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# CHANTAL MOUFFE AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: AGONISTIC EXPERIMENTS IN NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines questions regarding the alleviation and management of religious conflict. It will first examine the philosophical framework of Chantal Mouffe as a response to Carl Schmitt's critique of pluralism. Then it will give examples of conflict resolution and the preservation of diversity in such regions as, Lebanon, Indonesia and Thailand. Finally, it will examine these examples as exercises in "agonistics" as understood by Mouffe. This will be shown to be a valuable framework for conflict resolution and democracy in the ASEAN region.

## Introduction

The occurrence of religious conflict around the world is intensifying, from the Middle East to South East Asia. So an understanding of mechanisms of dialogue and conflict resolution is becoming increasingly important. Religion has often been considered as a crucial and integral part of the fabric of the national solidarity. It provides a powerful "*comfort zone*" and spiritual cohesion for the identity of a culture. But in many regions, such as in Lebanon or even ASEAN itself, the strong attachment to religious identity is problematic, since it leads to religious domination or violence.

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The strong attachment to religion and traditional culture might be natural, but this attachment must also be controlled, so that does not get out of hand and obstruct a basic respect for pluralism, which is important in an interconnected globalized world. It is only through appropriate conflict management strategies and respect for various cultural and religious identities, could the many dangerous hostilities we witness today be defused.

But society has always been conflictual, so we need to examine the role of conflict before we try to understand how it can be managed. The philosophy of Carl Schmitt which condemned pluralism, has long been influential. But as a response to this, Chantal Mouffe, focuses upon “agonism” rather than antagonism. This takes Schmitt a step further. She attempts to use many of Schmitt’s insights concerning the inevitability of conflict, while also showing how conflict can be a valuable part of a democracy or a pluralistic society. In order to understand the modern predicament, we must stop romanticizing the power of consensus and recognize how conflict can be accepted and adequately controlled and managed. This essay is an attempt to apply Mouffe’s insights to the preservation of religious pluralism and how the relationship between religions can be managed in non-Western societies.

Chantal Mouffe is well known for promoting the idea of “*the agonistic dimension*” and also for her idea of “*radical democracy*” which is based on conflict. In her argument against conventional political theorists and predecessors, Mouffe also promotes the idea of “*conflict*” as the key driving force in present culturally diversified society. This has been discussed in Chayathat Supachalasai’s essay “*The Genealogy of Political Philosophy: on the Anti-Consensus*”.<sup>1</sup>

For Carl Schmitt’s, the idea of “the political” is always distinguished from “politics”. While politics involves conflicting factions within a state, “the political” refers to the identity, unity and sovereignty of the state. For Schmitt, the friend/enemy distinction, is key to understanding the unity of a state. But this idea is hostile to the present-day culturally diverse societies. Schmitt saw religion as a threat unless it was incorporated

into the state. So Schmitt encouraged the politicalization of Christianity, through an embrace of “*political theology*” as well as his concept of the “*state of exemption*.” This is the sovereign’s ability to transcend the rule of law in the name of the public good and the nation state.

The rise of nationalism around the world which is now threatening pluralism seems to be an outcome of this world-view. But this crude nationalism undermines the diversity of the society which makes a society vibrant. The challenge in an age of globalization becomes how to retain an understanding of the importance of conflict which allows for the preservation of pluralism and democracy.

Chantal Mouffe, recognized that the global community needs a new type of philosophical mechanism in order to help them tackle the rising problems of diversity in an age of globalization. The philosophical framework of agonism is simply based on “*struggle*.” It is a political theory that emphasizes the potentially positive aspects of conflict. This is done by accepting that there is a permanent place for such conflict, and showing how people might accept conflict and engage in it positively by engaging in debates. But here, the emphasis is not on consensus but on *dissensus*. This is how Mouffe envisions an agonal democracy or radical democracy.

But this is nothing new. Such agonal mechanisms have been practiced for some time. This paper draws from three non-Western examples. Lebanon, Indonesia and Thailand. In these examples we see these agonal mechanisms played out in *Confessionalism*, *Pancasila*, and *ASEAN Centrality*. All of these are agonistic experiments which might become appropriate conflict management strategies in the non-Western societies.

## **Lebanon**

Religious sectarianism is the main cause of dispute in Lebanon. While religions can promote peace and understanding between people, they could also be instrumentalized as a powerful political device for destruction when violence is done in its name.

The ruthless civil war which lasted for more than a decade, and

also destabilized the whole nation, hindered progress and most of all, the path to envision a possibility of creating national solidarity and civil society. When all religious factions strive to make a political discourse based on the polemical issue of religious identity, national integration and solidarity is nonetheless, obstructed. Lebanon's survival may still lie in "*consensual democracy*" and "*confessionalism*",<sup>2</sup>

One of the problems in Lebanon is *religious domination* where one religion had an exclusivist view that could see no spiritual values in other religions.

This was initially followed by many powerful Maronite Christians, and developed into a Christian radicalism, which obstructed the path to national solidarity, when many Maronite Christians avoided justified power sharing with other non-Christian factions.

To remedy this situation, new political structures were created: "**Consociationalism**" (with reference to politics) and "**Confessionalism**" (with reference to religion). Consociationalism is a form of democracy which seeks to regulate the sharing of power in a state that comprises diverse societies (distinct ethnic, religious, political, national or linguistic groups), by allocating these groups collective rights. The executive-power sharing is mainly characterized by proportional representation, veto-rights and segmental autonomy for minority groups. The consociationalist approach consists in *accommodating* minorities, by granting them collective rights.

This comes to the final resolution of how the crucial issue of factional "*animosity*" and the Maronite Christian's religious approach which was based on friend/enemy distinction, was balanced with the recognition of religious pluralism and divergence variations. The heart of this issue is to eventually recognize that conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict itself! Also, according to Chantal Mouffe, this confrontation between the adversaries is what constitutes "*the agonistic struggle*" that is the very condition of a vibrant democracy in an age of globalization.<sup>3</sup>

## Indonesia

Indonesia today consists of more than 17,000 islands with the population of approximately 200 million people, who belong to more than 300 ethnic groups and speak more than 500 languages and dialects. According to Suseno (1985) in Javanese society, there are several ways to prevent conflict, and maintain plural order as well as social harmony.<sup>4</sup>

One of the fairly unique philosophical and political mechanisms to resolve tension in Indonesia is called “**Pancasila.**” It is what president Sukarno describes as a new worldview in an age of bitter “*identity politics*” and pseudo-claims to “*inclusivity.*” The tension Indonesia had somehow compelled social theorists to go back to foundational premises, to start all over again and rebuild a model of society based on reason, shared values, and individual autonomy.<sup>5</sup>

According to Alexander Seran, President Sukarno’s concept of Pancasila involved the idea that the struggle for recognition requires communicative action to preserve cultural identities while establishing laws on universally validating principles of morality. As Habermas’s theory of communicative action and Honneth’s theory of the struggle for recognition are concerned, Pancasila manifests the dialectic process in generalizing different cultural worldviews involving economy, culture, and politics and therefore Pancasila is compatible with the search for a moral grammar, through which the dreams of a new world can be built.

Moreover, the worldview of Pancasila is the recognition that we must meet cultural diversity half-way through the use of a suitable “*moral grammar*” to construct better arguments for all affected and to increase the capacity for all parties to make decisions which benefit them equally.<sup>6</sup> In connection with this unique approach of Pancasila, are the traditional mechanisms of “**Tawhid**” or “**unity**” which constitutes the very core value of the Islamic faith, which in Indonesia possess a vibrancy and dynamism.<sup>7</sup> Also connected are the dual mechanisms of “*Musyawaharah*” and “*Mufakat*” for consensus and conflict resolution and management in Indonesia. But we saw that Mouffe is critical of a simple reliance on consensus. This means that communicative action can also involve an

agonistic debate which is simple regulated by the idea of *Tawhid*, one of the five elements of Pancasila. Unity in diversity also involves a unity in conflict.

## **Thailand**

Historically, Thai people were adept at defusing political and social tensions within the society. And in the modern era, Thailand conducted flexible foreign policies, that successfully established ASEAN. However, over the past decades, Thailand is increasingly experiencing more division and hostility within its society than any other neighboring states in the South East Asia region.

Recently, Thailand has been experiencing unprecedented escalation of political unrest in its three Malay-Muslim dominated provinces, namely Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. The hostility between Buddhists and Muslims seems to have escalated as the local Thai authorities kept on employing draconian measures to suppress this unrest. This created backlashes, which exacerbated the violence.<sup>8</sup>

In order to defuse the rising tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims, we can consider the model of “*ASEAN Centrality*” which is the brainchild of Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, who is also the Secretary-General of ASEAN. He is the person who really understands the problem and rising sectarian tension, which had been plaguing Thailand for decades. A former resident of one of the Southernmost provinces himself, Dr. Surin possessed insight about this troubled region and so his model of “*ASEAN Centrality*” is well crafted for defusing the conflict as well as deep divisions within the kingdom.

In a speech, given in the year 2010, Dr. Surin made it very clear that ASEAN has indeed matured in the last 43 years, and that it is now taking its rightful place on the same platform among major global players for political and economic dialogue and cooperation. In fact, even the US President Barack Obama also recently described ASEAN as an “*organization of global importance*”

“*ASEAN Centrality*” means to use the regional organization as the core of connectivity or hub, and a viable alternative option or crucial mean to an end in order to conduct effective foreign policy, with the European Union as the inspiration. Although the regional integration of ASEAN is to be considered as loose and not as solid or rigid as in the case of the EU.

In addition, the term “*ASEAN centrality*” is used as a means to help the Southeast Asian region initiate and coordinate collective action, and to serve as the key hub connecting all major powers in the region, and although nowadays regional conditions may differ and vary from one state to another, regional clashes as well as tensions still run considerably high, with competing territorial as well as historical claims.<sup>9</sup>

### **Avoiding the Clash of Civilizations**

Conflict management and transformation in highly disputed regions around the world requires more than a single approach or mechanism, on the contrary, multiple approaches as well as mechanisms must be embraced. Only in this way can we diminish religious conflict. The preservation of conflicting differences is what Claude Levi-Strauss recognized as “*divergence variations*” and constitutes the world he understood as a “*pluri-verse*” rather than a uni-verse. It is only this recognition that can ensure the ultimate survival of humanity.<sup>10</sup>

The creation of a stabilized plural world order in the upcoming, foreseeable future would require the cultivation of profound religious toleration. Yet religious toleration is not sufficient in facing the political wrongdoings and sectarian divisions of various political as well as religious protagonists in the past.

Therefore, as our complex pluri-verse gradually unravels itself in the unending “*agonistic struggle*,” it is futile to totally reject it. On the contrary, the multi-faceted society must preserve pluralism by applying various collectively endorsed procedures or mechanisms, to manage conflict and to preserve differences. These differences are both political as well as the spiritual. This is what we see demonstrated in the discussions on “*Confessionalism*”, “*Pancasila*”, the Islamic Sufism’s approach of

“*Tawhid*” or “unity” / the approaches of “*Mufakat*” or “consensus” the approach of “*Musyawah*” or “collective deliberative” to be fulfilled simultaneously with the conventional religious approaches of Confucianism, Theravada Buddhism and finally the regional integration paradigm of “*ASEAN Centrality*”

To prevent conflict from getting out of hand, and to ensure that it plays a positive role, these approaches and mechanisms operate as pressure valves. They can also provide a necessary public accountability and ensure fairer economic and social transitions, as well as guaranteeing more transparent allocation of economic resources amongst the several contending religious factions.

The sectarian divisions and regional conflicts which arise in Lebanon, some parts of Indonesia as well as in the southernmost provinces of Thailand are the result of misleading public perceptions and the subversive attempt to create what could be labeled as a “*monocultural*” or “*monofaith*” climate of fear and distrust, which generally breeds hatred, intolerance and radicalism. Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic approach can be considered a viable attempt to “*rebalance*” the deep sectarian divisions in all of the religious factions.

Therefore, based on Mouffe’s philosophical approach, agonism is considered as a useful mechanism for the management of conflict between diverse groups. It does this not by enforcing any sort of superficial makeover, or by compromising the public’s cultural and religious identities, on the contrary, *the agonistic approach* ensures the cultural and religious coexistence through the recognition of conflict, which involves both the vitality, as well as its “*divergent variations.*” It does this in an intricate and even creative way, in order to ensure an *agonal*, yet peaceful society where conflict, and mutual development go hand in hand. It finally provides a model of democracy not threatened by plurality or division.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Supachalasai, Chayathat. *The Genealogy of the Political Philosophy on the Anti-Consensus*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Book Press, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2007, 19

<sup>3</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. (New York: Verso, 2013), 6-7

<sup>4</sup> Suseno (1985)

<sup>5</sup> Seran, Alexander. "Pancasila and the Struggle for a Moral Grammar." *Prajna Vihara*: Vol. 17, No1., 38

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44).

<sup>7</sup> (Ramadan, 2004, p.12).

<sup>8</sup> Nimanong Veerachart, "Thai Buddhists-Muslims Customs in Dialogue for Peaceful Co-Existence in Southern Thailand". *Prajna Vihara* Vol.13 No1-2, 2

<sup>9</sup> *ASEAN Centrality in the Regional Architecture*: Singapore Institute of International Affairs: (policy brief January, 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. New York: Verso, 2013), 40-41

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