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Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Democracy

by Chantal Mouffe

Carl Schmitt asserts that liberal individualism and the democratic ideal are opposed: the former's moral discourse centres on the individual; the latter is essentially political and aims to create an identity based on homogeneity. Liberalism and democracy negate each other; parliamentary democracy, which combines democracy and individualism, is, therefore, unworkable.

We need to distinguish, Schmitt argues, between the liberal and the democratic conceptions of equality. The former postulates that each individual is automatically equal, as a person, to every other person. The latter, however, requires that a distinction be made between those who belong to the *demos* and those who do not: its necessary correlate, therefore, is inequality. Equality can only exist in particular spheres: as political equality, economic equality, and so on. These specific equalities always, and necessarily, entail some form of inequality. Absolute human equality, therefore, Schmitt concludes, would be meaningless, a pure abstraction.

Schmitt's makes an important point: to be viable, political democracy must be attached to a specific people, not to humankind. What matters is the possibility of drawing a line of demarcation between those who constitute the homogeneous people that make up the *demos*, and so have equal rights in the political domain, and those who do not constitute it, and so cannot enjoy these rights. (And Schmitt did not suggest that such a people could only be defined in racial terms.) This democratic equality - expressed today through citizenship - is for Schmitt the basis of all other forms of equality: it is as

members of the *demos* that citizens are granted equal rights, not as part of an abstraction called 'humanity'; only a 'people', and never 'humankind', can enjoy democracy. As he puts it: 'In the domain of the political, people do not face each other as abstractions but as politically interested and politically determined persons, as citizens, as governors or governed,

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politically allied or opponents - in any case, therefore, in political categories. In the sphere of the political, one cannot abstract out what is political, leaving only universal human equality.'

If a state tried to realise the universal equality of individuals in the political realm, Schmitt argues, without concern for national, or any other form, of homogeneity, the consequence would be a complete devaluation of political equality, indeed of politics itself. Nor would it mean the disappearance of substantive inequalities. For, writes Schmitt, these 'would shift to another sphere, perhaps separated from the political and concentrated in the economic, leaving this area to take on a new, disproportionately decisive importance. Under the conditions of superficial political equality, another sphere in which substantial inequalities prevail (today, for example, the economic sphere) will dominate politics'.

These arguments need to be taken seriously, unpleasant as they are to liberal ears. They contain an

important warning for those who believe that the process of globalisation is providing the foundation for worldwide democratisation and cosmopolitan citizenship. They also provide important insights which help us understand the current dominance of economics over politics. We need to be aware that without a *demos* to which they belong, these cosmopolitan citizens, or citizen pilgrims (to use Richard Falk's expression) lose the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights of law-making. They are, at best, left with the liberal right to appeal to a transnational court to defend their individual rights when these have been violated.

By reading Schmitt in this way one does violence, of course, to his aims: his main concern is not democratic participation but political unity. He considers that such unity is crucial, for, without it, a state cannot exist. But his thoughts are relevant also to those concerned with democracy.

Democracy, says Schmitt, consists fundamentally in the identity between rulers and ruled; it is linked to the basic principle of the unity of the *demos* and the sovereignty of its will. But, before the people can rule, one must determine who belongs to the people: unless there is a criterion according to which one decides who bears democratic rights, the will of the people cannot take shape.

Of course, it could be claimed that this view of democracy is at odds with liberal democracy; some would argue that this is not democracy but populism. Certainly, Schmitt is not a democrat in the liberal sense of the term; he had only contempt for the restraints imposed by liberal institutions on the will of the people. But the issue he raises is of crucial importance, even for those who advocate liberal democracy. The logic of democracy implies that the process of constituting the 'people' requires a moment of closure. This cannot be avoided, even in a liberal democracy; it can only be negotiated in different ways.

By stressing that the identity of a democratic political community hinges on the possibility of creating a 'frontier' between 'us' and 'them', Schmitt highlights the fact that democracy always entails relations of *inclusion* and *exclusion*. One of liberalism's main problems - one that can endanger democracy - is precisely its inability to envisage such a frontier. Liberal theory is unable to tackle adequately the central question of the political constitution of the 'people' because the need to create a 'frontier' contradicts its universalist rhetoric.

Unlike those who believe there is a necessary harmony between liberalism and democracy, Schmitt makes us see the way in which they conflict, and the dangers the dominance of the liberal logic poses to the practice of democracy. However, he is wrong to present this conflict as a contradiction that will inevitably cause liberal democracy to self-destruct. The articulation of liberalism and democracy, and the consequences of this articulation, can be seen to constitute the specificity of liberal democracy as a new political form of society. The democratic logic of constituting the people and inscribing rights and equality into practices is necessary to subvert the tendency toward abstract universalism inherent in liberal discourse. But the articulation of this logic with liberal logic allows us constantly to challenge - through the reference to 'humanity' and the polemical use of 'human rights' - the forms of exclusion that are inscribed in the political practices of defining the 'people' that is going to rule and of establishing its rights. Despite the ultimately contradictory nature of the two logics, their articulation has positive consequences and there is no reason to share Schmitt's pessimistic verdict about liberal democracy.

However, we should not be too sanguine about its prospects, either. No final resolution or equilibrium is possible between these two logics; only temporary, pragmatic, unstable, and precarious negotiations of the tension between them. Liberal democratic politics consists, indeed, of the constant process of negotiation and renegotiation - through different hegemonic articulations - of this constitutive paradox.

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