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A CURIOUS MERGER IN THE SEARCH FOR A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL COMMUNITY: MICHAEL OAKESHOTT AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

Michael Oakeshott, one of the most influential theoreticians of the twentieth century, has been brought to the forefront surprisingly by a strand in democratic theory that advocates the radicalization of democracy. What is interesting is that Chantal Mouffe, the leading theoretician of the project of radical democracy argues that Oakeshott, who is known as one of the symbolic names of the conservative thought, could make an important contribution to their project. In doing that Mouffe is aware of the incongruence between their approaches but nevertheless she insists that Oakeshott's conceptual and theoretical framework can be incorporated into radical democracy. As this article shows, the most important parallelism between the two approaches is their concern with individual and his/her life choices and with the danger and/or impossibility of politics of uniformity as well as their focus on the general rules that are supposed to regulate the intersection between the public and private. But they seriously diverge in their approach to the processes through which these rules emerge, in short, to the concept of politics: while Oakeshott has a consensus-oriented conception of politics which has no particular reference to the conflicts, antagonisms, unequal power relations or hegemony Mouffe's conceptualization of politics is built completely on these phenomena. This in turn leads us to argue that these two approaches are indeed too different to be brought together or that the effort to bridge them is far from being persuading, since this pair seems artificial.

Keywords: Oakeshott, Mouffe, radical democracy, pluralism, difference, democratic politics.

Öz

Demokratik Toplum Arayışında Tuhaf Bir Birleşme: Michael Oakeshott ve Radikal Demokrasi

Yirminci yüzyıl siyasal düşüncesinin en etkili kuramcılarından Michael J. Oakeshott yakın dönemde umulmadık bir siyasal akım tarafından ilgi odağı

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haline getirildi. İlgi çekici olan, demokrasinin radikal bir yorumunu yapma iddiasındaki bir yaklaşımın en önde gelen temsilcisi Chantal Mouffe'un muhafazakar düşüncenin önde gelen temsilcilerinden biri olan Oakeshott'un kendi projeleri açısında açımlayıcı bir rol oynayabileceğini iddia etmesidir. Bunu yaparken Mouffe, kendi görüşleri ve Oakeshott'un bakış açısı arasındaki farklılığın ayırdındadır; ancak yine de Oakeshott'un kavramsal ve kuramsal çerçevesini radikal demokrasi projesine entegre edilebileceğini önermektedir. Bu çalışmanın da gösterdiği üzere iki yaklaşımın en önemli ortak noktası siyasal topluluk kavramıyla ilişkili olarak yazdıklarında siyasal topluluğu çerçeveleyen kuralların önemini, bu kuralların içeriğiyle ilgili olarak bireyi ve bireyin yaptığı seçimlerin önceliğini, bireyleri bütüncül toplumsal projelerde biraraya getirmeye çalışmanın imkansızlığını ve hatta tehlikesini vurgulamalarıdır. Ancak bu kuralların oluşum süreçlerine, yani aslında bir anlamda siyaset kavramına yaklaşımları neredeyse birbirine tamamen zıt kutupları yansıtmaktadır: Oakeshott uzlaşma kavramını esas alan, toplumun kendi dinamikleriyle şekillenen bir siyaset algısından söz eder ve çatışma, antagonizma, eşitsiz güç ilişkileri ve hegemonya gibi kavramlara hiç atıfta bulunmazken Mouffe tümüyle bu kavramlar üzerinde şekillenen bir siyaset anlayışını savunmaktadır. Bu ise aslında iki yaklaşımın biraraya gelemeyecek kadar farklı olduklarını ya da onları biraraya getirme çabalarının ikna edicilikten uzak ve yapay olduklarını düşünmemize yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Oakeshott, Mouffe, radikal demokrasi, çoğulculuk, farklılık, demokratik siyaset.

INTRODUCTION

Michael J. Oakeshott is considered as one of the most significant political theorists of the twentieth century. His views have been usually evaluated in terms of their contribution to conservative thought in the Western world. Recently, however, there was a change in the interpretative debate about Oakeshott, in the sense that his works began to constitute an important reference point in the discussions revolving around the concept of democracy. In Gerencser's (1999: 845) words, certain features of Michael Oakeshott's political thought have attracted interest from "an unexpected source, those who are advocates of radical democratic theory and practice." As is well known, at the core of such discussions concerning democracy, we see the questions associated with equality in the context of difference. All of those involved in the debate tries to find an answer to a very crucial question that Mouffe (1992a: 3) formulates as follows:

> How can the maximum of pluralism can be defended –in order to respect the rights of the widest possible groups- without destroying the very framework of the political community as constituted by the institutions and practices that constitute modern democracy and define our identity as citizens?

It deserves attention that in such a context there has been a revived interest in Oakeshott's political philosophy. For instance, Mouffe, as a central figure in the debates about democracy, has given a central place to Oakeshott's views in her influential works that advocates radical democracy. She has built her basic arguments upon central themes of Oakeshott's political thought on the grounds that she has found a theoretical potential in his work. At this point, one is tended to ask, why this is the case, that is to say, why look to Oakeshott while there are a number of political theorists to draw upon for a democratic theory? More specifically, why an advocate of a "radicalization" of democracy draws upon a figure who is well known for his conservative disposition? Actually, the starting point of this study is this question and hence it will, to a great extent, be based upon an analysis of the ways in which an important strand in contemporary democratic theory tries to come to terms with the question of plurality by incorporating Oakeshott's framework into its own. Nevertheless, the main contention of this article is that although in some cases there is much to be gained from bridging different theoretical standpoints, the coupling between Oakeshott and radical democracy seems highly artificial.

This article starts with an overview of the major themes and questions that Oakeshott dealt with in analyzing the relationship between individual and political community. Then, it will highlight the central themes of the debate about a radicalization of democracy, and the main criticisms directed by the advocates of this approach towards the dominant understanding of democracy (i.e. liberal democracy). After doing that it will try to delineate the essentials of the alternative vision that the project of radical democracy brings to the fore and discuss the place of Oakeshott's views in this alternative vision.

1. OAKESHOTT ON RATIONALITY, REASON, PLURALITY, AND THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Oakeshott's critique of rationalism lies at the centre of his thought. It is necessary; therefore, to grasp the essence of this critique in order to understand his views about experience, knowledge, human conduct, politics and the state. Before an analysis of his critique of rationalism, however, we should look at how he defines rationalism and its main characteristics. In a letter to Karl Popper Oakeshott (1948) says, "When I argue against *rationalism* I do not argue

against *reason.* Rationalism in my sense is, among other things, thoroughly *un*reasonable."[1] This is an interesting sentence that deserves attention. What does 'rationality' mean for Oakeshott and what does 'reason' refer to in his formulation? What constitutes the essence of his critique of rationalism and of his alternative understanding of reason? Oakeshott (1962a:1) characterizes rationalism as "the most remarkable intellectual fashion of post-Renaissance Europe." According to him, although it is not the only or the most fruitful fashion in modern European political thinking, rationalism in politics is strong and it has come to colour the ideas of all political persuasions. He argues that "almost all politics today have become rationalist or near-Rationalist" (1962a: 1). At this point we should point out that when we consider the time period during which Oakeshott's major works appeared, we see that his position was that of an opposition to the mainstream politics of the time. As Eccleshall (1992: 173) points out, "what seems to have prompted Oakeshott to reflect more explicitly about the nature of politics was the penchant of post-war Europe for economic planning. Certainly, he was appalled by the reforming zeal of the British Labour government of 1945-1951." When we look at his definition of "the general character and disposition of the rationalist" we see that the rationalist for Oakeshott stands for independence of mind on all occasions; he stands for thought free from obligation to any authority except the authority of 'reason'; he is the enemy of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual (Oakeshott, 1962a: 1). He defines the Rationalist's "mental attitude" as "at once sceptical and optimistic":

> Skeptical because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely believed that he hesitates to question it and to judge by what he calls his 'reason'; optimistic because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his reason.... to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action. Moreover, he is fortified by a belief in a 'reason' common to all mankind, a common power of rational consideration which is the ground and inspiration of argument (Oakeshott, 1962a: 1-2).

According to the rationalist, "the unhindered human reason" is an "infallible guide in political activity: "Consequently, much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect; and the rest is rational administration, 'reason' exercising an uncontrolled jurisdiction over the circumstances of the case." (Oakeshott, 1962a: 4). It becomes clear from those quotations that Oakeshott defines rationalism as a doctrine that takes reason to mean as the pipeline to the universal truth and certainty. It is the idea that through the guidance of reason, which is common to all humanity, it is possible

to reach general abstract principles about *the ideal* or about *the best* for all. Oakeshott strongly rejects this formulation of reason and the consequent understanding of rational politics. The main reason for his rejection is his claim that such an understanding results in "the assimilation of politics to engineering." "The conduct of affairs for the Rationalist, is a matter of solving problems... political life is resolved into a succession of crises each to be surmounted by the application of 'reason' (Oakeshott, 1962a: 4).

Oakeshott (1962a: 5) argues that rationalist politics has two components: one of them is the *politics of perfection* and the other is the *politics of uniformity*. For him, "the essence of rationalism is their combination". For the Rationalist, politics can consist only in solving problems and there can be no problem without a 'rational' solution; besides, the rational solution of any problem is, in its nature, 'the perfect solution'. There is no place in the rationalist scheme for a 'best in circumstances', only a place for 'the best'; because the function of reason is precisely to surmount circumstances. In other words, in rationalism there is the belief that reason is supposed to point out "the best" irrespective of the circumstances, meaning irrespective of social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of any society. There is the view that "all rational preferences necessarily coincide". This is how, in Oakeshott's view, the politics of perfection leads to the politics of uniformity. As a result, "political activity is recognized as the imposition of a uniform condition of perfection upon human conduct."

After considering the way Oakeshott defines the main characteristics of rationalist politics we can now look at his objections to that disposition. According to Oakeshott, the rationalist politics, with its emphasis on reason, politics of perfection and politics of uniformity, has led to a certain understanding of the state, which is "state as an enterprise association". This association is not the ideal condition in his view, but it has somehow (and unfortunately for Oakeshott) become the most widespread. Enterprise association denotes an understanding of the state as an association whose aim is to pursue a common goal. In the second essay of his book *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott deals extensively with that notion as well as the alternative that he proposes. He defines enterprise association as "...relationship in terms of the pursuit of some common purpose, some substantive condition of things to be jointly procured, or some common interest to be continuously satisfied" (Oakeshott, 1975: 114). What is most important in such a scheme is the reduction of individuals to mere "role players" and hence Oakeshott strongly rejects the view that identifies enterprise association with civil relationship:

> Some writers takes this view of the matter, because they mistakenly think there is no alternative to it... they find it impossible to imagine association except in terms of a common purpose... They are concerned to celebrate or to believe it to be of supreme worth, or, as they say, the only mode of relationship in which the 'social' nature of man is fully requited (Oakeshott, 1975: 118).

Oakeshott, on the other hand, opposes the idea that enterprise association is the ideal condition and that there is no alternative to it. He proposes the concept of "civil association" as an alternative way of conceptualizing the state. Before going into the details of this alternative model, however, we should first grasp Oakeshott's thought about reason and knowledge, individuality and contingency, all of which are central to his thoughts about politics. As Shirley Letwin (1978: 53) points out, rationalism takes it for granted "reason is the power to discover a system of laws... Reasoning is identified with starting from a universal truth and deducing from it a particular conclusion." Our world, it is argued, presents us a picture of confusing variety and frequent, irregular change; it is difficult for us to cope with it. Only by using reason this 'chaos' can be reduced to order. Rationalism supposes to "allow us to hope that by exercising our reason we can put everything into a clearly defined place in a single system" (Letwin, 1978: 53). Oakeshott opposes to such an understanding of the world around us and develops instead, "a thesis of the primacy of practice" (Gray, 1993: 202). As was mentioned before, rationalism insists that practice (practical life) should be governed comprehensively by a system of propositions and principles; otherwise practice is irrational. Oakeshott (1962a: 7) thinks that such a claim is a result of a mistaken conception of knowledge and tries to show how mistaken it is by developing his own: "every human activity whatsoever involves knowledge. And universally, this knowledge is of two sorts" which are technical knowledge and practical knowledge. Technical knowledge is the knowledge that can be "formulated into rules which are or may be deliberately learned, remembered and... put into practice... its chief characteristic is that it is susceptible of precise formulation". Therefore, it "can be learned from a book and "can be applied mechanically. The second sort of knowledge, practical knowledge, on the other hand, "exists only in use" and cannot be formulated in rules. Therefore, says Oakeshott, it can be called as "traditional knowledge." According to him, these two sorts of knowledge are inseparable; they are "the twin components of the knowledge involved in every concrete human activity." Oakeshott criticizes rationalism for underestimating practical or traditional knowledge; for considering only the technical knowledge as knowledge. He argues that these two are inseparable, they cannot be considered identical with one another; and none of them is able to take the place of the other (Oakeshott, 1962a: 7-13). This emphasis on practice (practical life, practical knowledge etc.) brings with it a radically different conception of

'reason' from the rationalist conception of the term. In this conception "reason has to be understood not as a pipeline to universal truths, but rather as a creative capacity to transform whatever is experienced into a variety of interpretations, responses, and reflections (Letwin, 1978: 56).

It is at this point that the emphasis on circumstances comes into the scene. Human beings find themselves in a variety of experiences none of them reducible to one another. There are different modes of experience in human life. According to this second definition of reason, a human being is always interpreting his experience and responding in the manner he selects; hence he can give different meanings to events (Letwin, 1978: 57). Circumstances are important but not in the sense of automatically causing desires or determining the interests. "A man's circumstances are only conditions which he interprets and takes into account in making choices." So, the conception of reason as a creative capacity implies that human beings make sense of the world around themselves not only through technical knowledge, but also through practical knowledge that in turn is inseparable from the circumstances in which a human being finds himself. Here the importance of individuality and contingency comes out. In Letwin's (1978: 59) terms,

> We are obliged to recognize that human beings may disagree for many reasons, not because some are less wise and good than others, but because being rational they can always notice or emphasize different aspects of what they perceive, or pursue different purposes. We are obliged, in short, to renounce the dream of achieving unity by common recognition of one universal truth.

Letwin (1978: 58) explains that, Oakeshott draws a picture of the human world "not as a chaos being reduced to systematic unity by reason but as a web of responses that are constantly being created by intelligent individuals." In that picture, "each human being possesses individuality *not in spite of but because of* his rationality... to say that human beings possesses individuality means that each is the maker of his own thoughts, that he is capable of shaping a personality, and that he is responsible for what he becomes (1978: 59, emphasis added). Oakeshott (1962b: 184-185) also underlines this notion of individuality in his depiction of the "image of ourselves as we have come to be" according to which,

> [w]e are apt to entertain a multiplicity of opinions on every conceivable subject and are disposed to change these beliefs as we grow tired of them or as they prove serviceable. Each of us is pursuing a course of his own…We are all inclined to be passionate about our own concerns… Each of us has preferences of his own…

In sum, then, by evaluating their circumstances human beings reach different views about what is good, bad, true, false etc. besides, these considerations are not constant they are open to be reformulated; they are contingent upon the circumstances, they are constantly made and remade. Such a conception of rational human conduct is very different from the rationalist understanding. As I have mentioned before, rationalism assumed the possibility of a knowledge that is completely freed from the particular circumstances, prejudices, previous experiences, etc. As we have seen, Oakeshott rejects this; and in that respect he is in line with the subjectivism of the Austrian school, to use Dunleavy and O'Leary's (1987: 89) terms. They define subjectivism as "the doctrine, which asserts that the private experience of each individual is the ultimate foundation of knowledge" according to which, From this perspective, social facts are what people think they are, and the proper subject matter of economics and politics consists of the expectations and evaluations of individuals... The process of *verstehen* (understanding from within) is distinctive to the social sciences (Dunleavy, O'Leary, 1987: 89).

Oakeshott's emphasis on reason as a creative power has important implications for his critique of enterprise association, and hence, for his alternative model, i.e. the civil association. Since he defines reason as a creative force leading to a variety of interpretations, reflections and responses whereby emphasizing the significance of individuality and contingency, it becomes impossible for him to accept the enterprise association as the ideal condition. The main reason for this is that enterprise association is built upon the idea of a collective good, common purpose. However, in Oakeshott's formulation since we all have reason, we all have different goals, purposes, enterprises etc. none of us can impose these upon others, we choose them we formulate them out of our different interpretations of the world around us. As O'Sullivan (2002) puts it,

> What he is saying is that we always look at the world from a particular standpoint-scientific, historical or practical. We can become aware what that standpoint is, but we can never a view from nowhere… we always wear conceptual spectacles when we look at the world. Although we can never get rid of them, we can become aware of them and the assumptions they make.

Moreover, again due to our reason as a creative power and/or as an intelligent capacity, we always tend to change or reformulate them on the face of our conditions. So, in short, there can be no common good to pursue, in Oakeshott's own words there can be nothing common to all. Letwin (1978: 60-61) uses the term "metaphysical skepticism" to denote this kind of approach: "Metaphysical skepticism rejects the possibility of achieving knowledge which will remove uncertainty and reveal the purpose and destiny of human life."

What, then, is the main characteristic of a civil association, the ideal condition? What is the role of the government? What is the function of the state in the ideal condition? Letwin points out that the government, as a ruler of a civil association does not organize life for the members of the community. In other words, the object of the rules of the political community is not to overcome rifts, to give men a purpose in life, or to create national unity, but to allow individuals to make their own lives as they choose (Letwin, 1978: 66-67).

Oakeshott deals with the general character of rules of a civil association in his *On Human Conduct.* It is a system of law (*lex)* "which prescribes not satisfactions to be sought or actions to be performed, but moral conditions to be subscribed to in seeking self chosen satisfactions and in performing self-chosen actions (1975: 158). His distinction between civil obedience and civil obligation is important to understand the role that he prescribes for the rules of conduct in civil association.[2] Our obligation does not stem from a fear of penalty for not following those rules, and also it does not stem from a view that those rules should be obliged to because they serve some common purpose. We feel obliged to the rules of the civil association because we have the respect for their authority. We feel obliged to them even if we may have questions about their desirability. In other words, we have to acknowledge their authority no matter we approve or disapprove. However, what rules are most desirable cannot be decided in the abstract or for all times. It can be decided only by living through those rules, if there is a need for change it will be revealed by the practice, that is, in the course of the spontaneous development of the society.

These points about the rules of a civil association are in direct relationship with Oakeshott's conservatism. He attributes a special importance to the historical, political, legal and institutional heritage of a society, in short to the circumstances that human beings find themselves within. It is not possible, for him to ignore them by engaging in grand change programs shaped according to the some abstract generalizations or universal truth claims. He believes that we can only think of 'a best in circumstances' not 'the best'. And what is best for a society cannot be determined only by technical knowledge; traditional practical knowledge is also required. Practical knowledge exists only in use, that knowledge can be acquired only through practice. So, if there is a need for change, it will be influenced by the direction of the movement of the society. Oakeshott is against radical change programs imposed upon society and rejects the presupposition that "some over-all scheme of mechanized control is possible" to administer the practice (1962a: 23). On the notion of change, he insists that "the politics of destruction and creation" is not better than "the politics of repair" and that "the consciously planned and deliberately executed" is not better than "what has grown up and established itself unselfconsciously over a period of time" (1962: 21). This is true, therefore, for the law of the ideal

condition. As was mentioned above, their desirability can be a matter of discussion among the *cives*. There is always room for such notions as desirability of laws (he defines politics around this notion) approval, disapproval. Oakeshott (1975: 165) states "where these conditions are understood to be alterable, and where there are known procedures in which they may be deliberately enacted, changed, or terminated, *cives* are invited to think of them in terms of approval or disapproval." However, we should always remember that what is asked of the *cives* is their acknowledgement of the authority of these rules not their approval. Once those rules are in force they are considered to have an authority that is not open to be questioned and/or challenged.

What can be said about the criterion of desirability is that "the rules should be such as to maintain the character of a civil association and not to convert it into an enterprise which will compel everyone to do what those in power consider desirable" (Letwin, 1978: 66). According to Oakeshott "the rules of civil association are not to be understood as demanding associates to take certain actions in order to achieve a particular, substantive common purpose. Instead, such rules are to be understood as formal considerations to be subscribed to in pursuing one's own ends" (Gerencser, 2000: 132). In Oakeshoot's (1962b: 187) terms, "the office of government is not to impose other beliefs and activities upon its subjects, nor to tutor or to educate them, not to make them happier in another way, not to direct them, to galvanize them into action, to lead them or to coordinate their activities... the office of government is merely to rule."

As this brief analysis shows, Oakeshott's understanding of reason as a creative intellectual capacity, which transforms whatever experienced into a variety of interpretations, responses, and reflections, naturally results in his assertion that there can be nothing common to all and hence there is no way of eliminating plurality within the society. This is the basic principle an ideal type of political community (i.e. a civil association or *societas)* should be built upon. This, as we shall below, is at the same time the main point of convergence between Oakeshott and a certain group of the political theorists who advocate a radicalization of democracy. Before coming to an analysis of these convergence points, however, we should look at what prompted those students of democracy to urge for a radicalization of democracy. Thus, the next section of this study will deal with the question of pluralism in liberal democratic tradition.

2. THE QUESTION OF PLURALISM, IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

In order to see how liberal democratic tradition deals with the question of plurality, it would be illuminating to look at the historical development of liberal democratic conception of citizenship and the constitution of public political life. One core principle, which constitutes the basis for the liberal democratic citizenship, is that of universality. The major questions that we referred above as 'the questions associated with equality in the context of difference' include such questions as:

> How are democracies to deal with divisions by gender or ethnicity or religion or race, and the way these impinge on political equality? What meaning can we give to the political community when so many groups feel themselves outside it? How can democracies deliver on equality while accommodating and indeed welcoming difference? (Phillips, 1993: 2)

These questions that contemporary democracies face take us to the questions of justice, equality and freedom. Members of the nation-states have different personal identities as evidenced by their ethnic affiliations, religious beliefs, their views of personal morality etc. In all these areas there is a little possibility of convergence. At the same time, however, the individuals and groups having those particularities need to live together politically. This in turn means that there should be some common ground or reference point from which their claims on the state can be judged. In liberal democracy, the notion of citizenship is supposed to provide this reference point; but nowadays it is at the center of hot debates whether it can really meet such expectations. Liberal democratic notion of citizenship is grounded on the premise of universality. Universality implies that all individuals are given the same formal legal/legal rights regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion or class that result in an abstract notion of citizen-individual. The rationale behind this formula is that these latter categories are conceptualized and formulated as private matters. The real of politics, on the other hand, is defined in the public sphere and so is citizenship. Consequently, liberal democratic citizenship has taken the form of a legal status where everybody is equal and the possessor of the same political rights. The public sphere, so defined, has to be impartial with regard to the 'private concerns'. However, both the intensity of the ongoing intellectual debates and the problems at the practical level show that this distinction has not been so successful in dealing with particularities. The notion of citizenship in its liberal democratic formulation has tried to solve the problem by creating a homogenous public by relegating all particularity and difference to the private (Mouffe, 1992a: 7). Liberal democracy has presumed that we can abstract some

essential human sameness in people and tried to structure the political public realm on this principle of universality. Within this framework, being a member of a political community has come to mean being the bearers of the same legal rights. As Hall and Held point out, "From the ancient world to the present day, citizenship has entailed a discussion of, and a struggle over, the meaning and scope of membership of the community in which one lives. Who belongs and what does *belonging* mean in practice? (Hall, Held, 1990: 144). In today's conditions, it has become increasingly difficult to answer this question largely due to the process that we call globalization. The latter has been going hand in hand with the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization that is also known as the tension between universalism and particularism (Ronald Robertson quoted in Keyman, 1995: 100). If the deeply different perspectives on critical subjects are allowed to dominate political life (because such differences have important implications for collective life and consequently for political decisions), the result may become disunity; on the other hand, if citizens are told that in politics they should not use their most fundamental beliefs about what is true, that may seem both unreasonable and a serious infringement of full liberty; consequently "this conflict is the dilemma and it is a genuine one" (Greenawalt, 1999: 670). Various theorists respond to the above-mentioned questions and this dilemma in various ways. This study will try to show how an important strand in democratic theory (i.e. radical democracy) has been trying to respond them. While doing that we will pay a specific attention to the ways in which their proposed alternative draws upon Michael Oakeshott's political thought.

3. MICHAEL OAKESHOTT AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Mouffe, the most prominent advocate of the project of radical democracy, builds her basic argument upon a critique of liberal pluralism and defines the project as a "strategy" to "pursue and deepen the democratic project of modernity" (1993:21). At the center of her critique of liberal democratic tradition lies a rejection of a perspective that tries to come to terms with pluralism through the presumption that via 'rationality', which is common to all human beings, it is possible to reach a consensus in the public realm. As we have seen in the previous section, liberal democratic tradition tries to get rid of antagonisms that stem from the radical plurality of views, beliefs, opinions, and experiences by

> "…relegating pluralism and dissent to the private sphere in order to secure consensus in the public realm. All controversial issues are taken off the agenda in order to create the conditions for a 'rational' consensus. As a result, the realm of politics becomes merely the terrain where

> individuals, stripped of their 'disruptive' passions and beliefs and understood as rational agents in search of self-advantage within the constraints of morality, of course- submit to procedures for adjudicating between their claims that they consider 'fair' (Mouffe, 1993: 140).

In the light of our analysis of Oakeshott's views on rationalism and *politics of uniformity* we can say that there is an important parallelism between Mouffe and Oakeshott in their rejection of the possibility of reaching at a consensus through the use of reason that is common to all humanity. Although Mouffe does not refer directly to Okasehott in her criticism of a consensus based upon rationality, the parallelism between the two can be observed quite easily. The point where Mouffe directly draws upon Oakeshott is Oakeshott's differentiation between two alternative interpretations of the modern state that is between civil association and enterprise association or between *universitas* and *societas* (Mouffe, 1992b: 232-235). As we have seen above, *universitas* indicates an engagement in an enterprise to pursue a common purpose or to promote a common interest. Contrary to that model of association of agents engaged in a common enterprise, defined by a purpose, *societas* designates a formal relationship in terms of rules, not a substantive relation in terms of common action. In Oakeshott's (1975: 201) words: "The idea *societas* is that of agents who, by choice or circumstance, are related to one another so as to compose an identifiable association of a certain sort. The tie which joins them... is not that of an engagement in an enterprise to pursue a common substantive purpose or to promote a common interest, but that of loyalty to one another".

It is not a mode of relation, therefore, in terms of common action but a relation in which participants are related to one another in the acknowledgment of the authority of certain conditions of acting. To belong to the political community -*societas*- what is required is that we accept a specific language of civil intercourse. Oakeshott calls this *res publica.* Those rules prescribe norms of conduct to be subscribed to in seeking self-chosen satisfactions and in performing self-chosen actions. To recover citizenship as a strong form of political identification requires our loyalty to the *res publica,* to the political principles of modern democracy and the commitment to defend its key institutions. 'Equality and liberty for all' is the central political principle of modern liberal democracy. "The conditions to be subscribed to and taken into account in acting are to be understood as the exigency of treating the others as free and equal persons" (Mouffe, 1992b: 236). However, there is an important point that needs to be underlined here. She considers that *if interpreted in a certain way*, Oakeshott's reflections on civil association views illuminating. She (1992b: 231) argues:

> We need to conceive of a mode of political association, which, although it does not postulate the existence of a substantive common good, *nevertheless implies the idea of commonality*, of an ethico-political bond that creates a linkage among the participants in the association, allowing us to speak of a political 'community' even if it is not in the strong sense.

So, she sees the model of a civil association can serve such a purpose by envisaging a common identity of persons who might be engaging in many different communities and who have different conceptions of good, but who accept submission to certain authoritative rules of conduct, and thereby linked to each other:

> It seems to me that Oakeshott's idea of the civil association as *societas* is adequate to define political association under modern democratic conditions. Indeed it is a mode of human association that recognizes the disappearance of a single substantive idea of the common good and makes room for individual liberty. It is a form of association that can be enjoyed among relative strangers belonging to many purposive associations and whose allegiances to specific communities is not seen as conflicting with their membership in civil association. This would not be possible if such an association were conceived as *universitas*, as purposive association, because it would not allow for the existence of other genuine purposive associations in which individuals would be free to participate (Mouffe, 1992b: 233).

What is required to belong to the political community is that we accept a specific language of civil intercourse, the *respublica*. Those rules only provide a framework of common practices to guide political activities of the citizens. The identification with those rules, in turn, creates a "common political identity". So, it is in this sense that Mouffe finds Oakeshott's views useful to a radical democratic project. She is attracted to Oakeshott's elaboration of the concept of *societas*, because with it Oakeshott has portrayed *a strong conception of political community* (Gerencser, 1999: 847, emphasis added.) Moreover, she thinks that such an approach brings with it not abandonment but a reformulation of the public/private distinction and hence can help us to find an alternative to the limitations of liberalism: "In *societas*, every situation is an encounter between "private" and "public"… The wants, choices, and decisions are private because they are the responsibility of each individual but the performances are public because they are required to subscribe to the conditions specified in *respublica*" (Mouffe, 1992: 237-238). She finds this important because, in a similar vein, the project of radical democracy also proposes, as a major strategy to overcome this shortcoming of liberal understanding of pluralism, the

revitalization of the public sphere in the form of a new mode of articulation between the public and the private.

Notwithstanding the common ground between Oakeshott and Mouffe, Mouffe has important rejections and criticisms regarding that model. At the heart of that criticism we see her claim that Okaeshott's idea of politics is a flawed one "for his conception of politics as a shared language of civility is only adequate for one aspect of politics: the point of view of the 'we', the friend's side… What is completely missing in Oakeshott is division and antagonism that is the aspect of the 'enemy'." (Mouffe, 1992b: 237-238). Indeed, this is the most distinguishing aspect of Mouffe's interpretation of Oakeshott. She draws attention to the fact that "to introduce conflict and antagonism into Oakeshott's model, it is necessary to recognize that *the respublica is the product of a given hegemony, the expression of power relations*, and that *it can be challenged*" (Mouffe, 1992b: 237-238). If we recall Oaksehott's views about the unquestionable nature of the authority of the *respublica* we can grasp what Mouffe sees as absent in that approach. As we have seen, Okaeshott argues that even if we find those rules undesirable we have to acknowledge their authority. With his emphasis upon spontaneity he sees those rules of conduct as the expression of the spontaneous development of a particular society; they evolve and take shape in accordance with the particular path that the historical development of a society follows. They emerge as a result of the political, legal and cultural inheritance of that society. Oakeshott does not question, takes for granted, or simply ignores, the nature of the process through which those particular rules come to have that authority. In other words, he does not mention the power relations and its dynamics characterizing a particular social context and their influence in determining the rules of conduct whose authority has to be acknowledged by all in the society. He fails to see that those rules are an expression and/or reflection of the particular configuration of power relations. He does not tackle with the crucial question of how those groups who neither 'desire' nor 'approve' those rules come to accept their authority.

Mouffe, tries to shed some light on these complex processes by insisting that "(p)olitics is to a great extent about the rules of the *respublica* and its many possible interpretations, it is about the constitution of the political community" (Mouffe, 1992b: 237-238). In order to grasp the essence of this argument we should be familiar with the definition of "politics" that she proposes. In this definition, Mouffe draws largely upon Carl Schmitt.[3] In her words:

> … for Schmitt, the criterion of the political, its *differentia specifica* is the friend-enemy relation; this involves the creation of a 'we' as opposed to a 'them', and it is located, from the outset, in the realm of

> collective identifications. The political always has to do with conflicts and antagonisms and cannot but be beyond liberal rationalism since it indicates the limits of any rational consensus and reveals that any consensus is based on acts of exclusion (1992b: 123).

Mouffe maintains that the political can be defined only with reference to relations of power and antagonisms and that unless we do this we completely miss its nature. This is why she criticizes liberal democratic tradition for "conceiving the well-ordered society as one *exempt from politics*" (1992b: 139). As we have seen, in liberal understanding of pluralism the diversities that are viewed as the source of conflict are relegated to the private realm. Mouffe (1992b: 127) sees this kind of an approach as "a dangerous liberal illusion which renders us incapable of grasping the phenomenon of politics."

The definition of politics based upon antagonism is directly related to the notion of 'relational identity' which Mouffe develops with reference to Derrida's concept of "constitutive outside". Mouffe uses the concept by pointing out that it "cannot be reduced to a dialectical negation" and that it implies something more than saying simply that there is no 'us' without 'them' (Mouffe, 2000: 12-13). According to this, "in order to be a true outside, the outside has to be incommensurable with the inside, and at the same time, the condition of emergence of the latter. This is only possible if what is 'outside' is not simply the outside of a concrete content but something which puts into question 'concreteness' as such" (Mouffe, 2000: 12).

This approach brings with it the perception of the us/them relation as one between friend and enemy instead of as simple difference. Hence, "(f)rom that on, it becomes the locus of an antagonism, that is, it becomes political" them' (Mouffe, 2000: 13). This in turn means that antagonism can never be eliminated and it constitutes an ever-present possibility in politics. In addition to this, such a conception of requires a non-essentialist framework, which suggests that all identities are necessarily precarious and unstable (Mouffe, 1992a: 10). A corollary to that understanding of politics is the conceptualization of democracy as a continuous process rather than as an end point to be reached at. It is the precariousness of identities that makes democracy an endless process since, as was mentioned above, an identity can develop through its relation and, perhaps more importantly, on the face of the challenge posed by its constitutive outside.

To sum up, the comparative analysis made above shows that there are both important divergences and convergences between the theoretical frameworks developed by two leading figures of the modern political thought. They share a common ground in regard to their concern with individual and his/her life choices and with the danger and/or impossibility of politics of

uniformity as well as in regard to their focus on the general rules that are supposed to regulate the intersection between the public and private. These can be considered as the essentials of their understanding of (democratic) political community. However, the points raised by Mouffe related with the conceptualization of politics with reference to conflict and antagonism, as well as the hegemonic configuration of unequal power relations seems to indicate an almost completely different understanding of political community.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The relation between the individual and the community has been at the heart of the political thought since the antiquity. The debate has always revolved around this central theme and all those involved have endeavoured to find the ideal way of relating the individual to the society. This article made a comparative analysis of two leading modern political theorists, who are well known for their concern to come to terms with this crucial question. The starting point of this study was a indeed a humble curiosity: how and why Chantal Mouffe, an advocate of the radicalization of democracy incorporates the ideas of Michael Oakeshott, a conservative (or conservative individualist), in her reflection on the notion of democratic political community. Although Mouffe writes about the points of divergence between Oakeshott and herself and revises the former in a significant manner, she nevertheless finds important parallelism between the two perspectives. However, her emphasis on the notions of conflict, antagonism and unequal power relations with reference to the concept of hegemony is the keystone of a distinct view on socio-political life, especially on the decision-making processes that end up with the formulation of the rules of the *respublica.* This is so because Oakeshott has a rather consensus-oriented perspective in this respect in that he does not go beyond suggesting that these rules are to emerge as part and parcel of the practical life of the society and they are to prioritize the self-chosen actions of inidivuals. So, it is a bit puzzling that Mouffe tries to bring together this approach with her antagonism and conflict-oriented perspective. These two approaches seem to be mutually exclusive rather than complementary and hence the attempt to bridge them seems to be destined to be unconvincing.

NOTES

[1] http://www.michael-oakeshott-association.com/pdfs/mo_letters_popper.pdf Emphasis in the original.

[2] As Gerencser rightly points out, Oakeshott uses a series of terms that carry with them similar meanings. The central theoretical distinction in *On Human Conduct* is between

civil association and enterprise assocation. However, Oakeshott uses a series of Latin terms to explore this distinction. Thus, discussing civil association , he uses *civitas* for this ideal condition, and *respublica* for the comprehensive conditions of association. However, in the third essay of *On Human Conduct,* he introduces the terms *societas* and *universitas* for the historical expressions of civil and enterprise associaition respectively. Thus, we see **civil association**, ***civitas, respublica*** *and* ***societas*** on the one side; and **enterprise association** and ***universitas*** on the other. See, Gerencser, "Oakeshott, Authority and Civil Disobedience", footnote 3. I prefer civil and enterprise association in this paper, but when we come to a review of Chantal Mouffe's elaboration on Oakeshott's thought we will need to use the other terms that she prefers.

[3] Mouffe tries to make it clear that she does not accept Schmitt's ideas in toto and especially his understanding of democracy "as a logic of identity between government and governed, between the law and popular will" which she thinks "perfectly compatible with an authoritarian form of government"; and also that she does not accept the consequences Schmitt draws from his critique of liberal democracy. She says "If Schmitt can help us understand the nature of modern democracy, it is, paradoxically, he must himself remain blind to it." What she finds helpful in Schmitt's thought in that sense is his definition of politics with reference to friend/enemy relation, antagonism and conflict. For a detailed analysis of Mouffe's interpretation of Carl Schmitt see the eighth chapter of The *Return of the Political* titled "Pluralism and Modern Democracy: Around Carl Schmitt".

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