Creative Democracy: Dewey and Mouffe

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In *Individualism, Old and New* (1930), John Dewey offers a critical analysis of what he terms "the religion of prosperity" in the United States (6). He claims that our materialism, our devotion to money making, our interest in private profit is "the serious and fundamental defect of our civilization" (15). In various texts, Dewey argues that social inquiry and creative intelligence must be harnessed and wielded on the technological and economic forefronts. He argues that we should reassess our human goals/ends in light of our ostensive (liberal democratic) commitments to liberty, egalitarianism, and fraternity, working to direct technological and economic developments toward social, rather than merely private, goods. In "Creative Democracy -- The Task Before Us" (1939), Dewey argues that the creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute is the continuous task of democracy (230).

While I agree with Dewey, I have often wondered about the rational and cooperative manner in which economic, political, and social inequities were supposed to be addressed in Dewey's model. Enlightened enculturation, education, and cooperative inquiry into indeterminate situations are held up as the preferred means of social amelioration. This, in essence, relies upon convincing fellow citizens, in face-to-face dialectical exchange, that some proposed change to the social order is best for themselves and the community or polity at large. As some have pointed out, this may be a bit too idealistic (Talisse). It may rely upon fairly homogenous populations that are open to the questioning and revision of their closely-held values. If consumerism and the accumulating of capital presently commands religious devotion, it may be exceedingly difficult to draw people into civil dialogue, let alone cooperative inquiry, regarding one’s critical perspective of capitalist ideology. And, even if people engage in discourse, there is no guarantee that a consensus or resolution will be established.

To highlight this apparent limitation in Dewey’s work, I juxtapose Chantal Mouffe's recent articulation of agonism and radical democracy in *Agonistics* (2013). Like Dewey, Mouffe is critical of neo-liberalism and its blunt advocacy of materialism, consumerism, and profit making. She shares a concern for the exploited worker and the underclass, who struggle under this ideology. Mouffe calls for an engaged radical democratic politics, yet she argues that “there will always be a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects aiming at presenting their views of the common good” (79). The articulation and re-articulation of the common world is exceedingly political and it does not take place in a neutral terrain in which observers could impartially decide if things have been composed in a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ way (81). Thus, Mouffe argues that a vibrant democracy relies upon on-going agonistic struggle (7).

Dewey and Mouffe seem to share certain commitments; notably, that social orders and norms are contextual and contingent, that democracy is the preferable mode of political engagement, and that the consumerism and profit motive of modern capitalism must be critiqued and attenuated. Moreover, much of Mouffe’s work takes the European Union (EU) as its context and object of study. This provides an imagination-expanding counterpoint to the typical ethnocentric, United States-focused political thought. I believe that a constructive amalgam of these two positions can be articulated. In the end, I argue that Mouffe's suggestions regarding agonism, aesthetic strategies, and radical politics may be a welcomed addendum to Dewey's earlier call for creative democracy.