

Agonism in International Relations?

Written by Paulina Tambakaki

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PAULINA TAMBAKAKI, SEP 18 2012

Central to agonistic theory (and its different versions) is the assumption that differences and disagreements are constitutive of politics, and strife plays a vital, nourishing, role. Elicited by plural interpretations of the socio-political imaginary, strife challenges hegemonic ways of being and, according to agonistic theorists, ensures that democratic politics remains dynamic and alert at instances of closure. On one level, then, strife is central to the agonistic vocabulary because it instantiates the *agon* or contest necessary to 'undo' the given and the hegemonic. On another level, it is central because it attests to the pluralism constitutive of democratic life. Neither dispensable then, nor a problem to be solved, strife means politics for agonistic theorists, and points to the idea that a vibrant democracy might not simply call for the creation of an institutional haven, but for the cultivation of such ethos of contestation. Can agonistic theory with its emphasis on dissensus and suspicion of institutional politics contribute to international relations theorising? And the reverse: can international relations theorising with its twin focus on institution building and harmonious being-together give agonistic theory flesh and bones?

With critical approaches increasingly being integrated into international relations thinking, it comes as little surprise that agonistic theory is rising into prominence – to influence, challenge and expose hegemonic readings of the 'international'. The irony is inescapable, perhaps even inevitable. While agonistic writings[i] resist the primacy of institutionalisation, international relations theorising does not just invite, but also promotes the very institutionalisation which agonistic theorists are sceptical about – especially if we consider that, ironically, it is in peace-building studies that agonistic theory appears to be most influential. Then, there is the issue of conflict. Although it would appear in the first instance that the focus which agonistic theorists place on the constitutivity of conflict chimes well with the pluriverse of international relations, with the post-conflict and conflict-prone zones that international policy makers are keen to grasp and address, on closer inspection we notice an interesting difference.

While agonistic theorists emphasise dissent, critique and contestation, with the aim of securing political openness (an emphasis which attests to the radical credentials of agonistic theory), peace-building theorising inasmuch as international policy making acknowledges dissent and contestation with the aim of securing reconciliation or 'harmony of selves'. To be sure, openness and reconciliation/harmony of selves are not mutually exclusive objectives, but they are different – one hints to an eventual end state (reconciliation/harmony of selves), the other to incompleteness, to the constant interplay between fixity and rupture (openness). By thus diminishing the difference between the two, between openness and reconciliation, we diminish and perhaps even underplay the radical import of agonistic theory. This radical import does not simply consist in the assumption that we need to politicise (pacify) premodern types of conflict, but that we need to conflictualise politics, to subject *liberal democratic* politics to interrogation and critique. Indeed, liberal democracy is, ironically, the key site for agonistic politics – ironically, because it is precisely the western focus on liberal democracy that critical theorisations of the international confront through recourse to agonism.

This is not only because democracy means critique in the agonistic vocabulary, but also because critique (ideally) thrives in liberal democracy. Although, it could certainly be objected that by moving away from the one-dimensional focus on state institutions, agonistic theory does hold open the possibility for local variations of liberal democracy – especially if we accentuate the attention given to the ethos or attitude of contesting the given and hegemonic – the critical acceptance of liberal democracy is unmissable. For it is not institutions (state, inter- or non-governmental) which *instil* citizens with the ethos of critique, as state builders would like us to believe, but citizens who *exercise* this

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ethos of critique. Does this mean then that agonism, has little to contribute to international relations theory?

The answer to this question depends not on the version of agonism we adopt, Connolly's[ii] ethico-political version or Mouffe's[iii] institutionally friendly conception of the agon, but rather on the type of politics we endorse. For what agonistic theory teaches us above all is that politics, and international politics for that matter, is not out there set, fixed and closed, calling for institutional blueprints that would give solutions to 'real' problems. But it is collectively constructed, contingent, and incomplete. To return therefore to the second question we set at the beginning, whether international relations theorising can give flesh and bones to agonistic theory, it could be argued that by seeking to institutionally translate agonism, as peace-building theorising does, we miss not only the point of agonism, but also of politics. For uncertainty is both the lure and risk of agonistic politics.

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[i] The agonistic perspective consolidated into a distinct position on democratic politics in the early 1990s. With its emphasis on conflict and contestation, it offered a different way of understanding democratic pluralism to that of American political science with its focus on procedures and interest groups, and it challenged the emphasis on consensus of the deliberative perspective as elaborated by Jurgen Habermas. Key theorists identifying with agonism on both sides of the Atlantic are William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig and James Tully. Their work draws on the work of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt.

[ii] See the following books by William Connolly: *Identity/Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, and Speed*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002; *Pluralism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005; and *A World of Becoming*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

[iii] See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*. London: Verso, 1993; *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2000; and *On the Political*. London: Routledge, 2005.

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