing circumstances. It is important that you are flexible and agile enough to react to this, to be able to pinpoint strategies, which often aim for minimal consensus to continue what they are doing. When you stay agile, you also do not risk becoming defensive, which is a very disabling mode when what you actually want to

do is be projective and, in fact, propositional. It would be interesting to see, for example what happened during the subsequent conference in Porto Alegre, what they were discussing, but I don't know, I have to read about this.

PART 3

MARKUS MIESSEN — Maybe before we move to sustainability, it would be interesting to introduce the question about the progressive potential of the current crisis.

CHANTAL MOUFFE — Yes. At the time of our last conversation, the British government—with the Third-Way consensus at the center—was still presented to the rest of Europe as the road to be followed, coupled, as it was, with the idea that there was no alternative to neoliberal globalization. This, of course, has since been shattered with the crisis of financialization.

MM — The question is: What are the possible perspectives and alternatives?

CM — First, to think that this is the final crisis of capitalism, as some Marxists would believe, is obviously a mistake. It might be a crisis of a certain form of capitalism, but I am no longer even sure of this. So far, no radical measures have been taken, and the state has only intervened to save the banks. The banks themselves do not seem to have learned their lesson, and have quickly returned to their previous ways of

operating. In fact, it is possible that the crisis is not as deep as we thought, except, of course, for the masses of people who have lost their jobs, their savings, and their homes. For the multinationals and the banks, however, things could soon be back to the way they were before. What was interesting, and could have opened a possible alternative, was that suddenly the state was again seen as having an important role to play, whereas before, we had been told that the market was everything. The state was demonized, and the motto was: the less state, the better. And then, suddenly, the state was really important. Some people, in fact, were optimistic, and predicted a return to neo-Keynesian policies. There has been some rehabilitation of the role of the state, that's for sure. But for what?

MM — But what will be the new role of the state?

CM — There are two possibilities for this new role to take shape. Either, and this is what I think has happened, the state intervenes to save the banks, but without forcing them to make any fundamental changes in the way they operate. Or the state could have taken this opportunity to foster another form of globalization, and to implement redistributive policies to fight against the profound inequalities created by decades of neoliberalism—reversing the trend towards the growing social polarization. But unfortunately so far, it has not happened, and there does not seem to be any indication that it is going to happen in the near future.

MM — Let me recap a question we discussed earlier: In Frances Fox Piven's article "Obama Needs a Protest Movement," she makes a very interesting argument, which suggests that Barack Obama is not a visionary or movement leader, but became the nominee of the Democratic Party because he is a skillful politician. How can Obama's ambition be pushed in a constructive manner?

CM — I know Frances very well. She is a very old friend of mine. In fact, I saw her in New York shortly after Obama's inauguration, and we of course discussed the new potentialities that his victory had opened. I absolutely agree with her that it will all depend on the emergence of a social movement. It is interesting, because there are many people on the Left in the United States who are extremely sceptical of Obama—not anti-Obama, as this would probably be too strong. Frances, on the contrary, was excited about a president who is intelligent. This in itself is a big change, she said. But when she said that the possibility of progressive reforms depends on the mobilization of a social movement, I asked, "But Frances, which social movement?" "Yeah, I know, it really does not exist," she responded. But then she said, "It might emerge." I do not know what she would say now but she was pretty confident that it could emerge. In fact, because she is a historian, she was making a comparison with the 1930s, saying that what happened then was similar to what is happening now. By the way, when Frances speaks of movements,

she is referring to the poor people who are thrown out of their homes. It is not only the Internet-kind of mobilization—it is really a grassroots movement. Her point was that, in the United States, every day now, incredible amounts of people are losing their jobs and being evicted from their homes. And she said, "Well, they are simply not going to accept this, something is going to happen. This is what happened in the 1930s—it was these people who began to organize and put pressure on the government." And this is what pushed Franklin D. Roosevelt—he was radicalized. Frances was saying that this could also happen with Obama. The way governments will deal with the consequences of the crisis depends on the relation of forces. In most of Europe, nothing very radical can be expected because there are so many right-wing conservative governments. And even when there is a center-left government, it is incapable of proposing alternatives. This is, of course, due to the fact that Socialists and Social-Democratic parties have long been accepting the idea that there was no alternative to neoliberal globalization. I think, however, that even if we return to where we were before the crisis, what will have been undermined is the idea that everything is wonderful under neoliberal globalization. More and more people are now becoming aware of the need for an alternative.

MM — Is this the reason why many people are surprised that in this crisis Social-Central-Democratic parties are not doing better?

CM — It is true, conservative governments seem to profit from the crisis. Amazingly, it was only in Iceland that the conservatives were ejected from power. But that did not happen in any other European country. In France, this might be due to the fact that the Socialists are completely divided. But the problem is that the Left has generally been implicated in neo-liberal policies. In fact, in many countries, the wave of privatizations has been carried out by Socialist or center-left governments. They did not offer an alternative to the Right, so there has been no possibility for change. That is the reason why I have insisted on the importance of people seeing that there is an alternative to the existing order. And if you do not offer this alternative, I think people tend to stick to the existing order.

MM — Yes, not necessarily what they trust, but what they know.

CM — The Right is in power, and the Left is not offering an alternative. This explains why the crisis has not at all advanced the prospects of the Left.

MM — Do you think that people lack the attention span? For example, I agree with you that Obama does not really represent a social movement right now—not in the sense as outlined by Frances—but what was interesting during the elections was that Obama managed to engage a great number of people for a certain period of time, but then it just stopped.

CM — Yes, but I do not really consider mobilizing people through the Internet a form of real political mobilization, because it does not create a genuine social movement.

MM — I agree.

CM — And I think it also tells us something about the state of politics today. Basically, Obama was promoted as some kind of pop star.

MM — An icon of public media, correct?

CM — Yes, like Michael Jackson. And for many people, the excitement for Obama was the same as for, say, an actor or a footballer. This is why I do not think it was an expression of real politicization.

MM — So what would be an example of actual political mobilization?

CM — When you have a variety of constituencies, including workers and poor people, who become mobilized and organized. Not simply young people on the Internet. I am not saying that the Internet is unimportant, but it does not represent an alternative for me—it does not represent a social movement. By the way, I do not know if you read it, and maybe we commented on it when we spoke in Berlin, but there was an interview with Negri in the *Tageszeitung* in which he says something like, “the Obama victory is the victory of the multitude.” This is completely

ridiculous. I think the worldwide appeal of Obama is very much an expression of what politics has become today: a media show. But a social movement is something different. When Frances speaks of a social movement, she is really thinking of people who organize, who have demonstrations, who block factories, and who are not just simply sending e-mails.

MM — But how do you think Obama could be pushed so that it somehow becomes more productive, so that it moves away from this kind of shallowness.

CM — Well, I am not saying that he is shallow. I am not referring to Obama. I am referring to his support as being somewhat shallow. He would really need a lot of mobilization to push his health reform. Of course, his reform project is much less radical than Hillary Clinton's proposal. In fact, of the three candidates, his reform was the least radical. But still, it is radical for the United States. So let's wait and see. But in Europe, people really have tried to resist—in France, for instance. You have certainly heard in quite a few places that workers have taken over.

MM — the factories. You mean with the firebomb threats?

CM — Yes. They even tried to put fire to an entire factory. It really shows that, because of the relation of forces, they are ready to fight the existing situation. This takes us to the other question I wanted to

discuss—your other buzzword, sustainability. What should we make of sustainability? Well, although I am not particularly qualified in this field, we could maybe talk about it briefly, as it is also one of the most publicly discussed issues today. What are the forms of sustainability? When people speak of it, they speak of the fact that we know that our way of development has created an ecological crisis. And of course this is absolutely true, and the consensus is just getting stronger. One can no longer say it is only an issue limited to the Left.

MM — I think it is interesting what you said in our conversation at Café Einstein in Berlin, that of course sustainability is not only related to ecology, but can also be related to many things, topics, phenomena, and problems. So, for example, you could also talk about the sustainability of a political or financial system, which, as we have just seen, has collapsed at least to a certain extent. But sustainability is really about a holistic approach, which takes long-term thinking into account. What seems interesting is that, as we have just said about the Obama phenomenon, there seems to be a very short attention span. Moreover, to come back to what you said before, this attention span is incredibly short when it comes to the financial crisis. There are already multinationals and banks that are making billions again, and it seems that, within six or eight months, all the issues of regulation that have been discussed have all of a sudden been

swiped off the table. Regarding the issue of sustainability, I am wondering whether this could be something interesting to address: different forms of economic sustainability. What are the different forms of sustainability that should be discussed? Because quite often, when people talk about sustainability, they talk about the ecological dimension only.

CM — Yes, and in fact, I would want to approach this question of sustainability from another point of view, but this would definitely imply a longer discussion. Ultimately it has to do with what we discussed earlier: the fact that the economic crisis implied the possibility for an alternative to neoliberal globalization, however distant that alternative may feel. Even if everything goes back to normal, there is somehow a moral awareness of the fact that it is no longer possible to tackle dimensions of sustainability without, at the same time, tackling the issues and questions of globalization.

MM — But how can these issues be tackled?

CM — They can be tackled in very different ways, either from the Left or the Right. The Right, for instance, will try to develop a palette of more energy-sufficient products and services—and, in fact, some people are already thinking of how to make a profit out of that. Producing marketable products that represent a more ecologically friendly approach to both production and consumption, but without put-

ting into question capitalist relations of production. This is why the ecological question by itself is not necessarily an issue of the Left, and there are, in fact, ecologically thinking parties that are not Left at all.

MM — What does it mean from the point of view of the Left to think in terms of sustainability?

CM — I think it is to offer an alternative to neoliberal globalization.

MM — What should the center of thinking about sustainability consist of?

CM — A critique of free trade. I find it amazing that, except in the alter-globalization movement, free trade seems to be accepted as something positive, and that it is not challenged at all by Left parties. Free trade is some kind of dogma: "Free trade is good and protectionism is bad—we cannot question the realities of free trade." For me, a critique of free trade should be at the center of our challenge of the existing order. For instance, there is one thing that more and more people are becoming aware of: the issue of food sovereignty. We have become increasingly aware of the food question, the fact that several countries are no longer able to produce enough food for their own people. I think that this phenomenon is linked to the question of free trade, and the fact that, with neoliberal globalization, production is increasingly done for export. This fact has important and very negative consequences not only in developing and

emerging countries, but also in Western countries. One of the problems is that multinationals are basically producing for export. They do not care about domestic markets any longer and this has many very negative consequences.

MM — What does not taking care of one's domestic market imply?

CM — In the past, enterprises were producing for domestic markets, so they had to think about the conditions in which people could buy their products. They had to think about local jobs. There was no point to produce if you did not have people to buy your product. Today, the situation has changed dramatically because enterprises are primarily producing for export. They do not care if there is a domestic market for their products or not. There is also the issue of de-localization. Multinationals look for the places where labor power is cheapest. In advanced economies, all these factors contribute to a growing level of unemployment, which also has political implications, because it creates a terrain that is very easily exploited by right-wing Populist parties. Of course, the conditions are even worse for poor countries. Each week, there are cases of local industries being destroyed in African societies because they cannot compete with the cheap exports. For example, I was recently reading that there used to be a very thriving onion-producing business in Senegal, which is now completely destroyed because they import onions produced in the Netherlands that are much cheaper.

There are constant and numerous examples of this happening. There are also cases in which countries are becoming unable to produce enough food for their own people because everything is now controlled by multinationals producing for export. This is why the question of food sovereignty is absolutely central for me, and why those countries cannot, and should not, focus all their attention on global exports. It is my belief that each country should at first be able to produce enough food to satisfy its own people. This is also the central claim of the La Via Campesina movement, which is an international organization of small farmers. José Bové, who you have probably heard of, is active in it. It is a way to insist on how very important it is for each country to first produce food to satisfy its own domestic demand.

MM — Could you please elaborate on the relation of export and the destruction of local industries?

CM — I think one example of extreme destruction and desperation is that of sub-Saharan countries. What is happening in Africa is precisely a result of all these cheap exports from Europe and the United States that, over the years, have completely destroyed local industries. Most men have absolutely no way to maintain or earn a living and stay alive by working at home. This, of course, is the reason why they are forced to emigrate. All these desperate people are trying to reach Europe by boat and by exposing their lives because they cannot survive in their home countries because of foreign exports. I think this is

very important for Europeans to realize: We are the ones responsible for this situation. It is the policies and the subsidies of the European Union and the United States that have caused this condition—a condition under which young people struggle for survival and are forced to emigrate. We need to realize that this cannot continue. But of course it is a very tricky issue, as it means that we will have to recognize our own mistakes and be willing to change our policies. Unfortunately, the Left does not have the vision or the courage to tell people that, in order to tackle this situation seriously, the mode of living for people in Western countries will have to change. We need to become aware that our welfare is being maintained on the basis of creating misery in other parts of the world. It is an unacceptable situation. It is both shocking and, of course, not sustainable in the long run. Something really needs to change. People in the West are accustomed to things getting cheaper. We want to pay less and less for food—in fact, not only for food, but pretty much for everything. We want to pay less and less for clothing. We want everything for the cheapest possible price. Of course we do not realize, or, more importantly, internalize the vicious cycle of such a mania for “the cheap”: local industries are destroyed, people are becoming de-localized, and there is a dramatic rise in unemployment. It presents us with a very dangerous and vicious cycle, and the Left needs to explain to people that this cannot go on.

MM — This brings us to a topic that we are both interested in, and that I think, especially within

this context, is of immense importance: the issue of non-moralistic modes of politics. It seems that in almost every European country, the way for left-wing politics to address this question is in fact not to address it, and then to defend themselves with some kind of moralistic politics.

CM — Some people in the European Left are critical of any form of control on immigration. They claim that we should open our borders so as to allow poor Africans to come here and work. But this is not the solution. As I mentioned earlier, the situation in those countries is not going to get better if they keep loosing their potential labor force. The way to treat this question is not to combat having limitations on immigration, or to simply open our borders, but to transform the conditions in these countries in order to allow them to develop sustainable forms of domestic economy. There is so much moralistic rhetoric about “sans-papiers” and immigrants, while what we actually need is a properly political approach—not the type of charitable attitude of helping the poor Africans without ever questioning our privileges. This is not a question of charity but of justice. The way to help those people is not just simply to allow them to come in. We have got to put into question our mode of development, which is the cause of their misery. We have to abandon these cravings for cheaper and cheaper goods. People need to understand that they have to pay more for their food and that their consumerist way of life cannot continue in the same way that it has been for decades now. This would be

the proper political way of dealing with this question. The other one is simply a moralistic approach, which is unable to deal with the roots of the problem.

MM—I am interested to hear from you about how such an approach can start to communicate between scales, for example the local and the global—something that we have already addressed in one of our earlier conversation.

CM—To begin with, the local and global scales should not be opposed. They are co-constitutive and interdependent. The global is always locally constituted and vice versa. As we spoke about before in the context of Negri's and Hardt's concept of the multitude, I am against the celebration of "deterritorialization" that is currently so fashionable in some left-wing circles. For me, this is exactly the way in which the question should not be addressed. In fact, I even think that a certain amount of protectionism is important. In France, Emmanuel Todd has been arguing in favor of some forms of European protectionism, which I support on the condition that it is not a national, egoistic form of protectionism in which we only think about "our" industries and "our" workers. We need to think in terms of the articulation between the local and the global.

MM—So we first need to have a conversation within Europe, amongst ourselves, in order to get beyond the moralistic consensus of doing good by giving, to change our own habits and

lifestyles in order to stimulate change. Could you elaborate more on your point of view and critique of modes and readings of sustainability?

CM—What I said about Europeans and their way of operating is precisely how I address the issue of sustainability. It offers an alternative to the present mode of development, which nobody, at least politically, is interrogating. From the point of view of the Left, I would insist that we are in desperate need of a sustainable politics that considers the question of equality and redistribution. I simply cannot think of a sustainable politics that would not imply dealing with injustice and being more redistributive. In this context, I also defend the idea of a multipolar world because, as you know, I am very critical of the kind of cosmopolitan view that advocates a cosmopolitan democracy, a cosmopolitan citizenship. I think it is important to envisage issues in regional terms, and that all forms of regional organization are important. It is always better to start dealing with things from a regional point of view. The problems of Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, would be better resolved if several of the countries in the region got together and thought about a common approach. Of course, the solutions are going to be different according to different areas. For Latin America, the solutions will be different than for other regions. I do not think we can really envisage a unique model. In fact, for me, the issue of sustainability implies a multiplicity of solutions that can adapt to different contexts. The idea that sustainability would apply one single model to everything is

wrong and deeply worrisome. We need to consider the context, the conditions, as well as the local and regional traditions. Sustainability goes hand in hand with the idea of a multipolar world.

MM — Which in many ways will form a critique of modern democracy and a possible model of an agonistic space.

CM — Yes. Why do we not simply start by saying the following: This is our form of democracy, which, of course, needs to be radicalized. It is very specific for the West and we should not believe that the same model could work in African or the Middle East, to name two examples. This is not to say, as some people would argue, that democracy is only good for the West. I would, on the contrary, say that the idea of democracy is something we could call “trans-cultural.” I would not use the term “universal” because for some people it implies the existence of one single model that is valid everywhere. Instead, I would like to propose “trans-cultural.” There is a demand for democratic participation in the way people are ruled, which is not something specific to the West. But the way democratic institutions are going to be envisaged depends very much on the way they are inscribed in specific traditions and cultures. So we should really think of legitimate forms of democracy in a pluralistic way, and not believe that our so-called modern form of democracy is the only legitimate and correct model. It is really important for people to envisage their own vernacular form of democracy.

MM — This issue of “universal” versus “trans-cultural” also brings to mind the question of responsibility and risk, especially when you talk about the European border—where, instead of actually talking about the problems that might exist in the countries where migrants come from, they discuss the issue of the physical border, and whether immigrants should be allowed in or not. I think conflicts can only be overcome if somebody assumes responsibility. So the real question for me seems to be: Why is responsibility so often outsourced rather than assumed?

CM — What do you mean by outsourced?

MM — What I mean by outsourced is this paradigm of safe and politically correct forms of participation in which the ruling majority gives people the impression that they themselves can participate in political decision-making on a national scale. This was particularly apparent in the UK under New Labour. The outsourcing of responsibility generated all kinds of counterfeit participatory structures that gave people the impression that they could participate. But from my point of view, it was merely a way for politicians to outsource their own responsibility, because the moment they were critiqued from the outside, they could just refer to those structures being in place, and, at least in theory, that everyone could participate. So I think this issue of responsibility is very interesting in terms of how it will be

dealt with now, especially in regard to the Left. The question that I would still like to address in this conversation, and in the context of my book, concerns the role of the outsider. I am referring to the outsider as someone who is not necessarily dependent on a consensus within their immediate or associated political context—within their own party, for example. An interesting example of this is the crossbench politicians in the British House of Lords who don't belong to a specific party, which you could also imagine happening in any other context, outside of politics. I am wondering, from your point of view, what is the potential of the outsider?

CM—I disagree with you concerning the potential of the crossbench politician, because, for me, this crossbench practitioner is precisely somebody who wants to avoid taking sides. I think it is important in politics to have a choice between real alternatives. But then you also need to know which camp is yours, and it seems to me that the crossbench practitioner is precisely somebody who does not want to take a stance, who wants to be able to move from one side to the other. I do not find this attitude very political.

MM—This could be one reading of the situation. But another reading is precisely the opposite: that the political attitude emerges from the ability and ambition to stir change by instigating real political confrontation. My point of view is that it is not necessarily about whether or not to

take sides, but rather, to be able to decide based on your instinct and real belief, to be able to say what you think is best, and not have your opinion or approach watered down before it has even left your immediate political context, or, in the context of the parliamentary democracy, your own party. This is fundamentally different from starting from an embodied position in which the first thing you have to do is search for a consensus among your peers. In the case of the crossbench practitioner, one can start a conversation by putting something on the table that usually does not, and does not have to, necessarily satisfy everyone.

CM—Yes, I see what you mean. I have the feeling that you are, in fact, clearly trying to theorize your own role—according to what you have told me about your different kinds of interventions.

MM—Yes.

CM—It is about your role as an outsider to some of the contexts and internal mechanisms in which you intervene. I certainly do not disagree with that. Though I do think that this approach is different from the crossbench politician who is dealing with clearly defined camps. The crossbench politician tries, in fact, to avoid taking sides by following a clearly individualistic position. I always insist that to act politically is to act as part of “us,” to act from the position of a “we.” I would not want to advocate or glorify

a person who acts purely from an individual point of view. This is not how I view left-wing politics. On the other hand—and I think this is a completely different case—I can see that your theory is very positive, and in fact productive, when you go to the Middle East or do similar projects. Your position in that sense could be compared to someone intervening from the outside, a role that is similar to somebody who wants to mediate a conflict, for instance.

MM — I do not mean to say that this necessarily always works in a restricted model or paradigm such as in parliament, which, as you mentioned, is both highly structured and defined in terms of political parties and coalitions, but also spatially in terms of it being physically autonomous. It should neither be misunderstood as a general political theory. You are right, it is very much concerned with my own context, but I would argue further that the approach and the basic understanding of its principles can also be helpful for others who are working in similar conditions, or who find themselves in situations where they are working outside of clearly defined disciplines. It is meant to present an alternative approach for engaging oneself, or dealing with spatial practices in a world that—at least in some areas—is highly politicized. An approach to understanding how to use the status of outsider as a surplus rather than a restriction.

CM — It is always some kind of temporary interven-

tion. What you want to do is just allow these people to talk to each other, or to put into movement a dynamic that they then have to develop.

MM — Exactly. To instigate processes of change.

CM — Yes, I think this is very interesting and important.

MM — If, for example, you come in from the outside, it is important that you are not viewed as someone either from this or that party, that you have as few associations as possible.

CM — Of course, you need to be seen as independent of the sides which are in conflict. But this is a very specific kind of intervention.

MM — You said that, if you look at the party system within politics, someone from within that system, like a crossbench politician, would refuse to take sides. Maybe we can talk about the idea of party representation for a moment. I think this issue of the biased political party is really interesting because it brings together people with similar beliefs and, quite often, backgrounds. But would you also agree that there is a danger in political parties becoming very dogmatic and paradigmatic, and therefore more hindering than protective? Even if the individuals within such parties can sometimes understand that a different alternative would maybe be appropriate,

they cannot follow it because they have subscribed to a certain dogmatic framework. Am I exaggerating?

CM — Well, of course, there is always a danger. It depends on how the parties are organized and how much agonism is permitted and practiced internally. In fact, most parties accept having factions, and are, in this sense, pluralistic. In principle, I think a party that functions well democratically should allow for this debate to take place on the inside without being instigated by someone on the outside. I see what you are getting at, and as I said, I agree with you in the context of your praxis, of somebody trying to mediate a conflict, intervene spatially even. But in terms of the workings of internal politics and the British House of Lords, I am not so sure, especially since the House of Lords is not a particularly democratic institution either.

MM — I am of course aware of this—and, for me, this is part of the analogy's charm. It is a supposedly democratic representation rooted in an aristocratic framework, which is, of course, absurd. However, I like to use it as a comparative image simply because many people can easily understand what I am talking about. For me, it is also interesting because it is a spatial setting. You can see where the agonism occurs simply by looking at the picture. You can actually see two different parties sitting on different sides, and then these guys sitting in the middle. This is the

only reason I like to talk about it. Otherwise, of course, it is incredibly conservative.

CM — Yes, but this is not what you do when you, Markus, practice—in the context of your interventions—because you are not moving from one side to the other. In fact, in all of your projects, your books, your teachings, you are trying to remain outside.

MM — Yes. The “uninvited outsider”—that is the title of a text I wrote some time ago.

CM — You try to bring people together to allow for some kind of dynamic between them. You are neither on one side or the other for very long. So, in fact, you are not really like the crossbench practitioner either.

MM — So maybe it simply needs another word, another term. In the end, it comes down to semiotics. Brilliant. But parties are also interesting. For example, I personally find it difficult in Germany right now. In two months, the general election will take place, and I still cannot make up my mind as to who to vote for, let alone consider actually belonging to a political party. For me, this is part of the internal conflict. It is not that I do not believe in parties but—are you in a party?

CM — No. [*laughs*] Yes, I feel like you. The problem is that I never found a party that I really wanted to belong to. But I'm still looking for one.

Markus Miessen
The Nightmare of Participation

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Markus Miessen

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