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From Moral Combat to Societas: The Civil Grammar of Democratic Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the institutional challenges inherent in Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy. While Mouffe strongly critiques the depoliticization fostered by deliberative liberalism, proposing a conflictual "agonistic" citizenship instead, her work is faced with a significant gap on its implementation. Drawing on the critiques of Daniel de Mendonça and Alexandre Franco de Sá, the article argues that Mouffe's theory suffers from an "institutional deficit": it lacks a concrete political design to channel the passions it seeks to mobilize. Consequently, without adequate institutional containment, the agonistic distinction between "adversary" and "enemy" risks collapsing into a destructive "moral combat" characteristic of contemporary cultural wars. To resolve this dilemma, the article proposes a theoretical synthesis with the political philosophy of Michael Oakeshott. Specifically, it mobilizes Oakeshott's distinction between *Universitas* (enterprise association) and *Societas* (civil association). The central argument is that the concept of *Societas* defined by adherence to non-instrumental rules of conduct (*lex*) rather than a substantive common purpose provides the necessary normative framework to sustain agonism. By reframing the state as a civil association, it becomes possible to house the "hot" conflict of populist demands within the "cold" structure of institutions. Ultimately, the article posits that Oakeshott's metaphor of politics as an "endless conversation" offers the missing praxis for Mouffe's project, ensuring that radical pluralism does not degenerate into civil fragmentation.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, contemporary society has been marked by a crisis of democratic legitimacy, reflecting neoliberal hegemony and the rise of the so-called "post-political" era. In this landscape, the role of the citizen has been significantly diminished, restricted to the functions of consumer and taxpayer. This depoliticization is the direct result of a democratic model that has prioritized consensus and public reason over the conflict and passions that inevitably shape political life.

The liberal conception of citizenship, particularly in the framework of John Rawls (1987, 1993, 2001), while seeking political justice based on an overlapping consensus, ultimately reduces citizenship to a merely moral and legal activity. The Rawlsian separation between the public and private spheres results in the neutralization of public spaces. In contrast, there is an urgent need to reclaim the dimension of "the political" as a space of struggle and antagonism, revitalizing citizenship as a practice of radicalizing democratic values.

It is in this context that Chantal Mouffe's thought becomes relevant. Grounded in Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction (1992) and Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory (1985), she proposes "agonism" as an alternative to "antagonism". For Mouffe, politics is not the rational management of interests, but the construction of collective identities ("us" versus "them"). In her more recent work, *For a Left Populism* (2018), she argues for the construction of a "people" through a chain

of equivalence capable of mobilizing affects to challenge the hegemonic order.

However, despite the accuracy of her diagnosis of liberalism, Mouffe's proposal faces a critical obstacle to institutionalization. As Daniel de Mendonça (2010) argues, while Mouffe successfully deconstructs deliberative consensus, she does not offer a structured "model," but merely a "principle of action." This theoretical gap leaves the practice of citizenship undefined: without concrete institutional mechanisms, it remains unclear how agonistic identity can be exercised without rupturing the democratic fabric.

The gravity of this institutional vacuum is deepened by Alexandre Franco de Sá's analysis (2021). He warns that in the absence of a political design capable of mediating conflict, the empty space is filled by "moral combat." The risk of the contemporary populist moment, therefore, is that the political distinction between adversaries might collapse into a moral crusade between good and evil institutionalized not in parliaments, but within cultural and media spheres.

This article investigates this tension between the agonistic disposition and the lack of adequate institutions to sustain it. The central hypothesis is that the solution to avoid the degeneration of agonism into moralism lies in adopting an institutional structure to "cool down" antagonism, based on Michael Oakeshott's concept of *Societas* (Civil Association) (1975). It seeks to demonstrate that it is possible to have a vibrant agonistic conflict (the content

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of politics) contained by non-instrumental rules of conduct (the form of politics), thus offering a response to the dilemma raised by Mendonça and Franco de Sá.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dispute for Liberty and Citizenship: From Liberal Consensus to Republican Non-Domination

The central discussion of citizenship in contemporary political theory concerns the distinct conceptions of liberty that shape views of society. To understand Mouffe's proposal, it is necessary to situate the debate between liberalism, communitarianism, and the republican response.

Modern liberalism, exemplified by John Rawls's work, prioritizes negative liberty, understood as the absence of coercion and the protection of the individual against State interference. In the Rawlsian framework, liberty and equality constitute essential principles for social cooperation (Rawls, 2001). The theory establishes that no basic liberty can be sacrificed for economic or social gains, conferring a priority to liberty (Tavares & Cunha, 2015, p. 169). Consequently, citizenship requires the mastery and exercise of two distinct moral powers: the capacity to cultivate a sense of justice and the aptitude to formulate and revise a conception of the good (Rawls, 2001, pp. 18-24).

For Rawls, democratic deliberation must follow the logic of public reason, presupposing a public space structured by rational consensus. Justice must be based on shared and comprehensive political principles, not on particular moral values (Rawls, 2001, p. 7). However, from a communitarian perspective, this liberal individualist conception of citizenship is considered limited precisely because it undermines the possibility of forming an authentic community. This framework produces, at best, a merely instrumental association a *modus vivendi* where the individual is treated as a self-sufficient entity (the unencumbered self) with pre-defined interests (Mouffe, 1991, p. 71).

In contrast, the communitarian conception, as developed by Charles Taylor, offers a counterpoint to liberal individualism. Taylor fundamentally questions liberalism's "unencumbered self," arguing that identity is inherently dialogical, being shaped within the context of a community and culture (Taylor, 1985). For Taylor, positive liberty must be understood not as the mere absence of coercion, but as the capacity for full self-realization. He emphasizes that "the joint deliberation of men about what should be imposed on everyone is an essential part of the exercise of freedom" (Taylor, 1985, p. 208).

This critique aligns with the idea that individuals cannot flourish or be truly free outside a community that creates their capacities and offers a common framework for understanding the good. Communitarian citizenship, therefore, is not merely a set of rights, but an ethical and practical commitment to collective life (Ramos, 2014, p. 75). Michael Walzer reinforces this view by presenting a conception of citizenship the practice of which is rooted

in the social, historical, cultural, and moral context, in opposition to the liberal tradition based on hypothetical constructs like the "original position" (Walzer, 1981, p. 385).

However, in seeking a modern approach, it is crucial to recognize the indispensable contribution of the liberal tradition to contemporary democracy, especially in the defense of pluralism and individual liberty. A functional political community cannot be organized around a single, substantive idea of the common good, requiring the protective limits defended by liberal thought (Mouffe, 1993, p. 72). To overcome the dichotomy between the liberties of the moderns (liberals) and the ancients (communitarians), the central argument passes through the neo-republican perspective.

Quentin Skinner advances an idea that refutes the incompatibility between the classical republican conception of citizenship and modern democracy. In his interpretation of Machiavelli's republican tradition, Skinner argues that liberty must be understood, above all, as "freedom as non-domination," a concept distinguished from the purely negative notion of liberty understood as non-interference (Skinner, 2002). This republican conception of liberty consists of being free from arbitrary power or the mere possibility of coercion, even if such interference is not effectively occurring (Barros, 2015, p. 193).

Skinner maintains that Machiavelli implicitly defines liberty through the analysis of two distinct types of citizens: "the great" (*il grandi*), who desire liberty to conquer power and dominate; and "the people" (*il popolo*), who aspire to liberty as non-domination, seeking to live in peace (Barros, 2015, p. 193). For Machiavelli, the cultivation of civic virtù among citizens is the best defense against corruption, understood as an inability to recognize that our own liberty depends on committing ourselves to a life of virtue and public service (Skinner, 1986, p. 243). Republican liberty, therefore, is inseparable from the practice of self-discipline and the citizens' willingness to subordinate private interests to the common good. Skinner insists that "the enjoyment of our individual liberty can often result from coercion and constraint" (Skinner, 1986, p. 247). The law serves as a mechanism to compel citizens to turn away from their self-interested habits. This constant vigilance of the citizen takes conflict and transformation to the heart of liberty.

Machiavelli demonstrates, through the historical conflict between the patricians and the plebs in Rome, how the clash between parties whose interests are completely irreconcilable can be channeled through the state apparatus. The creation of new institutions contained civil disorder, a direct result of the people's struggle against domination (Barros, 2022, pp. 131-132). It is this understanding of Machiavelli who views conflict as positive and transformative, rather than as a threat to concord as the English republicans or liberals did that grounds Mouffe's preference.

The liberal tendency to neutralize antagonism, combined

with an excessive focus on negative liberty, ultimately dilutes the essence of the political. The discussion thus shifts from multiple theoretical conceptions of citizenship to the fundamental need to rethink the political space where this citizenship is exercised. It is in this space that citizenship can be lived as a living practice, where conflict and difference are not seen as threats, but as conditions for flourishing. This requires maintaining a political space that channels forces (Mouffe, 2013) and implies a pluralistic justice based on citizen engagement. The redefinition of this space is crucial to accommodate the plurality of modern society, a theme that will be deepened through Carl Schmitt's ontology of the political below.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Theoretical Foundations: The Schmittian Critique and Discourse Theory

To comprehend Mouffe's (2013) agonistic proposal, it is fundamental to revisit its theoretical bases: Carl Schmitt's (1992) ontology of the political and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory. The articulation of these two currents allows for a diagnosis of the insufficiency of liberal universalism and offers a grammar for constructing political identities.

The analysis starts from the realization that liberalism harbors a deep aversion to the "political," systematically attempting to annihilate politics as a sphere of conquering power. As Carl Schmitt points out, liberal thought transforms political concepts: conflict is diluted into mere economic competition or ethical discussion, and the State is reduced to an instrument for ensuring the conditions of individual liberty (Schmitt, 1992, p. 98). The fundamental error of this perspective lies in the attempt to ignore that the domain of the political is that of concrete reality and existential decisions, not of normative abstractions (Schmitt, 1992, p. 99).

This liberal blindness becomes critical when applied to democracy. While liberalism is based on a moral discourse of universal human rights that seeks to encompass all of humanity, democracy operates on a distinct logic: it is essentially political and presupposes a demos a people defined by an act of delimitation (Schmitt, 1985 as cited in Mouffe, 2000, pp. 39-40). This act necessarily involves drawing frontiers between inclusion and exclusion; a political unit cannot exist without the distinction between allies and opponents.

Mouffe appropriates this insight to demonstrate that, without a defined political entity, there cannot be a "people" with an identifiable will. In the domain of the political, "people do not confront each other as abstractions, but as politically interested and politically determined individuals" (Schmitt as cited in Mouffe, 2000, p. 41). The liberal insistence on universal human equality, by attempting to erase the "us/them" frontier, ends up weakening the very possibility of exercising popular sovereignty, for "in the sphere of the political, one cannot abstract out what is political" (Schmitt, 1985

as cited in Mouffe, 2000, p. 40).

If Schmitt (1992) provides the ontology of conflict, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory offers the analytical tools to understand how these political identities are constructed within a social sphere marked by contingency.

The central premise is the "ontology of difference," which rejects the idea of a fixed essence or an organizing center of society. Meaning is never definitive but is always under construction, since "the sign is the name of a fissure, of an impossible suture between signifier and signified" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015, p. 188, our translation). In this context, identity is not a pre-existing datum, but the result of an articulatory practice. Articulation consists of the union of diverse elements that, when related, modify their identities, forming a new meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2015, p. 167).

It is in this scenario of incompleteness that the concept of hegemony becomes central. Since the social is never a closed totality, hegemony emerges as the possibility of creating a dominant discourse and a temporary social order when a fixed understanding is not possible (Nascimento, 2020, p. 33). Hegemony is, therefore, a political project that attempts to fix the meaning of key concepts such as "citizenship" by articulating diverse demands around a nodal point.

Thus, the construction of a political identity (the "us") occurs through the articulation of a "chain of equivalence." Particular demands, which could remain dispersed, are united under a single signifier such as "social justice" to form a frontier against a common antagonism (Nascimento, 2020, p. 40). In this way, political identity reveals itself not as a natural essence, but as a precarious hegemonic construction, always subject to displacements and re-articulations within a field of permanent conflictuality.

The Strategy: Left Populism

Faced with the crisis of representation and neoliberal hegemony, Mouffe proposes the "Left Populist Strategy" (2018) not only as an analytical tool but as a vision of active citizenship capable of revitalizing democratic politics. The central objective is not consensus, but the construction of a collective will capable of radicalizing democracy.

The fundamental premise of this strategy is that "the people" does not constitute a pre-existing empirical referent, nor a given sociological entity. On the contrary, its construction is a discursive and eminently political process. Mouffe emphasizes that the goal is not to create a homogeneous subject, but rather to forge a collective will through what she terms a "chain of equivalence" (Mouffe, 2018).

This political operation necessarily requires the designation of an adversary. A chain of equivalence is not a simple coalition of groups with disparate interests; it is formed when heterogeneous democratic demands (whether ecological, social, or civil) articulate themselves

around a common signifier, uniting in opposition to a “them,” be it the oligarchy or the neoliberal establishment (Mouffe, 2018). The political identity of “the people” is, therefore, forged in this tension: it emerges from the articulation of diverse demands that, while maintaining their specificity, find equivalence in their shared opposition to the hegemonic order.

For Mouffe, the efficacy of this strategy lies in its capacity to mobilize political passions, recognizing that democratic politics is not driven solely by rational arguments, but fundamentally by affects. The formation of a collective will is driven by “shared affects,” and the figure of charismatic leaders can play a crucial role in the crystallization of these emotional bonds necessary for mobilization (Mouffe, 2018).

Unlike Schmitt’s authoritarian decisionism, where the leader suspends the legal order, in left populism, leadership serves as a point of articulation that must remain responsive to the base, ensuring that the construction of the people does not annul plurality. The ultimate goal of this affective mobilization is to “radicalize democracy”: to recover and extend the democratic values of liberty and equality to new spheres of social life, combating the depoliticization promoted by the post-political consensus (Mouffe, 2018).

Thus, active citizenship is redefined not as a passive legal status, but as a “grammar of conduct” that allows individuals to become part of “the people” (Mouffe, 2018). This strategy operates in a double dimension: occupying representative institutions (vertical) and energizing social movements (horizontal), transforming the State into a space of agonistic contestation rather than mere technocratic management (Mouffe, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Deficit and the Normative Vacuum

Although Mouffe’s work redefines citizenship not merely as a legal status for the aggregation of preferences but as a discursive attempt to construct a hegemonic identity established through antagonism, it faces significant practical limitations. As Daniel de Mendonça (2010) argues, while Mouffe successfully deconstructs deliberative consensus, she stops short of providing a structured “agonistic model.” This theoretical gap leaves the practice of citizenship underdefined; without concrete institutional mechanisms, it remains unclear how this agonistic identity can be effectively exercised within a democratic framework.

Consequently, citizenship is inherently an unfinished project. Since there is no ideal or final society to be reached—only a plurality of contingent possibilities—the identity of the citizen can never be fully fixed. Mendonça reinforces this point by drawing on the concept of the “impossibility of society,” arguing that it is unfeasible to apprehend the social as a unitary or finished object, for discursive structures remain perpetually open and marked by incompleteness (Mendonça, 2010, p. 482).

In this context of incompleteness, Mouffe’s recent work,

For a Left Populism (2018), presents a specific political project: the attempt to construct “a people” and, by extension, a radical idea of citizenship. Mendonça assists in understanding this operation through the concept of hegemony, which functions as a way to fill this constitutive void. He highlights Laclau’s understanding of hegemony as the process by which a specific element transcends its own particularity to represent an impossible universality, temporarily occupying the place of a totality that is, in fact, unreachable (Mendonça, 2010, p. 484).

Beyond this understanding of hegemony, it is crucial to note the paradoxical nature of discursive constitution, where the “other” (the exterior) is not just an enemy that destroys the cohesion of the “us” (the interior), but acts as the very frontier that allows this “us” to define itself and take shape (Mendonça, 2010, p. 486). Therefore, in Mouffe’s view, citizenship cannot be inclusive of everyone without losing its meaning. For citizens to exist, there must necessarily be something or someone defining the limit. This ontological dependence on exclusion contrasts directly with political models that seek universal inclusion through rational agreements.

Mendonça reaffirms Mouffe’s warning regarding the danger of “rational consensus.” By attempting to eliminate passion and conflict, deliberative models—such as those proposed by Rawls and Habermas—effectively depoliticize citizenship. Within this framework, consensus acts as a “suture,” or a temporary closure of the social. The rationalism of Rawls and Habermas attempts to mask the political nature of laws; proposals founded exclusively on rationality risk eliminating the necessary distinction between justice and law, operating a closure of the political space that is, in reality, the very condition of possibility for democracy (Mendonça, 2010, p. 488).

Additionally, consensus is inherently a form of exclusion, for the discourse of “rational” consensus silences dissidents, framing them as irrational. Following Mendonça’s reading, Mouffe’s theory invites us to demystify this consensus. Instead of a universal agreement free from exclusions—which would be an impossibility—consensus must be understood as a precarious hegemonic construction: a contingent political arrangement that, to exist, necessarily excluded other possibilities of meaning (Mendonça, 2010, pp. 487-489).

Consequently, Mouffe’s agonism offers a more realistic approach that acknowledges the exclusion inherent in any political order and views citizens as passionate agonistic actors. The fundamental task of democracy is to channel these passions rather than eliminate them. The challenge lies in constructing political devices capable of welcoming and giving public existence to these impulses, rather than denying them in the name of rationality (Mendonça, 2010, p. 492).

However, Mendonça identifies a significant limitation in Mouffe’s independent production following her collaboration with Ernesto Laclau. While Laclau continued to refine the ontological dimensions of the social, Mouffe turned to the establishment of a normative political

theory. Mendonça argues that, despite this shift, Mouffe did not provide a structured institutional framework; her proposal remains an “incomplete model.” She offers only cursory references to potential frameworks—such as Canetti’s parliamentary conceptualization (Mouffe, 2005) or Oakeshott’s civil association (Mouffe, 1997)—leaving unanswered the crucial question of how conflict, reinterpreted as agonism, should be concretely institutionalized. Ultimately, although the ethos of citizenship is clearly outlined, the praxis necessary to sustain it remains theoretically underdeveloped (Mendonça, 2010, pp. 479-480).

This theoretical limitation requires a shift from abstract principles to concrete application. To operationalize Mouffe’s vision, it is necessary to confront the practical questions regarding this lack of institutional design explicitly posed by Mendonça: how can we effectively create or expand agonistic spaces? And how should a democratic system deal with those who remain excluded? (Mendonça, 2010, p. 495).

The urgency of these questions is deepened by the complementary critique of Alexandre Franco de Sá (2021), which reveals what fills this “institutional vacuum”: in the absence of concrete political forms, “moral combat” becomes institutionalized in cultural spheres. Without the political structures demanded by Mendonça, the agonistic distinction between adversary and enemy inevitably collapses into a moral crusade.

The Symptom: Moral Combat and the Collapse of the Agonistic Distinction

The critique of the institutional void, identified by Mendonça, is deepened by Franco de Sá’s (2021) analysis. While Mendonça highlights the absence of political design, Franco de Sá’s examination of contemporary political reality reveals what fills this void: a “moral combat” that, lacking adequate political channels, becomes institutionalized in the spheres of culture, universities, and media. The danger, therefore, is not merely that agonism lacks structure, but that, in the absence of adequate political institutionalization, the distinction between adversary and enemy collapses into a moral crusade.

Franco de Sá’s critique focuses on the direct consequence of the logic of polarization and binary simplification inherent in the populist strategy. By establishing the “people” versus “the elite” dichotomy (the pure against the corrupt), agonism risks converting the political adversary into a morally disqualified enemy. Franco de Sá argues that, although counter-hegemonic combat is the fundamental principle (*ratio essendi*) of left populism, its mode of operation tends to transform political conflict into moral terms (2021, p. 30).

In this dynamic, the unity of “the people” is not inherent, but performatively constructed through the exclusion of the opposing pole. This binary construction generates a moral asymmetry: “the people” is perceived as intrinsically good, while the “elite” is seen as corrupt and perverse.

Mouffe and Laclau’s citation regarding the “other” that prevents the full realization of the “self” is interpreted by Franco de Sá as the basis for this asymmetry (2021, pp. 31-32). When the “other” is perceived not as someone with diverging opinions, but as a holder of illegitimate privileges, the possibility of mutual recognition—essential for agonism—is excluded (Franco de Sá, 2021, p. 32).

Unlike classical Marxism, which saw counter-hegemony rooted in the working class, contemporary populism confronts a worldview naturalized by intellectuals and conveyed by cultural institutions. Franco de Sá notes that left populism directs its antagonism against neoliberal hegemony, which it classifies as a form of moral discrimination (2021, pp. 30-31; 34).

However, this strategy faces a paradox. The friend/enemy conflict, as employed by Schmitt, was notably political and did not necessarily result in the demonization of the adversary. However, by operating in an institutional vacuum, modern populism tends to convert political conflict into absolute moral combat. The populist leader, characterized by amalgamating demands into an undifferentiated whole, ends up representing a “void”: in contrast to the institution that differentiates and resolves problems, populist leadership only enables the manifestation of indignation and repudiation (Franco de Sá, 2021, p. 42).

This tendency exposes the fragility of an agonistic model devoid of normative safeguards. Franco de Sá’s critique reveals that, by focusing excessively on the political dimension of rupture, the theory may underestimate the moral dimension, leading to the transformation of the political adversary (with whom one must struggle) into a moral enemy (who must be destroyed). It is precisely to avoid this degeneration of agonism into pure antagonism that it becomes imperative to seek an institutional structure capable of containing conflict—a search that leads us, in the final section, to Michael Oakeshott’s *Societas* (1975).

The Solution: Oakeshott’s *Societas*

Faced with the challenge of normativizing agonism without suppressing the dimension of conflict, the answer lies in the conceptual structure proposed by Michael Oakeshott: the fundamental distinction between *universitas* and *societas*. To overcome the institutional gap pointed out by critics, Mouffe finds in Oakeshott a mode of political association that, although it does not postulate the existence of a substantive common good, implies the idea of an ethical-political bond between participants (Mouffe, 1997, p. 63).

Understanding this solution requires, first, moving away from the conception of the State as a *universitas*, or an enterprise association. Oakeshott argues that conceiving the State as the manager of a common purpose constitutes a “self-contradiction” (Kim, 2016, p. 279). In a *universitas*, the association is constituted by the continuous choice of associates to relate to one another for a specific end, retaining the freedom to disassociate

should the objective no longer suit them. However, since the State is a compulsory association, imposing a substantive collective purpose—a *telos*—would violate the moral agent's freedom, as there is no state-imposed "collective choice" that does not suppress the irreducible plurality of human beings (Kim, 2016, p. 279). If the State were to adopt this form, the existence of the association would be threatened whenever the divergent interests of members collided with the supreme goal (Kim, 2016, p. 278).

The solution, therefore, is found in the conception of the State as *societas*, or civil association. Unlike *universitas*, *societas* is a condition based on rules of conduct, not on the pursuit of a collective end (Mouffe, 1997, p. 63-64). Oakeshott defines this civil condition as a relationship of agents who recognize themselves as *cives* (citizens) "in virtue of being related to one another in the acknowledgment of the authority of a practice of rules" (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 127).

This structure offers the "cold" framework necessary to contain the "hot" conflict of agonism. In *societas*, the law (*lex*) is not an instrument to achieve a managerial objective, but a self-sufficient system that establishes the conditions of human conduct (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 129-130). Civil freedom, in this context, is radically distinguished from the freedom of enterprise: it is not submission to a "common will" (*voluntas*), but subscription to a common law (*lex*) (Oakeshott, 1975, p. 157). This generates a structure that engenders the individual's preferential agency without resorting to state perfectionism, ensuring a moral commitment to the intrinsic value of free agency (Kim, 2016, p. 281).

Mouffe considers *societas* particularly "adequate to define political association under modern democratic conditions" precisely because it recognizes the disappearance of a single, substantive idea of the common good, creating space for individual liberty (Mouffe, 1997, p. 63-64). By adopting this "grammar of conduct"—the *res publica*—as the bond that unites citizens, it becomes possible to maintain a common political identity based on the mutual recognition of rules, allowing conflict and plurality to flourish without destroying the association (Mouffe, 1997, p. 65; Oakeshott, 1975, p. 128). Thus, *societas* provides the stable normative basis upon which agonistic passions can be exercised without degenerating into destructive antagonism.

The Dynamics of Action: Politics as Conversation

If *Societas* provides the "cold" institutional architecture to contain conflict, it is Luke Plotica's (2012) interpretation of Oakeshott's work that offers the necessary dynamics for agonistic democratic practice. Plotica identifies a crucial affinity between Oakeshott's pluralism and Mouffe's agonistic perspective: both fundamentally reject the "Enlightenment dream of an ever-widening rational consensus" (Plotica, 2012, p. 294), viewing plurality and disagreement not as temporary obstacles to be resolved, but as permanent characteristics of democratic politics.

Plotica's central contribution lies in the critique of deliberative reason and the proposition of "conversation" as the adequate metaphor for political practice. He argues that deliberative democrats operate with a "rationalist frame of mind," visualizing democracy in epistemic terms, where moral and political questions are treated as "truth-apt" (Plotica, 2012, p. 299). In this view, deliberation becomes an inquiry in search of truth, aiming for decisions that would be "epistemically superior" (Plotica, 2012, p. 291). For a radical democracy, the danger of this approach is the impulse towards closure: by postulating regulatory principles such as "reasonableness" or "neutrality," deliberation risks imposing a degree of pre-political agreement that silences voices outside this "rational" framework (Plotica, 2012, p. 296).

In contrast, Plotica proposes Oakeshottian "conversation" as an "endless" engagement that accommodates conflict without seeking to eradicate it. Unlike deliberation, conversation has no predetermined destination, winner, or final truth. However, it is not chaotic; it demands a "thin consensus." Oakeshott suggests that conversational partners must share a "flow of sympathy" and a language of civility—a "minimal stratum of attunement" that makes communication possible without requiring a strong identity or a substantive common purpose (Plotica, 2012, p. 294). This attunement creates the structural condition for the adversarial respect necessary for radical plural democracy.

Plotica advances the argument by stating that Oakeshott's conversation offers not only a model of institutional construction but an ethos for democratic practice (Plotica, 2012, p. 287). In this view, politics inevitably involves making decisions, and each democratic decision effectively acts as an "arrest" in the flow of democratic conversation (Plotica, 2012, p. 304). However, when animated by this conversational ethos, these arrests are explicitly understood as temporary. This perspective avoids the "closure" of the political sphere, allowing "momentary impositions of tentative priorities" without converting them into absolute truths or permanent hegemonies (Plotica, 2012, p. 304).

CONCLUSION

The trajectory traversed in this article began with the diagnosis of the crisis of democratic legitimacy and the depoliticization promoted by Rawlsian liberalism. We turned to Chantal Mouffe for the recovery of the dimension of "the political" and the agonistic proposal as a way to revitalize citizenship through the construction of collective identities. However, the analysis revealed a critical obstacle: the institutional deficit in Mouffe's theory which, by lacking a concrete model to channel antagonism, allows conflict to degenerate into a destructive "moral combat" in cultural spheres.

The answer to this dilemma was found in the Oakeshottian distinction between *Universitas* and *Societas*. We demonstrated that *Societas* offers the necessary "cold" institutional structure—based on rules of conduct (*lex*)

and not on substantive ends—to contain the “hot” conflict of agonism without suppressing it.

However, for this proposal to be valid in the field of political science, it is necessary to situate this theoretical articulation within institutional practice. In philosophy and political science, there is a constant dialogue between normative and empirical approaches, which often work side by side. While philosophers elaborate ideal models, political scientists evaluate the efficacy of institutions (Tavares & Cunha, 2015, pp. 167-168). This exchange contributes decisively to the understanding of the principles that ground democratic citizenship, allowing the model of Societas to be not merely an abstraction, but a reference for the design of institutions capable of withstanding contemporary populist pressure.

In this sense, the adoption of Societas as a normative model does not imply a static or immutable structure. On the contrary, politics, understood as an endless “conversation,” presupposes that the very rules of civil association are subject to constant reinterpretation. Oakeshott reminds us that political changes must arise from the “intimations” of the community itself—that is, the potentialities for change already present in existing traditions and practices.

A normative model of citizenship must be capable of transformations over time, responding to new agonistic demands without breaking the civil bond. By grounding citizenship in the mutual recognition of the authority of rules (cives), and not in the moral identity of the participants, Societas allows democracy to accommodate political passions and hegemonic dispute. Thus, agonism ceases to be a threat of moral civil war to become the engine of a civil order, where conflict is protected and regulated by institutions that guarantee political liberty.

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