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Against naïve pluralism in media politics: Some implications of the radical-pluralist approach to the public sphere

Introduction

In theorizing the public sphere and the relationship between media and democracy, diversity and pluralism are unarguably key principles whose importance only seems to heighten in contemporary debates. It can be argued that the theories and concepts, on which normative views of media and democracy build, have generally taken a marked pluralist or anti-essentialist turn in the recent decades. Symptomatic to this, the various neo-Habermasian conceptions of deliberative democracy and the public sphere have been increasingly criticized for overemphasising rational consensus and disregarding the irreducible value pluralism of today's societies. Instead of a singular notion of the public sphere, public use of reason, or the common good, theorists increasingly prefer stressing the plurality of public spheres, politics of difference, and the complexity of ways in which the media can contribute to democracy.

In part, the emphasis on pluralism can be seen as an expression of a general postmodern suspicion of universalism and unifying discourses generally, but it also constitutes a form of political rationality that directly concerns media and cultural policy. According to Nielsen (2003), for instance, the ideas that all forms of culture contain their own criteria of quality and that no definition of quality can legitimately repudiate another have broken the universal basis for defining cultural quality and lead to a 'pluralistic consensus' in media and cultural policy. The notions of quality, cultural value or public interest are thus increasingly conceived in a relativist manner, avoiding the paternalism of the old paradigm of cultural policy.

But doesn't this assign pluralism itself a status of a foundation or essence of democracy. As McLennan (1995) notes, it may seem that all things plural, diverse and open-ended are automatically to be regarded as good. But in deconstructing it, we are faced with questions of the following order: Is there not a point at which healthy diversity turns into unhealthy dissonance? Does pluralism mean that anything goes? And what exactly are the criteria for stopping the

potentially endless multiplication of valid ideas? In other words, how to conceptualize media pluralism as a political value without falling into anti-political relativism and indifference?

This question is particularly pertinent to perspectives that tend to conceptualize pluralism in the public sphere as a matter of multiculturalism, politics of recognition or politics of difference. While the struggles over cultural recognition of group and individual difference clearly have significance, they have not always cohered with the structural and political concerns found in critical and normative theories of the media and the public sphere. In this sense, Nancy Fraser (1997) notes a divide between politics of re-distribution, understood in material, institutional, political-economic terms, and the ethos of pluralization found on the level of micro-politics and the symbolic realm. It seems that in their denial of all universalism and systemic concerns, the discourse of pluralization has been incapable of dealing with macro-political concerns. Thus, for those explicitly concerned with institutional politics and media structures, the postmodern critique of universalism often represents an irrational threat to the modern democratic ideals. If there is no rational basis or common standards for evaluating the media, it is feared that relativism will take over; ‘politics of difference’ will lead to ‘politics of indifference’.

For Fraser (1997: 2), one of the main impediments to progressive political thought has been the incapacity of various radical-democratic and multicultural perspectives to deal adequately with the questions of political economy. Similar concerns have also become familiar in the context of media studies and media policy (see McGuigan, 1997; Garnham, 2000). With these concerns in mind, the purpose of this article is to take some distance from the affective resonance of the ‘pluralistic consensus’ and examine some of the contradictions inherent in normative and conceptual underpinnings of the present discussion on pluralism in media and cultural politics from the perspective of democratic theory. In particular, the article discusses the radical-pluralist, or agonistic, theories of democracy, and their potential significance in the context of media studies and media policy. The radical-pluralist approach, which I discuss primarily through Chantal Mouffe’s (1993, 1999, 2000) recent work, will serve as a starting point in two senses. First, she poses a fundamental critique of the Habermasian theories of the public sphere that has also been noted in media studies (see Jacka, 2003). Secondly, and more importantly, I argue that her ideas also pose an equally strong, though not as apparent, critique of the naive celebration of multiplicity as such. The second part is what her followers in media and cultural studies have generally failed to register.

Furthermore, the agonistic model of democracy is discussed here as a possible theoretical basis for bringing the ‘ethos of pluralization’ to bear on the level of media structures and politics. Drawing from Mouffe’s work, I will argue for a more *political* understanding of media structures and the public sphere. Central to the radical-pluralist perspective is thus the effort to question the inclusiveness of the pluralistic consensus and ask how plural, really, is the pluralism extolled in political and academic discourses today.

Pluralization and the public sphere

The bulk of the discussion on media pluralism as a political value is premised on the conceptual framework of the public sphere. As a general normative concept against which to assess the media, it is often attributed to Habermas (1989), but also more broadly, it is understood as a general context of interaction in which ‘public use of reason’ and public discussion take place and citizens in general inform and form themselves into the public. In this general sense, access to a wide range of information and experiences is rarely questioned as a precondition for citizens’ effective participation in the public life.

On reflection, however, it becomes evident that the concept of the public sphere also includes a strong aspect of commonality and unity. With aspects of both pluralism and integration prominent in the functions that the media are expected to serve in society, there seems to be an inherent tension between the two aspects. The media are often seen as a central tool for initiating people into a political community, creating a common culture, national identity, or a shared arena for public debate; aims that would seem in contradiction with the strong pluralist agenda. This relates to the idea in political theory that at some point the emphasis on diversity and pluralism runs against the imaginary presuppositions of democracy itself, that there is an inherent tension between pluralism and ‘publicness’ (McLennan, 1995: 92). Hence ‘the democratic paradox’; how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a ‘demos’ but nevertheless compatible with true religious, moral, cultural, and political pluralism (Mouffe, 2000: 64)?

Currently the dominant answer to this paradox lies perhaps in the theories of deliberative democracy, which have recently dominated the academic debates in democratic theory and to an extent media studies. As a third model of democracy beyond liberal and republican traditions, it places the normative core of political community in the political participation and the discursive formation of the public opinion – instead of some pre-political cultural community or aggregation

of pre-defined individual interest (Habermas, 1998). With added emphasis on communication and interaction in the public sphere, the ideal of deliberative democracy also underlies much of the discussion on the role of the media in democracy. In the neo-Habermasian understanding, the role of the public sphere and the media is then conceptualized in terms of the ‘public use of reason’ of free and equal citizens. The hypothetical media system built around this would then provide an arena for public debate over matters of ‘common interest’ that is open to all, free from both state and market manipulation, and oriented to the critical-rational formation of a consensual public opinion.

The ideal of deliberative democracy, however, has hardly escaped criticism over its treatment of pluralism and irreducible value differences, and the tension between commonality and pluralism has increasingly provoked scholars in recent years to challenge its postulates of universalism, generalizable norms, and procedural neutrality. Of particular prominence here has been the postmodern lash against Habermas, and its invoking of theorists like Lyotard and Foucault to discredit the medium of communicative reason (Villa, 1992; Gardiner, 2004). The emphasis on rational consensus, however idealized, has thus proved problematic for many who believe that Habermas’ discourse-ethical approach ultimately underestimates the depth of societal pluralism and the fundamental nature of value conflicts, both in the sense of cultural differences as well as structural conflicts of interest (Fraser, 1992; Bohman, 1995; Dryzek, 2000, Young, 2002; Benhabib, 2002; Splichal, 2002; Baumeister, 2003). In its abstract universalism, and stress on consensus and universal criteria of rationality, the Habermasian ideal is seen as leading to an over-centralized model of the public sphere that is incompatible with societal pluralism and that inevitably ignores inequalities between social groups and their specific needs. In contrast, it is argued that the defining characteristic of a public is plurality and it is irreducible to a single denominator, and therefore, a conception of publicity that requires its members to put aside their differences in order to uncover the common good is seen as destroying the very meaning of publicity (Young, 1997: 401). Or more bluntly, as Bauman (1997: 202) puts it: ‘Habermas’s ‘perfect communication’, which measures its own perfection by consensus and the exclusion of dissent, is another dream of death which radically cures the ills of freedom’s life’.

Influenced especially by feminist critiques of the Habermasian public sphere, it has also been claimed that instead of either individual autonomy or collective self-government, more emphasis needs to be put on the aspects of self-realisation and personal identification, which are usually confined to the private sphere and which rationalist political theorists of both liberal and republican

orientation have had little to say about. Thus, it needs to be reminded that the public sphere is not only an arena for the formation of discursive opinion, but also for the formation and enactment of social identities. In response to the criticism, theorizing about the public sphere has taken a marked pluralistic turn in the past decades. The most notable implication of this is the rejection of a universal or singular idea of the public sphere in favour of a plurality of public spheres, conceptualized as various differentiated arenas of public action or communicating political views as well as social experiences; a revision that Habermas himself has now largely conceded (1992, 1996, 1998). The singular notion of the public has been replaced by plurality of publics, and similarly, attention has shifted from the normative concept of rational consensus to the pluralistic complexity of contemporary society and various differentiated political structures.

But is it enough to just add more subaltern public spheres to the mix? Although even Habermas acknowledges the ‘fact of pluralism’ and value-conflict as inevitable, he continues to defend the ideal of deliberative democracy as an ideal based on the universal criteria of communicative rationality, thus retaining an emphasis on rational consensus as a universal regulative ideal which guides deliberation and legitimates the outcomes of democratic procedures (see Bohman, 1995, Baumeister, 2003: 746). In other words, although the arenas and levels of public debate have multiplied to many, there continues to be ‘but one public reason’, one universal standard of rationality.

Similarly, the problem of media and democracy is still set up as one of bringing the systems world under the control of the life world by means of some universal standards of communicative rationality and establishing the institutional structures that guarantee this (Garnham, 2000: 175). So by recognizing the ‘fact of pluralism’, but retaining the regulative ideal of rational consensus and the orientation towards the ‘common good’ it can be argued that Habermas has come to grips with the ‘fact of pluralism’ but not with ‘metaethical pluralism’, a view in which political life is characterized not by a search for the ‘common standard’ but by persistent conflict between incommensurable interests and values (see Crowder, 1994). The ‘universal-rationalist’ public sphere approach then underestimates the challenge social and cultural pluralism pose *both* (1) to the idea of shared collective identity, all-encompassing political culture and political consensus *and* (2) to the possibility of common procedures or forms of deliberation that are purportedly value-neutral. While the revisions made by Habermas and his fellow deliberative democrats seem to address the first point to some degree, the second point remains a central point of disagreement between the deliberative democrats and their radical pluralist critics, who deny the Kantian and Habermasian

conceptions of reason as the universal criteria of political legitimacy and claim that not only the arenas or the metaphor of the public sphere, but also public reason itself needs to be made plural (Bohman, 1995, 255-256).

From a pluralist perspective the problem with Habermas is thus perhaps more in the universal, monistic and rationalist form than in the political substance of his approach. For many, Habermas remains an archetypically modernist thinker, one who strives to achieve a high degree of rational 'purity' and conceptual order (Gardiner, 2004: 30). Typical for monistic discourses, according to McLennan (1995: 10-11), is that on a highly abstract level, they assert an unbreakable unity of theory and practice, running all the way down from the epistemological and metaphysical considerations to specific policy proposals. Although the social may be accepted as being complex and variegated, its essential workings must be analysable according to one primary and singular logic – like those of 'public reason' or 'communicative rationality', notions that critics claim will inevitably turn into mechanisms of exclusion.

From rational consensus to agonistic pluralism

Explicitly directed against such 'theoretical purity', the agonistic, or radical-pluralist, theories of democracy, of which I will focus on Chantal Mouffe's (1993, 1998, 2000) arguments, have recently surfaced as one of the most prominent alternative imaginaries in democratic thought. Following the above critique of Habermas, these approaches typically maintain that civil society is not harmonious or unitary, but rather characterized by conflicts of interest and irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, any system of rational consensus is seen as not only utopian, but also dangerous and necessarily exclusive. Mouffe represents here a wider radical-democratic critique of 'political closure', theories that seek to confine politics to a specific form of consolidated community that is implicitly oriented towards political unity. According to Bonnie Honig (1993: 2), most political theorists converge in their assumption that success lies in the elimination of dissonance, resistance and conflict, and thus they confine politics to the juridical, administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, or consolidating communities and identities. Thus, they rely on principles of right, rationality and law to protect their political theories from the conflict and uncertainty of political reality. In contrast to this logic of unity and consensus, radical pluralists like Mouffe thus claim to shift the emphasis of democratic politics to the processes of dislocation, contestation, and resistance.

The main argument of Mouffe is thus that models of deliberative democracy have not adequately theorized the themes of plurality, openness, and undecidability that they claim is central to democracy today. In stressing rational consensus and procedural neutrality as regulative ideals, she claims that Habermasian deliberative democrats inevitably exclude the articulation of difference and conflict outside democratic deliberation. As Mouffe (2000: 49) argues, ‘consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of hegemony and the crystallization of power relations ...[and] ... because it postulates the availability of consensus without exclusion, the model of deliberative democracy is unable to envisage liberal-democratic pluralism in an adequate way’. Thus, while Habermas conceives the public sphere as an arena of rational and critical debate leading to a consensus, radical pluralists argue that democracy should rather be conceived as agonistic confrontation or continued contestation. From this it follows that democratic deliberation should not be understood solely as consensual, but that articulation and clarification of social conflicts and identity positions should be understood as equally valuable to democracy.

Central to this argument is questioning of the Habermasian private-public distinction. In Habermasian theories of deliberative democracy, the key aspect is the separation of private, the realm of irreconcilable value pluralism, and the realm of public, where rational consensus can be reached. According to Mouffe, what this separation really does is circumscribe a domain that would not be subject to the pluralism of values and where a consensus without exclusion could be established. In assuming that all differences could be relegated to the private sphere through the construction of a procedurally based rational consensus, they ignore the irresolvable nature of conflicts over political values; they ‘relegate pluralism to a non-public domain in order to insulate politics from its consequences’. (Mouffe, 2000: 33, 91-92.)

However, while arguing for agonistic confrontation as necessary for democracy, Mouffe (2000: 103) acknowledges that there will always be a need for certain amount of consensus in liberal democracy – hence ‘the democratic paradox’. However, this need not (and cannot) be a rational consensus envisaged by deliberative democrats. Rather, she stresses that every consensus is provisional and exists as a temporal result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. What the deliberative models are denying, she argues, are the dimensions of this undecidability and the ineradicability of antagonism which are constitutive of democracy (Mouffe, 2000: 104-105). The key to the democratic paradox is thus that is not to be solved. For accepting the final ‘truth’ would mean the elimination of conflict and contestation. And if conflict and contestation are accepted as central to democracy, then its

realisation in a reconciled way would mean the end democracy. In other words, a fully achieved democracy is a conceptual impossibility, and for Mouffe, the substance of pluralistic democracy is found in the continuing contestation of all normative principles, not in their final definition or actual realisation.

When applied to the ideas of democratic public sphere, freedom of communication, media pluralism, or any other basic values used in normative treatments of the media, Mouffe's approach is bound to have some contentious implications. In many ways, Mouffe tries to present the current debates in democratic theory as a clash between the monism of the 'politics of closure' and the liberating anti-essentialism and pluralism of her own perspective. On the other hand, without taking stand on her epistemological claims, this also mirrors the division of democratic theories to those oriented to democratizing or rationalizing the procedures of decision-making and those confined more explicitly to the processes of resistance and contestation as inherently valuable. While both may have merits, the role of the media, or the public sphere more generally, has never been understood so much in terms of direct participation in state power but primarily in terms of critique of other centers of power. For even Habermas (1996: 359) has demoted the public sphere to the status of a 'warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive through society', and seemingly relieved it from the burden of solving problems or having to produce a rational solution to political questions. In this sense, it is easy to understand why an approach stressing the aspects of contestation and dislocation (instead of the utopia of rationalizing society through some universal principles) and which is more receptive to the multiplicity of voices and the complexity of power structures seems particularly attractive in the context of media politics. However, I will now turn to criticize the way radical pluralist ideas have been appropriated in media and cultural studies.

Agonistic pluralism and media politics

While the neo-Habermasian public sphere approach is often (and rather loosely) mobilized as a normative-theoretical backbone in debates on media structure and policy, for instance in defence of public service broadcasting, the implications of the radical pluralist perspectives for the media are much less debated. Indeed, it seems that the lack of institutional proposals or interest in concrete political questions is a rather general feature among the postmodern theorists of radical difference and pluralism (McLennan, 1995: 85). Most notably these perspectives have thus been used more as oppositional discourses or critical tools in criticizing various monisms of media studies and political

economy, and not as coherent normative theories that would pertain to questions of media structure and policy.

In absence of alternatives, much of the theoretical discussion on media and democracy has thus been either explicitly or implicitly based on normative models derived from the Habermasian notion of the public sphere. However, in light of the above discussion, it is increasingly claimed that this approach is unnecessarily pessimistic and one-dimensional. As Elizabeth Jacka (2003: 183) notes, if an ideal type of communication is imposed, one inevitably sees any departure from this as a crisis. As a carry-over from the pessimism of Habermas' initial formulations of the public sphere, it would thus seem that growing social disintegration and cultural fragmentation are inevitably counter-productive to the ideals media ought to serve, imposing a theoretical frame that Jacka calls 'democracy as defeat'. The pluralization and fragmentation of society come to be seen above all as a loss for the democratic media, and developments that do not fit the preconceived ideal are easy to dismiss as re-tribalization, dumbing down or trivialization.

Based on this, and explicitly drawing from Mouffe's radical pluralism, Jacka (2003: 183) argues that the dominant arguments in media policy and especially those defending public service broadcasting are based on an outdated and undefensible theoretical ideal of a unitary public sphere that has little relevance in today's society. Following Mouffe, she calls for a rejection of the abstract universal definition of the public opposed to the private realm of particularity and difference. Translated to practical terms, her criticism is particularly targeted at the elitism and paternalism of the criteria of quality and rationality inherent in the ideals of public service broadcasting, which she sees as leading to exclusion of certain modes of expression in the public sphere. Instead of any utopia of a rationally based common public sphere, Jacka argues that democracy needs to be seen as pluralized, marked by new kinds of communities of identity which break the traditional public-private divide and ditch the universal visions of the common good. Instead, democracy needs to be seen as based on 'pragmatic and negotiated exchanges about ethical behaviour and ethically inspired courses of action, then we will be countenance a plurality of communication media and modes in which such a diverse set of exchanges will occur' (Jacka, 2003: 183). This approach would then be inclusive of different genres of media texts and forms of media organization, not privileging 'high modern journalism' as a superior form of rational communication.

Of course, leaning on theoretical and practical recognition of complexity, diversity and difference in criticizing the 'representativeness' of public service media is nothing new. John Keane (1992), for

instance, has acknowledged as self-evident that the repertoire of public service programmes cannot exhaust the multitude of publics in a complex pluralist society. Instead, the public service claim to ‘balance’ is a defence of virtual representation of a fictive whole, a resort to programming which stimulates the actual opinions and tastes of some of those to whom it is directed. (ibid: 117). Undeniably, the commitment to balance will in some cases close off contentious, unbalanced views, favour representatives of established social groups, and in effect stabilize difference.

But it doesn’t stop here. Echoing the postmodern antipathy towards all kinds of social centralism and planning, the stress on pluralism and complexity seem to have been used in a more general critique of all kinds of ‘cultural policing’, seen as an attempt to stabilize difference, create political closure, or otherwise define the acceptable limits of pluralism from above. Jacka, for instance, seeks support from John Hartley’s optimistic notion of semiotic democracy that separates democracy from the tediousness of collective action and re-articulates it with questions of personal self-realisation. Hartley (1999) refers by citizenship primarily to identity and difference in the sense of identity politics, and invents “do-it-yourself” -citizenship as “the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns and opportunities on offer in the semiosphere and the mediasphere’ (Hartley, 1999. 178). In this formulation, then, ‘citizenship is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves’. Jacka and Hartley thus claim that there is a move in postmodern democracy from politics to ethics. Seeking ‘democratization without politicization’, they envisage a shift from political democracy to semiotic democracy, a future of post-political, post-adversarial citizenship that is based on semiotic self-determination not state coercion or paternalism. Crucially, for them one of the key developments that is making semiotic democracy possible is the growth of channel availability that allows for ever greater diversity and choice, catering to more and more specialized tastes and needs (Jacka, 2003, 188). Semiotic democracy is thus seen to realize when people can freely construct their identities by choosing freely from the ever expanding choices in the mediasphere.

However, based on this cheerful praise of individual cultural autonomy and choice, it is no wonder that many have argued that the stress on popular consumption, active audiences, and individual creation of meaning is actually rather complicit with the neo-liberal idea of consumer sovereignty (see McGuigan, 1997). In the center of such postmodern anti-paternalism seems to be the recognition of complexity and plurality, from which they derive a resistance to any central rationalist planning and a denial of any systematic or integrative meta-theories. Social phenomena

are increasingly treated as self-organizing chaotic systems that cannot be reduced to the logic of political planning or regulation. But what then is the difference between this and the libertarian discourse of consumer sovereignty, or the Hayekian ideology of neo-liberalism for that matter? Hence, it is easy to claim that without any systemic emphasis and in its denial of all universalism, cultural and identity politics are in danger of degenerating into narcissism, hedonism, aestheticism, or personal therapy, where they pose no danger and are immediately co-opted by the neoliberal discourse of culture industries (see Best & Kellner, 1997). In short, the spread of such ‘radical-pluralist’ perspectives is feared to lead to an unsustainable relativism and ‘politics of indifference’ that is complicit with the domination of the needs created by the market.

Counter-critique

With very few institutional or political suggestions coming from the more postmodern end of the field, the whole notion of ‘media policy’ inevitably seems to have the connotation of a modernist field of socio-cultural engineering, and inevitably, this mismatch of perspectives seems to lead to misapprehension. As Nicholas Garnham (2003: 195-196) has appositely argued against Jacka: ‘You can argue for as much pluralism as you like, but in the end, and necessarily, decisions will be taken that effect to a greater or lesser extent all citizens. Indeed, that is why we have politics at all and why democracy matters as a form of that politics’. One of the main philosophical problems with any ‘principled pluralist’ perspective remains thus, where to draw the line; how to conceptualize the need for pluralism and diversity without falling in the trap of flatness, relativism, indifference, and unquestioning acceptance of market-driven difference and consumer culture (see McLennan 1995: 83-84).

This evacuation of the distribution of power and resources, which becomes especially apparent in calls to replace political democracy with ‘semiotic democracy’, is what I will address here via Mouffe. The attempts to transfer the concept of democracy to the cultural sphere and to replace political democracy with semiotic democracy is probably an extreme example, but arguably, there is also a more general tendency among postmodern thinkers in their concern for discourse and identity and their dissatisfaction with representative politics to ‘evacuate’ the fields of political power and distribution of resources (see Fraser, 1997; Garnham, 2000, 2003). In this sense, however, the reception of the above-reviewed ‘radical pluralist’ ideas in media and cultural studies has been at best inadequate, and probably antithetical to the main thrust of Mouffe’s democratic theory. In many ways the argument for ‘democratization without politicization’ is the diametrical

opposite of Mouffe's main argument. For instead of standing for dissolution of politics into semiotic democracy, personal therapy, or individual do-it-yourself citizenship, Mouffe (1993: 113) herself stresses that democratization of any social institution is above all a political task:

What is at stake is our ability to think the ethics of the political. By that I understand the type of interrogation which is concerned with the normative aspects of politics, the values that can be realized with the collective action ... a subject matter that should be distinguished from morality, which concerns individual action.

Contrary to writers like Hartley and Jacka, Mouffe has explicitly denied the type of extreme pluralism that valorises all forms of difference and espouses heterogeneity without any limits – not because it would be in conflict with the common good – but because what such pluralism misses is the dimension of the *political*. Because of its refusal to acknowledge the relations of power involved in the all 'constructions of differences', such naïve pluralism, Mouffe (2000: 20) argues, is compatible with the liberal evasion of politics, and converges with the typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism. Mouffe's position here would thus seem to complement Fraser's (1997) criticism of cultural politics of difference that override political-economic considerations and valorise agency within communicative practices without providing adequate attention to communicative constraints.

So while Mouffe criticizes the essentialism of the unitary and universal-rationalist forms of political theory that tend to fix social identities to a closed political community, she also criticizes its opposite: a type of extreme postmodern fragmentation that puts an exclusive emphasis all kinds of heterogeneity and incommensurability, and thus impedes the recognition of how social differences are constructed *relationally*, how certain differences are constructed as relations of subordination, and how any difference in general only makes sense from the perspective of a specific politically constructed social objectivity.

The radical-pluralist approach is thus best interpreted, not as praise of multiplicity as such, but as a call to recognize the aspect of power, exclusion/selectivity and control inherent in all conceptions of the public sphere. For Mouffe, the key task for radical-pluralist democratic politics is to make the relations of power visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. Of course, this is what is at stake in above-reviewed criticism of public service media as elitist or paternalist. There is no reason to regard any specific institution as a universal ideal type, for the diversity or balance offered by any one institution is necessarily balanced only in relation to the social objectivity they are premised on. In this sense, the criticism of the 'representativeness' of public service media and its

underlying biases is probably well-founded, but following through on Mouffe's ideas reveals that her point is exactly that this practice of exclusion is present in *any* and *all* forms of communication, all forms of public spheres and will always be. Thus, there is no reason to think that the 'freedom of choice' offered by the market would be any more natural or any more separated from unequal relations of power than public institutions. On the contrary, it is one of Mouffe's main aims to deconstruct the articulations between economic liberalism and political liberalism that associate the market with neutrality and freedom.

The radical-pluralist approach is thus best conceived as a critical orientation that seeks to ask, how plural, really, is the pluralism extolled today? As such, it departs from the political minimalism of liberal pluralism, for in contrast to the conventional view that sanctity of the individual is best protected by restricting politics to its bare essential, radical-pluralists contend that spaces in which differences may constitute themselves as contending identities are today most efficiently established by political means (Connolly, 1991: xi). In this sense, it can also be conceived as a useful bridge beyond the dead ends of identity politics, and the artificial impasse between culturalism and materialism of cultural studies and political economy respectively.

From a radical-pluralist perspective, it is not possible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of hegemonic structures, general societal inequality and structural conflicts of interests. The stress on structural relations of power that prestructure 'free choice', limit the inclusiveness of formally inclusive public spheres, and structure discursive interaction and 'construction of differences' within them thus stands in contrast to both the Habermasian ideal of 'bracketing inequalities' in deliberation and Hartley's ideal of semiotic democracy, which actually converge in that they both ignore the realities of structural power that always influence the public sphere. Both assume a sphere of action that is somehow unaffected by the structural inequalities and power relations of society. Only for Habermas it is the discursive sphere of communicative action, while for Hartley it is the autonomous semiosphere where individual liberty can reign.

Beyond celebration: Recovering the political

It is precisely due to this separation of the communicative realm from the systemic spheres of money and power that Dryzek (2000: 26) has come to conclude that, if there is no sense that the broader structures of administrative state or economy should be further democratized, it is difficult to regard Habermas' theory of democracy as a contribution to critical theory (see also Marsh, 2000).

While Habermas assumes that participants in ideal public deliberation somehow bracket inequalities and treat each other as equal, his radical-pluralist critics like Mouffe claim that in practice, the structural inequalities are ineradicable and undistinguishable from the actual deliberation. Thus, the main question regarding the public sphere is not how to bracket or even eradicate the aspect of power, but rather to recognize it and make it visible so that it can enter the terrain of political contestation. Power relations can thus be modified, and room can be made for a plurality of different modes of power. Democratic media policy, like any social policy, would accordingly require 'levelling the field' in a sense of increasing the 'participatory parity' between unequal social groups. One way of setting the question for radical politics is to ask, what institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups and create plurality of power structures that are maximally open to democratic contestation (Fraser, 1992: 122).

Similarly, Mouffe argues that the political authority must define the public space so as to allow a genuine pluralism; at the same time, however, the way in which the public space and agenda are defined must always be open to challenge by citizens. Of course, this is not only an institutional question, but as Fraser (1992: 120) notes, it would be a mistake to separate cultural processes from structural inequalities, because the subordinated social groups are usually also lacking access to the material means of participation: 'Political economy enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally'. Deliberating as if all people were equals - bracketing rather than to eliminating structural inequalities – can thus in practice emphasise the effects of this inequality. Based on this, we can start to understand radical pluralist critique, not as postmodern celebration of spontaneous multiplicity, but also as a call for institutional restructuring and macro-political concerns that pertain to the political economy of the media.

In fact, the issues here are quite similar to the ones Garnham has raised regarding identity politics. While one form of identity politics is a claim for recognition and toleration, another aspect is a claim on scarce resources, such as access to the media, cultural subsidies or production resources. But as Garnham (2003: 198) notes, 'Too often there is an attempt to combine a request for recognition and a share of public resources that such recognition brings with it and, at the same time, demonize the very common decision making, the politics, that must inevitably go with such resource distribution'.

Pluralism, representation and the political

Based on the impossibility of an unregulated ideal public sphere which could be autonomous from relations of power, it can be argued that, in fact, all communication and all media are intrinsically regulated. As Peters (2001: 85) argues, ‘as long as a political life is not centred on a single place where people can assemble as a single body, the expression of the people’s voice(s) will always be inseparable from various techniques of representation.’

To understand the nature of these techniques of representation, it is useful to recall Mouffe’s conception of ‘the political’ and ‘politics’. By the political, Mouffe (1993: 3) refers to the dimension of antagonism and conflict which can take many different forms and emerge in diverse social relations, but which are always present in all human societies. ‘Politics’, on the other hand, refers to the practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’. Political is thus an aspect inscribed in all social action and while there is no way to transcend this aspect by reaching for a rational consensus, there will always be a need to make common decisions. And just because of her denial of rationalism or universalism, the only (democratic) way to make such decisions for Mouffe is through ‘politics’.

For Mouffe, the aim of politics is to create political community that transforms antagonism into agonism, a form of adversary where the existence of adversaries is considered legitimate and tolerated, where coexistence is possible (Mouffe, 1993: 82). In other words, what is at stake is the struggle to establish the ‘rules of the game’. However, based on the above, these ethico-political rules will have been constructed on the basis of some constitutive exclusion so the rules of the game also need to be open to contestation (see Wenman, 2003: 62). Now, taking a leap from Mouffe’s level of abstraction to the level of institutional practice, I argue that what is at stake in the (political and cultural) regulation of the media is best understood as procedures that establish these rules of the game.

Denying the possibility of perfect harmony or fairness means that there is always regulation either by market, public institutions, cultural elites, and the form of this regulation is constituted by the existing relations of power. In terms of conceptualizing plurality as either free choice or as balanced reflection of social interests, both ignore that choice and reflection require a prestructured notion of the differences that make the choice and which differences media should reflect. Instead, grasping

the aspect of power and ‘the political’ in all public spheres means that there is certain selectivity and exclusion inherent in all forms of public spheres. As Splichal (1999: 291) argues, the ‘plurality’ of the media as such is not a reliable indicator of a society’s level of freedom, since it may create only the illusion of content diversity by hiding the fact that all mass communication processes are restrained by different forms of indirect control exercised by both the state and private corporations, ranging from formal regulation to pressures of advertising and subsidizers. A realistic question is thus not whether there will be forms of *political* intervention in the future, but rather what form they should take, what values they are based on, and how these decisions are arrived at. Accordingly, the real danger of ‘naive pluralism’ lies in the mapping of difference onto an underlying hegemony. When pluralism is conceptualized (or celebrated) within a certain system of social objectivity, it becomes itself an ideological tool.

It is in this sense that Keane (1992: 118) notes that all media are basically institutions that distribute (cultural and material) entitlements to speak and to be heard and seen unevenly. Realistically, there is no media system that can exhaust the multitude of publics in a complex pluralist society and claim perfect ‘fairness’, ‘representativeness’ or ‘balance’. More broadly, there is a similar process of selection and exclusion inherent in all public spheres. These include selection of who has access to the public sphere as well as the themes and topics relevant to public debate, and perhaps most relevantly, they pertain to the definition of procedures according to which the selection process are legitimized and put into practice (cf. Nieminen, 2000: 173-174). From the regulatory point of view, such regulatory or procedural rules of ‘preselection’ can equally be based on public regulation, the market and consumer choice (or advertiser choice), some professional or perhaps moral-conservative norms, but in any case they are *political*, and inseparable from the overall power relations in society, in the sense of Mouffe’s definition.

Thus, none of these logics is ‘natural’ or inherently free. Furthermore, if it is accepted that the ‘rules of the game’ provided by the market are a social and political construction like any other, it is rather evident that there is nothing natural or necessary about the privately controlled media any more than there is about a certain institution of public service broadcasting. Thus, any simplistic equation of media pluralism to market competition or freedom of choice obviously fails to take into account the wider relations of power in which the media are situated. Contrary to the language of ‘the free marketplace of ideas’ where the market is seen as self-regulating and spontaneous mediator, the market itself is a politically designed institution, not a homogenous, unstructured and unregulated natural entity. First of all, the actual shape of the markets must always be crafted by political and

legal regulation and it hardly emerges *spontaneously* as a neutral mediator of civil society (Keane 1992: 119). Secondly, any market also imposes its own criteria of preselection and construction of difference. The point is then that every kind of system necessarily limits the range of public choices. In addition, all of them have a tendency to present this process of preselection as that of natural and neutral mediation while in truth their criteria are inevitably *political*.

Conclusion

It is in this recognition of ‘necessary exclusion’ that I believe the critical promise of radical-pluralist perspectives lies for both cultural studies and the political economy of the media. There is a need to politicize the ideal of pluralism and recognize it as not only a neutral objective, but as a contingent and contested value, whose definitions, limits, and evaluation criteria are all politically constructed. From the radical pluralist perspective, the ideal of media pluralism need not be seen in terms of choice for consumers, perfect reflection of social differences, or any other simplistic system of modelling the media after the existing social differences. It would not only be preoccupied with heterogeneity and diversification of options for choice as such, but on the structural (not only material) relations of power that define the criteria that guides the system of representation, and limits of those options on the level of both political economy and cultural-hegemonic values.

Critical pluralistic politics are then best conceptualized in terms of the contestation of both hegemonic discourses and structures rather than as some kind of postmodern play of identity and difference. Similarly, James Curran (2002: 336-237) argues that rather than its traditional justification, that truth will somehow automatically arise from either free competition of ideas or open rational-critical debate, media pluralism should be conceived from the viewpoint of contestation that is open to different social groups to enter. Implication of this is that key requirement of media pluralism is structural reform that levels the field and widens social access to public debate. The real issue for media policy would thus not be lack of information but information accessibility and openness, particularly to new and innovative ideas and opinions of minority and marginalized groups. The task of media policy from this perspective would be to support and enlarge the principled opportunities of structurally underprivileged actors, create room for the critical voices outside the systemic structures of the market or state bureaucracy, with principled aim of increasing the inclusiveness, and openness of the public sphere to various forms of contestation.

In many ways these perspectives imply rethinking of the traditional concepts of media policy and regulation, not least those underlying public service media, but not necessarily to the direction of shifting regulation more towards the market and celebrating the multiple identification that the market offers. Instead, radical pluralist perspectives can be conceived as theoretical approaches that if anything call for radicalizing the aims of democratic media policy. Also, the radical-pluralist approach that I have sketched above should help go beyond the dualism of political economy and cultural studies, for it stresses the irreducible inter-connectedness of the ‘politics of re-distribution’ and the ‘politics of recognition’, and the processes of regulation that are the same time political-economic and cultural.

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