



A Critique of Consensus Politics

Cecy Marden

In the title quotation Mouffe not only critiques consensus politics, but also endorses her own ‘agonistic’ democracy. The quotation therefore alludes not only to deliberative democracy’s failure to accept the plurality of society and the impossibility of a distinction between private and public, but also to agonistic democracy and the passion that is essential to it. This essay shall explore how Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, Matthew Arnold’s essay ‘Democracy’ and George Clooney’s *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) challenge and support the problems Mouffe finds with consensus politics and the solutions agonistic politics suggest.¹ I shall show that the blurring of the distinction between public and private is key to agonistic democracy, and at what points each text or film challenges the steps Mouffe takes to reach this conception of a well-functioning democracy. Finally I shall conclude that though Rousseau and Arnold accept the conflation of public and private they do so without accepting all of Mouffe’s presuppositions, while *Good Night* presents such conflation as too dangerous in the political climate of 2005.

It is important to clarify Mouffe’s attitude towards consensus politics. Mouffe does not explicitly mention consensus politics in her essay; she instead critiques two forms of ‘deliberative democracy’. However, this form of democracy is explicitly designed to enable consensus in which everybody willingly agrees to something, not as the best possible compromise, but as the definitive solution to the issue under discussion. Whether it is termed ‘consensus politics’ or ‘deliberative democracy’ Mouffe critiques any form of government or politics which is designed to reach purely rational, definitive solutions to political issues. She argues that definitive solutions cannot achieve national approval and therefore necessitate exclusion. The vibrant clash of political positions is not a means to an end; its continuity *is* the solution.

For the purposes of this essay it is necessary to outline at what point all four authors’ ideas of what a ‘well-functioning’ liberal democracy accord. Mouffe suggests that two opposing dangers beset current democracy; ‘political apathy’ of individuals and ‘a crystallization of collective passions’ into a non-democratic form, for example fundamentalism.² What these dangers share is the potential to undermine democracy. Rousseau is similarly concerned with the sustainability of democracy; he says there is no other form of government ‘which has so strong and continual a tendency to change to another form’.³ Additionally, although Arnold focuses less on the possible failure of democracy, he does note that if the middle classes do not guide the masses ‘society is in danger of falling into anarchy’.⁴ Finally, footage of Milo Radulovich, in which he states ‘I see a chain reaction

¹ In future I shall refer to *Good Night, and Good Luck* as ‘*Good Night*’.

² Mouffe, <<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/uon/Doc?id=10054146&ppg=135>> [accessed 10 December 2008] p. 127.

³ *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole and others (London: Everyman, 1993) p. 240.

⁴ *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 22.

that has no end' is used more than once in *Good Night*.⁵ He is referring to the possible repercussions of the cause of his dismissal; unseen evidence of the communist leanings of his family. The quotation implies that the actions which McCarthy is associated with are antithetical to a well-functioning democracy because they undermine the liberal values essential to it. Consequently, the basis of a well-functioning democracy throughout this essay shall simply be one that can endure.

As previously mentioned, Mouffe challenges consensus politics because she fears it leads to apathetic individualism and anti-democratic collective identities. She suggests that a well-functioning democracy calls for a 'vibrant clash' of political positions instead; 'the uniqueness of democratic politics does not consist in overcoming this us/them opposition—that is impossible—but in the different way in which it is established'. By 'vibrant' Mouffe means 'passionate'; in order for people's passions to be engaged Mouffe thinks that politics must engage with issues which we as individuals are passionate about, and which deliberative democracy tends to consign to a theoretically separate private realm. Deliberative democracy tries to create two realms because it is aware that there are some issues which consensus cannot be gained upon, that will remain pluralistic. Mouffe argues that not only is it impossible to have two separate realms of private and public/political, it is not even desirable: it is by publicly engaging with the pluralistic private that people will become engaged and passionate about politics and, specifically, liberal democratic values. Naturally, passion increases the possibility of dangerous antagonism. Mouffe views the role of democracy as a means of transforming antagonism into what she terms agonism. 'Agonism is struggle between adversaries' where adversaries are defined as enemies 'with whom...we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality'.⁶ It is through this agonism that Mouffe believes the clash between democratic positions is to be achieved.

Shirley Letwin argues that 'liberalism was the enemy for Arnold', I disagree with the extremity of this statement but agree that liberalism was not his ultimate goal.⁷ Though Arnold realises that 'liberty of conscience and the right of free opinion [...is...] invaluable' appearing to imply that, like Mouffe, he thinks that agonism is necessary for a well-functioning democracy, he qualifies this by saying that 'it is a fine thing to secure a free stage [...but...] the part which you play on that stage will have to be criticised'. The metaphor of a stage illustrates his belief that *what* is said is more important. Freedom of opinion provides space for thought – but this is beneficial primarily insofar as it promotes 'high reason and a fine culture'.⁸ Diversity of opinions was simply a means of reaching 'an ideal higher than ordinary man, taken by himself'. It is specifically and repeatedly 'an' ideal, singular, that is needed to make a great nation.⁹ He argues that the State should be put in a position to set this ideal, this 'standard of rational and equitable action' as it must present the best self of everyone.¹⁰ Through this best self and right reason consensus will be reached and there will be no need for continuous debate.

Rousseau recognises that if there is no debate within politics although it is easier to produce action, there is no reason that that action will produce public happiness.¹¹ However, he argues that 'there is no government so subject to ... intestine agitations as democratic or popular government'. His solution, so far as he thinks there is one, is to stipulate that one of the

⁵ *Good Night*, (12, 20)

⁶ Mouffe, p. 126.

⁷ 'Matthew Arnold: Enemy of Tradition' *Political Theory* 10 (1982) 333-351 (p. 335)
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190559>> [accessed 20 December 2008]

⁸ Arnold, p. 20.

⁹ Arnold, p. 14.

¹⁰ Arnold, p. 24.

¹¹ Rousseau, p. 244.

conditions for democracy is to remove much of the inequality within the private realm as without it 'equality of rights and authority cannot long subsist'.¹² This 'systematic abolition of the other' is only one of several conditions, but it makes clear that Rousseau thinks the way to avoid antagonism and have a well-functioning to democracy is to erase difference and reach consensus rather than encourage antagonism to take a different form.¹³

The main narrative of *Good Night* is the opening up of debate, which is depicted through the news team of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy and his actions. *Good Night* comments not only on how McCarthy stifled debate in America but also on how debate was being stifled in 2005, due to the possible threat of Islamic terrorism. In Edward Murrow's (David Strathairn) first controversial broadcast he says that 'this is a subject which should be argued about endlessly' (21) and later instructs people not to keep silent (43). Continuous discussion, without necessarily any resolution, is desired. Murrow's use of a quotation from McCarthy is a neat example of the relationships between consensus, agonism and antagonism. Murrow quotes McCarthy saying that 'the republic cannot endure very long as a one party system'(40) implying that the 'fight' against communism therefore cannot be made antagonistic to the extent that it will destroy all those on one side of it. Murrow's solution is to highlight that the debate simply should not be so antagonistic that people are afraid to speak, while McCarthy's solution is to suggest that consensus must be reached to save the republic. McCarthy does not recognise the possibility of agonism, while Murrow seems to be aware that what makes democracy unique is the possibility of having adversaries not enemies. Throughout the broadcast democratic debate is represented through the juxtaposition of multitudinous images of McCarthy and Murrow's faces as they speak.

The second strand of Mouffe's proposal is the role of passion within the political realm. She believes that in order to engage the public democracy should mobilise passion rather than focus solely on the role of reason.¹⁴ Passion is necessary to secure allegiance to democratic values, and if democracy recognises passions other than this that individuals hold then they will feel acknowledged.¹⁵ Passionate involvement would be an automatic result of continually engaging with a wider range of issues, which Mouffe argues would lead to the requisite clashes. Democracy could then transform any antagonistic clashes into agonistic clashes. Though Rousseau and Clooney appreciate the advantages of passionate politics, it is for very different reasons, as shall be seen.

In 'Reason, Passion, and Politics in Rousseau' Cheryl Hall argues that despite the emphasis that he places on reason in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau does promote passion within politics.¹⁶ The only mention Rousseau makes of either passion or reason in the section this essay focuses on is when Rousseau argues that 'everything conspires to take away from a man who is set in authority over others the sense of justice and reason'.¹⁷ This initially appears to undermine Hall's argument, implying that it is those qualities that are desired in a person of authority. However, Hall argues that it is self-love that 'properly extended, produces the political virtue of justice'.¹⁸ Hall's argument that Rousseau maintained this view of justice based on passion in *The Social Contract* is debatable; Rousseau may have moved entirely to advocating reason in politics. However, even Hall's passionate interpretation of Rousseau challenges Mouffe's suggestion that democracy must involve a vibrant, passionate

¹² Rousseau, p. 240.

¹³ John Charvet, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 145.

¹⁴ Mouffe, p. 127.

¹⁵ Mouffe, p. 122.

¹⁶ *Polity* 34 (2001), 69-88 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3235509>> [accessed 10 December 2008]

¹⁷ Rousseau, p. 247.

¹⁸ Hall, p. 84.

clash of political positions because Hall suggests that Rousseau distinguishes between public and private passion. The latter is irrelevant and the former is a form of consensus: ‘the best outcome results from directing their [the people’s] passions toward the right object’, converting them from individual desires into general desire.¹⁹

Good Night and Rousseau share a similar approach to passion and politics – Clooney supports passion for the shared ‘ethico-political values’ that Mouffe suggests, but once within the sphere of politics appears to promote reason rather than passion. For example, Murrow’s assertion that he cannot see two sides to the story (12) implies a limit to reason and a passion for liberalism, additionally he may have been less likely to potentially make large sacrifices for his beliefs if he was not passionate. However, his passion is purely for liberal, democratic values - he does not support Senator McCarthy’s passion for uncovering communists, based on the value of security. The McCarthy era events are framed by a speech that Murrow gives; Murrow is introduced as having ‘lectured and taught’ and his speech emphasises the responsibility of those in the business to use television to teach, and to inspire. Analogously, democracy too ought to teach and inspire. *Good Night* focuses on the aspect of teaching, through its narrative and form. Speeches are used throughout, primarily through Murrow but also through McCarthy, Radulovich and other politicians. Speeches place the viewer in the same position as a student, they remain quiet, listen, and learn. Additionally, the cinematographer Robert Elswit notes that, ‘George intended [...some scenes to be...] staged and photographed to have a fluid and more random-appearing quality’.²⁰ This quality is the quality of a documentary – it makes *Good Night* seem more factual and combined with being black and white gives the illusion of being a contemporary record of events at the time. For example, the first shot in 1953 is a long shot and follows two female employees of CBS as they arrive at the bustle of their office (5-6). They use a steadicam, similar to the hand-held cameras documentaries tend to use and the lack of editing makes it appear that nothing is being concealed. Shallow focus subtly directs our gaze instead without diminishing the trust that the film acquires by echoing the style of documentaries which we trust as factual sources. Additionally, the viewer is directly given facts by text that scrolls down the screen. Despite this *Good Night* is aware that, ideally, democracy and television should inspire. I think that it is impossible to be purely rationally inspired, inspiration must involve passion and *Good Night* shows television as a tool democracy can use to promote a general desire for ethico-political values.

Like Rousseau, Arnold does not place much emphasis on passion. However, he mentions ‘high reason’ as one of the things gained by liberty and industry and writes that ‘in times when passions ran high’ the aristocratic government was capable of misusing its powers in ‘matters of domestic concern...and religious exercise’.²¹ Private matters where passions are more easily involved should be kept separate from politics and it is when those in power become passionate that private matters are brought into the political sphere. Passions trespass on political issues. None of the three authors advocate traditionally private pluralistic passions being involved in the public arena as they are too dangerously antagonistic - perhaps the authors would rethink their positions in a perfect democracy which is properly able to mobilise the passions into agonistic roles only. It remains to be seen whether any of the authors theoretically recommend the inclusion of private *issues* in the public arena notwithstanding the problems this brings in terms of passion, and agonism.

Each author has challenged either or both agonism and pluralistic passion, consequently they must either reject the conflation of public and private, or encounter severe

¹⁹ Hall, p. 83-5.

²⁰ Jon D Witmer, ‘Production Slate: Public and Private Battles: Murrow vs. McCarthy’ *American Cinematographer - The International Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques* 86 (2005) 24-28, (p. 24).

²¹ Arnold, p. 20, p. 16.

difficulties as conflation makes consensus and pure rationality impossible. Mouffe insists that it is impossible to create a realm ‘not subject to the pluralism of values, in which a consensus without exclusion could therefore be established’.²² It is the belief that it is possible to maintain a divide between two realms which leads people to think that consensus politics is even a theoretical possibility. For example, it is impossible to reach consensus about religion, to maintain consensus politics there therefore needs to be a separate arena to absorb it.

As has been seen, Rousseau and Arnold both support Mouffe’s argument to a degree – they recognise that the private lives of individuals necessarily impact the public sphere. However, where Mouffe and Arnold embrace this impact (though for different reasons) Rousseau writes that ‘nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests in public affairs’.²³ His solution, as mentioned, is to try and alter the private sphere so that it aligns with the public sphere thereby minimising the effect that the private has on the public. McCarthy appeared to act on this principle; he recognised communism as a potential danger to capitalist America, and that the private sphere of speech and thought affects the public sphere, so he tried to alter the private sphere. Before further exploring *Good Night’s* attitude towards the divide between public and private it is worth noting that while Arnold embraced the impact that the private had on the public he was able to do so only by denying pluralism. As previously mentioned, Arnold believed there should be ‘an ideal’ that is propagated by the state but lived and perpetuated by the people.

Good Night shows the danger of conflating the public and private realms through the newsreader Don Hollenbeck (Ray Wise). Hollenbeck’s suicide is partially caused by public allegations that he is sympathetic to communism. As it is filmed, an obituary written by a journalist who accused Hollenbeck, is read in voiceover - the journalist unrelentingly and unapologetically has continued his accusations. It echoes Arnold’s warning that when passions run high in the public arena they interfere where they should not. Hollenbeck is shown watching television as he waits to die. A medium shot pans round from behind him to a close up of his face. It feels uncomfortable and highlights Hollenbeck’s isolation, he is accompanied only by the television. There are comparatively few shots within the film which include the whole of a character’s body, instead there are many close-ups of faces. This focuses on each individual in relation only to themselves and to the public events rather than with each other. Murrow’s closing speech warns of the possibility of television serving only to insulate people, which links to the isolating nature of the feeling of fear that McCarthy created. Often the focus point of the shot is partially obscured by objects or parts of other people, this depicts physical closeness but the fact that those objects are often out of focus or partly out of frame highlights that though they may be physically close they remain isolated. When the public interferes inappropriately in private lives it isolates people, unless they conform to its ideals as Arnold wanted. Though Clooney attempts to maintain the divide between the private and public realms, he also supports Mouffe’s agonism – it is primarily because antagonism has not yet been transformed into agonism that Clooney supports the divide. Though he offers no answers as to how a purely public realm can truly be created, he attempts to offer a solution to the problems that the divide brings – apathy and undemocratic identities - by emphasising the role of education and rational discussion in creating passion.

Although each author recognises that passion in relation to politics is desirable because it keeps people engaged, they are all wary of what that passion is directed at. They think there should be some consensus about what issues it is appropriate or inappropriate to be publicly, politically passionate about. Additionally, Arnold and Rousseau think that consensus within the political realm should also be aimed for. However, despite this desire they see more clearly than Clooney that Mouffe’s conflation of public and private is

²² Mouffe, p. 119.

²³ Rousseau, p. 239.

inescapable. Nevertheless, while Mouffe draws the pluralism of the private realm into the political, public realm Rousseau and Arnold believe the solution is to try and create consensus within the private realm. Clooney is very critical of Rousseau and Arnold's approach and cautious of Mouffe's method. *Good Night* certainly supports agonistic politics, but is aware that it is not yet a position that has been reached and due to the dangers of antagonism the divide between public and private ought to be maintained as far as possible. Ultimately each author deals with the issues that Mouffe addresses in a way that does not quite map onto Mouffe's vision.

Bibliography/Filmography

Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Charvet, John, *The Social Problem in the Philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974)

Clooney, George, dir., *Good Night, and Good Luck* screenwriters George Clooney and Grant Heslov (Warner Bros, 2005) dvd release date 14 March 2006, dvd distributor 2929 International, 93 min

Hall, Cheryl, 'Reason, Passion, and Politics in Rousseau' *Polity* 34 (2001), 69-88
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3235509>> [accessed 10 December 2008]

Letwin, Shirley, 'Matthew Arnold: Enemy of Tradition' *Political Theory* 10 (1982), 333-351
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190559>> [accessed 20 December 2008]

O'Sullivan, Noel, ed., *Political Theory in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2000)

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. by G.D.H. Cole and others (London: Everyman, 1993)

Witmer, Jon D., 'Production Slate: Public and Private Battles: Murrow vs. McCarthy' *American Cinematographer - The International Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques* 86 (2005), 24-28