

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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# **Diversifying the Other: Antagonism, agonism and the multiplicity of articulations of self and other**

*Nico Carpentier*

## **Abstract**

Antagonism and agonism have become popular concepts, including in the field of Media and Communication Studies, because they capture the logics of conflict, the construction of self and other, and the relationship between conflict and democracy. This chapter aims to deepen the theoretical reflections on these two concepts by combining a discourse-theoretical and an empirical-enrichment strategy in order to deal with two problems: the black-boxing of antagonism and agonism, and their dichotomization. The first problem is tackled by extracting three defining characteristics of these two concepts: the pairs of radical difference vs conflictual togetherness; homogenization vs pluralization of the self; and enemy destruction vs peaceful and non-violent interaction. The second problem is dealt with by acknowledging a multiplicity of antagonisms and agonisms and unpacking the category of the Other. The latter implies a move beyond the antagonistic other-enemy and the agonistic other-adversary and recognition of the existence of other-neighbours, other-allies, other-friends and others that become re-articulated as part of the self.

**Keywords:** antagonism, agonism, Other, enemy, adversary, ally, neighbour, friend, discourse theory, constructionism, post-structuralism

## 1. Introduction

The notions of antagonism and agonism have been used in a wide variety of academic fields, including Media and Communication Studies (Dahlgren, 2005; Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006), to capture the logics of conflict, the construction of self and other, and the relationship between conflict and democracy. Even though many theorists have contributed to the development of these two concepts (see Deveaux, 1999, for an overview), in particular the work of Mouffe (2005, 2013) can be seen as one of the main contributions to this conceptual development.

Despite this widespread use of both antagonism and agonism, there is, arguably, still room to contribute to the further elaboration of these two concepts, in particular when it comes to the specification of their key characteristics. This chapter uses two strategies to distinguish antagonism's and agonism's key characteristics. First, a discourse-theoretical strategy, grounded in the work of Laclou and Mouffe (1985), is deployed, where antagonism and agonism are both defined as discourses that have a series of nodal points that stabilize their meanings. Second, this chapter benefits from an empirical strategy, where the two theoretical concepts have been confronted with a particular social reality, even though this chapter<sup>1</sup> only contains the theoretical outcome of this confrontation between theory and social practice. More specifically, this theoretical chapter has been generated through confrontation of the concepts of antagonism and agonism, with the participatory and conflict transformational work of a Cypriot community media organization called the Cyprus Community Media Centre. The book *The Discursive-Material Knot* (Carpentier, 2017) reports on both the theoretical elaboration of antagonism and agonism, and how they are played out in this specific social reality. For reasons of space, this chapter focuses on the former, but we should keep in mind that it has been 'empirically enriched'.

This theoretical elaboration consists of three steps. In a first step, the notion of antagonism is unpacked in a close dialogue with the work of Schmitt<sup>2</sup> (1996, 2004). This then allows for a second step, where agonism is unpacked in parallel with categories of antagonism. In a third step, the chapter argues for a move away from the dichotomy between antagonism and agonism, and from the dichotomy

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1 This chapter also uses a considerable amount of text from this book, see Carpentier (2017: 171-184).

2 Although Schmitt converted to Nazism, his theoretical work remains important. As Mouffe (1999a: 52) wrote: 'Schmitt is an adversary from whom we can learn, because we can draw on his insights. Turning them against him, we should use them to formulate a better understanding of liberal democracy.'

between the other-enemy and the other-adversary; in contrast, this chapter argues for the acknowledgement of a diversity of articulation of the other's (and the self's) subject position.

## 2. Defining antagonism and enmity

The specificity of modern democracy is precisely its recognition and legitimization of conflict; in democratic societies, therefore, conflict cannot and should not be eradicated. Democratic politics requires that the others be seen not as enemies to be destroyed but as adversaries whose ideas should be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas will never be questioned. (Mouffe, 2013b: 185)

From Mouffe's perspective, the aim of democratic politics is '[...] to transform an "antagonism" into "agonism"' (Mouffe, 1999b: 755), to 'tame' or 'sublimate' (Mouffe, 2005: 20-21) antagonisms, without eliminating passion from the political realm or relegating it to the outskirts of the private. In order to develop and theorize this model of agonistic democracy, Mouffe (2005) refers to the work of Schmitt (1996), and his friend/foe distinction. As Mouffe does not provide much detail about the characteristics of agonism, and of what she later started to call antagonism proper (see Mouffe, 2013a: 109), it makes sense to return to Schmitt's work to see how he characterizes antagonism and enmity. In the next part, we can then use these characteristics to further elaborate on agonism.

For Schmitt (1996: 27), the enemy is whoever is '[...] in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible'. A few lines later, Schmitt (1996: 28) provides a more elaborate description of the enemy, stressing its public nature:

The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exist only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship.

These reflections tend to see (even if it is mostly done implicitly) antagonism as a cultural-definitional process, which brings me to define this model as an antagonistic conflict discourse,<sup>3</sup> which enables signifying practices that identify with

3 When discussing antagonism in connection with war in earlier work, I have labelled this the ideological model of war (Carpentier, 2008).

this discourse (and which will be contested by other discourses), without forgetting that antagonism also has a material component. At this stage, the question is how antagonistic discourse is articulated. Arguably, three nodal points can be distinguished in antagonistic discourse: 1. the need for destruction of the enemy, 2. a radical difference and distance from the enemy, combined with (and supported by) a process of 3. homogenization of the self.

The definition of the Other as ‘an enemy to be destroyed’ (Mouffe, 1999b: 755) immediately brings us to the notion of destruction (and violence). In Schmitt’s (2004: 36) writings, different degrees of enmity are distinguished, with the ‘war of absolute enmity’, which ‘knows no containment’ being an extreme form. The wish to impose destruction upon the enemy is shared by these different models of enmity, albeit with different degrees of destruction, ranging from the desire to neutralize the threat originating from the enemy, to the enemy’s complete annihilation, as described by Schmitt (2004: 67):

In a world in which the partners push each other [...] into the abyss of total devaluation before they annihilate one another physically, new kinds of absolute enmity must come into being. Enmity will be so terrifying that one perhaps mustn’t even speak any longer of the enemy or of enmity, and both words will have to be outlawed and damned fully before the work of annihilation can begin. Annihilation thus becomes entirely abstract and entirely absolute.

Second, antagonistic discourse requires a radical difference between the enemy and the self, where no symbolic (or material) space is thought to be shared or could be shared. Harle (2000: 12, emphasis in the original) wrote: ‘The Enemy emerges if and only if “we” and “they” are thought to be *fundamentally* different [...]’ The construction of this radical other is supported by the logic of a dichotomy, whereas the idea of the absence of a common space produces distance. In more extreme cases, this radical othering leads to a dehumanization and demonization of the other, denying even the most basic features of humanity to that other, which makes its destruction easier and even necessary.

Moreover, radical difference is combined with a process of hierarchization. The dichotomy that defines the enemy and the self is not considered neutral, rather it supports a hierarchy that positions the enemy as inferior, and the self as superior. Delanty, Wodak and Jones (2008: 307) point to the combined processes of inferiorization and superiorization when analyzing migration into Europe in the following terms: ‘The inferiorization of the “others” and the superiorization of “us” is a complex and often hidden process that is not easy simply to observe. It is often understood by many members of the majority society as “normal” and “objective”.’

This citation can be seen as an illustration of how the process of hierarchization has a long history in positioning the racial and colonial other. For instance, Said (2003: 42) refers to *Orientalism* as the '[...] ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority'. Or, as Said (2003: 7) wrote a few pages earlier, 'Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.' Spivak's (1985) use of the notion of othering to analyze British colonial domination in its ethnicized, gendered and class-based logics is another illustration. Spivak (1985: 76) refers to '[...] the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other', which consists of the '[...] asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity' as the '[...] clearest available example of [...] epistemic violence [...]'. Here, it is equally important to keep in mind that 'In Spivak's explanation, othering is a dialectical process because the colonizing Other is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2000: 141, emphasis in original).

The process of radical difference also has consequences for construction of the self, which brings us to the third nodal point of antagonism: the homogenization of the self, which involves solidification of the chain of equivalence of the self. If we return to Schmitt's (2004: 61, emphasis in original) analysis, we can see that the self is not indifferent to the threat that the enemy-other poses to it:

The enemy is our own question as *Gestalt*. If we have determined our own *Gestalt* unambiguously, where does this double enemy come from? The enemy is not something to be eliminated out of a particular reason, something to be annihilated as worthless. The enemy stands on my own plane. For this reason I must contend with him [...] in battle, in order to assure my own standard [*Maß*], my own limits, my own *Gestalt*. (Schmitt, 2004: 61, emphasis in original)

We also find this threat to the self in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985: 125) work when they write that: '[...] the presence of the "Other" prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution'. This also implies that '[...] the Other has an important function in establishing the identity of the Self' (Harle, 2000: 15)<sup>4</sup> or, to use Schmitt's (2004: 65, emphasis in original) words: 'The heart of the political is not enmity *per se* but the distinction of friend and enemy; it presupposes *both* friend *and* enemy.' But this relationship between self and enemy-other surpasses the process of hierar-

4 This is in line with, for instance, Haraway's (1991) analysis of the components of the dichotomy as interdependent.



chization where ‘[...] the distinction is understood to reflect the struggle between good and evil, and when good is associated with “us” but evil with “them”’ (Harle, 2000: 12, emphasis removed). The relationship with the enemy-other also homogenizes the self through the attribution of a series of characteristics that distinguish the self from the enemy and which apply to the entire self. The self thus becomes one, united in its struggle against the enemy, rallying round the flag.<sup>5</sup> Laclau (1996: 40-41), in his analysis of Luxembourg’s writings about the unity of the working class in its political struggle, formulated this argument as follows: ‘It is not, consequently, something positive that all of them share which establishes their unity, but something negative: their opposition to a common enemy.’ In the creation of this solidified chain of equivalence, with the enemy as its constitutive outside, little room is left for internal differences, which is evidenced by the words of the German Emperor Wilhelm who, during the First World War, claimed that ‘[...] he would no longer hear of different political parties, only of Germans’ (Torfing, 1999: 126). The then American president George W. Bush used an updated version during his address to the Joint Session of Congress and the American People on 20 September 2001,<sup>6</sup> saying: ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.’ As a construction, the homogenization of the self becomes so hegemonic that resistance against it positions these actors as so-called enemies within, or traitors (Yiannopoulou, 2012: 127ff.). Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 125) offer an important addition to this way of thinking, arguing that this (fantasy of the) homogeneous self is also vulnerable, and that it can be ‘revealed as partial and precarious objectification’. Even when the enemy-other triggers fantasies of a homogeneous self that denies contingency and difference, the diversity that characterizes the self is most likely to eventually dislocate the (construction of the) homogeneous self.

### 3. Defining agonism

If we use the above discussion about antagonism to reflect on agonism, then the first point to make is that not every self and other relation has to consist of a self and enemy-other relation. To use Mouffe’s words for support: The political is grounded in self and other relations, but ‘Such a relationship is not necessarily antagonistic [in the proper sense]’ (Mouffe, 2013b: 185). In *Agonistics*, Mouffe (2013a: 109) argues that ‘[...] this antagonistic conflict can take different forms’, in order to introduce the distinction between antagonism proper and agonism. While antago-

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5 Mueller (1973) uses this metaphor to describe political support for US presidents, but in my text, the ‘rallying round the flag’ metaphor is used in a broader sense.

6 <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

nism proper is grounded in the Schmittian friend/enemy relation, agonism is not (Mouffe, in Errejón and Mouffe, 2016: 55). Agonism articulates the relationship between self and other as a '[...] we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents' (Mouffe, 2005: 20). Later, she also points to their sharing of ethico-political principles:

What exists between adversaries is, so to speak, a conflictual consensus – they agree about the ethico-political principles which organize their political association but disagree about the interpretation of these principles. (Mouffe, 2013a: 109)

In other words, an agonistic conflict does not hide the differences in position and interest between the involved parties, they are still 'in conflict' but share '[...] a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place' (Mouffe, 2005: 20; see also Mouffe, 2013a: 7). Still, antagonism proper<sup>7</sup> remains 'an ever present possibility' (Mouffe, 2013b) and societies can quite easily slip into antagonistic self-other relationships, where enemies need to be destroyed.

In developing the notion of agonism further, we can return to the three nodal points of the enemy-other that were discussed in the previous part, with the argument that the agonistic model of conflict will re-articulate these characteristics in shifting from the other-enemy to the other-adversary. As one of the citations in the previous paragraph illustrates, adversaries navigate in a common symbolic space, which implies a degree of togetherness. Arendt's (1998: 175ff.) writings on action offer an interesting starting point here, in particular when Arendt argues for the importance of disclosure of the actor in the act. For her, 'This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness' (Arendt, 1998: 180, emphasis in original). Relevant here is Arendt's (1998: 180) usage of the enemy concept to illustrate a situation without disclosure, which is connected to a situation without togetherness:

This [situation where action loses its specific character] happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy. In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed 'mere talk,' simply one more means toward an end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda [...].

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7 Their potential occurrence remains for Mouffe (2013a: 1) important, as this '[...] impedes the full totalization of society and forecloses the possibility of a society beyond division and power', but this analysis is made without any hint of celebration of the existence of antagonistic self-other relationships.

For Arendt, the position of the enemy is an illustration of a situation where human togetherness is lost which, in turn, makes this concept of togetherness highly useful to think about agonism. But this then raises questions about which togetherness, as Arendt has been critiqued for developing a too consensual model of action (and politics).<sup>8</sup> Breen (2009: 136, emphasis in original), for instance, problematizes Arendt's 'sheer human togetherness', arguing that a situation where an actor is not for or against some actor is not possible: 'Political actors are therefore never solely *with* their fellow human beings, but always *for* some and *against* others.' Mouffe's (2013a: 109) argument that '[...] what exists between adversaries is, so to speak, a conflictual consensus' is useful here to see this togetherness, still important to define agonistic relations, as what I would prefer to call a conflictual togetherness. This also implies that there is a structural (power) balance between the involved actors. While the enemy model rests on hierarchization, where the enemy-other is inferiorized and the self is superiorized, the adversary model builds on a structural balance where the different actors are not hierarchically positioned.

The second nodal point of agonism is the pluralization of the self, which is to be contrasted with its homogenization. Mouffe often combines pluralism with agonism, for instance when she refers to 'agonist pluralism' (Mouffe, 1999b) and the 'agonistic dynamics of pluralism' (Mouffe, 2005: 30). This combination of concepts is used to describe the need to acknowledge the ineradicability of conflict and the existence of a societal diversity that feeds this societal conflict, in combination with the need to democratically harness this conflict without suppressing it. As Mouffe (1999b: 756) formulates it: 'Far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence.' In the Introduction of *The Ethos of Pluralization*, Connolly (1995: xx) links pluralism to the construction of a 'we', arguing against the need to construct a homogeneous self, and instead pleads for a multiple, pluralized 'we' in the following terms:

You do not need a wide universal 'we' (a nation, a community, a singular practice of rationality, a particular monotheism) to foster democratic governance of a population. Numerous possibilities of intersection and collaboration between multiple, interdependent constituencies infused by a general ethos of critical responsiveness drawn from several sources suffice very nicely.

It is this idea of a pluralized self (and a pluralized other-adversary) that is seen as characteristic of agonism. In other words, agonism moves away from a dichotomiza-

8 Deveaux (1999: 20) disagrees with this critique, and briefly mentions (in a footnote) that '[...] the agonistic dimension of Arendt's account of action is often ignored in favor of "communicative" and "dialogical" interpretations [...]'].

tion that creates impermeable and solid frontiers between the self and the other-enemy, together with hegemonic chains of equivalence of the self and the other-enemy that leave no space for internal diversity and pluralism. Or, to use Mouffe's (2005: 82) words again: '[...] the absence of an effective pluralism entails the impossibility for antagonisms to find agonistic, i.e. legitimate, forms of expression'. Agonism recognizes difference and conflict, but also positions the adversary in the same symbolic space, which means that, in the agonistic model, differences are no longer absolute and all-encompassing. Difference and conflict co-exist in an agonistic model with the acceptance of the other as legitimate: 'Adversaries do fight – even fiercely – but according to a shared set of rules<sup>9</sup>, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives' (Mouffe, 2005: 52). This acceptance of the other creates linkages with the other, acknowledging the democratic rights and humanity of the other, but it also renders the frontier between the equivalential chain of the self and its constitutive outside less solid and more permeable, allowing for transgressions of that frontier and the creation of chains of difference.<sup>10</sup> Here we should keep in mind that '[...] the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 130). Using linguistics as an example, Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 130) argue that:

[...] the logic of difference tends to expand [...] the number of positions that can enter into a relation of combination and hence of continuity with one another; while the logic of equivalence expands the [...] elements that can be substituted for one another – thereby reducing the number of positions which can possibly be combined.

Laclau and Mouffe then connect the occurrence of several co-existing antagonisms with a '[...] situation described by Gramsci under the term "organic crisis"' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 131), and with social instability:

[...] the more unstable the social relations, the less successful will be any definite system of differences and the more the points of antagonism will proliferate. This proliferation will

9 The articulation of agonism with a 'shared set of rules' (Mouffe, 2005: 52) is problematic, as it suggests that antagonism (proper) is not structured by regulatory frameworks. For instance, even if the so-called *jus in bello* (as part of the law of war) is not always respected, it does exist and provides a shared regulatory framework for belligerent actors.

10 At least in the 20th-century version of this concept. Later, the logic of difference gains an alternative meaning, referring to the role of a particularity in constructing social reality. In Laclau's (2005: 78) words, the creation of chains of difference leads to the '[...] assertion of a particularity [...] whose only links to other particularities are of a differential nature ([...] no positive terms, only differences)'

make more difficult the construction of any centrality and, consequently, the establishment of unified chains of equivalence. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 131)

Arguably, agonism's nodal point of pluralization allows for a much less negative reading of this situation, as the co-existence of chains of equivalence and difference allows, on the one hand, for selves and other-adversaries (in plural) to be constructed, and on the other hand, for the avoidance of a hegemonic self that homogenizes itself as a united centre and transforms the other into a disconnected enemy. Pluralization, consisting of a combination of chains of equivalence and difference, enables connections between selves and other-adversaries, for changing alliances and border-crossings between them, and for the creation of affectious spaces of sharing.

Third, while the antagonistic enemy discourse is characterized by the need for destruction, the agonistic adversary discourse has the need for peaceful and non-violent interaction as a nodal point. If adversaries belong to the same political space, and do not attempt to destroy (or annihilate) each other, then a reflection on the nature of that interaction becomes unavoidable. Although peaceful interaction would be an obvious choice to describe this type of interaction, we again need to emphasize the context of conflictuality that structures this peaceful interaction. For this reason, peaceful and non-violent interaction<sup>11</sup> is preferred as a label. Peace and non-violence, first of all, refer to the absence of collective material violence (combined with the absence of interpersonal material violence motivated by an other-enemy logic), and the absence of the death and destruction that this brings. It also refers to the absence of structural violence, with inequality as 'the general formula behind structural violence' (Galtung, 1969: 175). In other parts of his article, Galtung also mentions social injustice as a defining element of structural violence (Galtung, 1969: 171). As Galtung points out, the combination of the absence of personal and structural violence necessitates an expansion of the definition of peace. For this reason, he introduces the concepts of negative peace (the absence of personal violence) and positive peace (the absence of structural violence) (Galtung, 1969: 183). Peaceful and non-violent interaction also implies the absence of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, which we can define here as discourses that violate the other (or part of the self), or signifying practices that identify with these antagonistic discourses. This not only concerns discourses that call for the destruction of the other, but also discourses that are characterized by the logic of antagonism (proper) in their creation of radical differences and hierarchies, and in their constructions of homogenized and solidified – one could also say stereotyped – selves and others. Finally, there is

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11 The use of both peace and non-violence in this label should not be read as an attempt to equate them. It is meant to emphasize the range of practices that are seen to be incorporated by this label.

also a temporal component to peaceful and non-violent interaction, as an agonistic discourse is fed by trust that the other will not engage in future violent acts, or that violent acts from the past will not be repeated. Bloomfield (2003: 11) captures this idea when he writes: ‘One of the biggest obstacles to [the] cooperation [between former enemies] is that, because of the violence of the past, their relations are based on antagonism, distrust, disrespect and, quite possibly, hurt and hatred.’

But equally important in the discussion of this third nodal point of agonism is the focus on peaceful and non-violent *interaction*, which again has many dimensions and variations. Interaction may be minimal, in the sense that it is based on mutual but distant toleration. Williams (1996: 19), although not discussing agonism explicitly, describes the necessity of toleration by contrasting it to antagonism and armed conflict:

It is necessary where different groups have conflicting beliefs – moral, political, or religious – and realize that there is no alternative to their living together, that is to say, no alternative except armed conflict, which will not resolve their disagreements and will impose continuous suffering.

The breakdown of agonism, and the evolution towards antagonism occurs when ‘[...] people find others’ beliefs or ways of life deeply unacceptable’ (Williams, 1996: 19). Williams (1996: 19) illustrates this with religious toleration: ‘In matters of religion, for instance [...], the need for toleration arises because one of the groups, at least, thinks that the other is blasphemously, disastrously, obscenely wrong.’ Toleration, which implies the acceptance of the other as legitimate, is the basic level of peaceful and nonviolent interaction, but more intense forms of (peaceful and non-violent) interaction, such as coordination, cooperation and collaboration, remain possible. This then, in turn, raises questions about when the other-adversary becomes an ally, friend or neighbour, but this will be discussed in the next part.

First, Figure 1 provides us with an overview of the nodal points of antagonism and agonism:

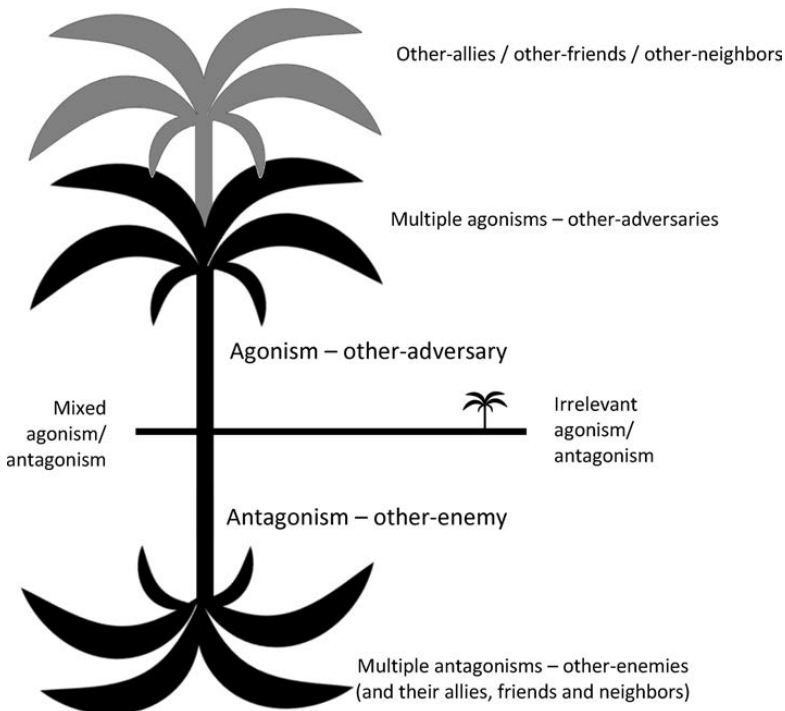
**Figure 1: Nodal points of antagonism and agonism**

Antagonism	Agonism
Radical difference	Conflictual togetherness
Homogenization of the self	Pluralization of the self
Enemy destruction	Peaceful and non-violent interaction

#### 4. Multiple antagonisms and agonisms, and multiple articulations of the Other

Apart from the straightforward agonistic and antagonistic positions, we can distinguish several other positions and combinations (see Fig. 2, labelled the palm tree model of antagonism and agonism), which enables avoiding becoming trapped in a mere dichotomy between antagonism and agonism. First, both agonism and antagonism suppose the relevance of the other, as either adversary or enemy. It is equally conceivable that actors are articulated as irrelevant non-self *and* non-other, or are not articulated at all. In some cases, as has been analyzed through the lens of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978), or the subaltern (Spivak, 1988), this is part of an antagonistic logic, but in other cases an actor can be met with indifference, or be articulated as part of another symbolic space. This scenario is not so much a situation of a discourse of indifference (which still signifies relevance) but rather a situation of indifference to discourse. A situation of irrelevance is not necessarily stable, and irrelevance can always be transformed into relevance (and vice versa).

**Figure 2: The palm tree model of antagonism and agonism. Source: Carpentier (2017: 184)**



Second, we should incorporate the co-existence of antagonisms and agonisms. When Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 131) write: '[...] there are a variety of possible antagonisms in the social, many of them in opposition to each other', it is a clear acknowledgment of a multitude of antagonisms (proper or in agonistic form). But dominant situations of agonism and antagonism can be combined with upsurges of antagonism and agonism, respectively. In other words, they can co-exist, temporally or more structurally. A chain of equivalence that is sustained by an antagonistic other can (and often will) be characterized by agonism within the chain itself. Conversely, in a situation of dominant agonism, antagonism can still occur, as Mouffe's (2005: 64ff.) discussion of the responses of Western democracies to right-wing populism shows.

Third, as already briefly indicated, there are more others than the other-enemy and the other-adversary. One of the problems of Schmitt's (1996) friend/foe distinction is that he does not develop the friend part of the dichotomy that much in *The Concept of the Political*, although there is more attention to the friend in *The Theory of the Partisan* (2004). This is worsened by interpretations of his work that implicitly conflate the friend with the self, which tends to hide some of the complexities in relation to the subject position of the self. The equivalential chain is itself a construction that articulates a diversity of elements under the common denominator of the self without, however, totally eliminating their differences: They '[...] can weaken, but not domesticate differences' (Laclau, 2005: 79).

As discussed earlier, the subject position of the self can become pluralized, which is considered characteristic of the agonistic model, but the self can also disintegrate, e.g. due to internal differences. More importantly, the subject position of the self can itself be articulated (or become part of a larger chain of equivalence) with other actors, who are considered allies or friends. In a book on political friendship, King and Smith (2013: 1-2) raise the question of '[...] whether any community ("us") is necessarily defined in opposition to some other and also whether any such opponent ("them") is necessarily to be construed as an enemy'. Their introductory chapter, and edited volume, argues for the importance of political amity, which provides a negative answer to their own question. Slomp's (2013: 85, emphasis in original) chapter in this same book returns to Schmitt's work to argue that 'Two types of friends populate the world of *Theorie des Partisanen*: on the one hand there is the friend who is external to one's own group or party, whom we can call the ally, and on the other hand there is the friend who belongs to one's own group or party.' Slomp's reading of Schmitt (2004) opens up space to distinguish more other-related subject positions than the enemy and the adversary. To echo's Slomp's (2013: 86) words: 'The presence of external



allies is as important to Schmitt as the existence of enemies.’ We can find other references to this other-ally, e.g. in Billig’s (1995: 87) work. Still, going back to Schmitt, I would like to question whether the friend is necessarily part of the ‘own group or party’, and I would like to suggest that the other-friend is also a possible subject position. Inspiration for this argument can be found in Derrida’s (2005) attempt to shift from fraternity to friendship in his *Politics of Friendship*, but also in Mehta’s (1999: 41) reading of Mahatma Gandhi’s use of the friendship signifier in structuring relations between Hindus and Muslims. What Chacko (2012: 74) called a ‘politics of friendship’ within Gandhi’s framework was ‘[...] based on equality, and when equality existed, friendship was to be cultivated through the willingness to unconditionally and disinterestedly share in the suffering of the neighbour’. This brings Bryant (2004: 250) to suggest yet another option, namely the other-neighbour, when she writes:

Neighbours [...] are those persons to whom one is historically connected through place and with whom one must live. [...] Affection, indeed, is not the point. Even the best neighbours may be noisy, may cause trouble, may know too much about one’s comings and goings. Neighbours form a moral community and a tribunal.

As is the case with the other-friend, the other-neighbour has also been addressed in philosophical texts, such as the work of Levinas (1978). For Levinas (1978: 159), the neighbour remains an other, but this other-neighbour takes a crucial place, because ‘[...] my relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others’. The subject position of other-neighbour, at least in Levinas’s articulation,<sup>12</sup> produces an obligation that cannot be escaped, and which precedes experience: ‘[...] the face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract’ (Levinas, 1978: 159).

These reflections enable distinguishing different articulations of the other subject positions, namely, the other-ally, the other-friend and the other-neighbour. Arguably, this distinction of more other-related subject positions does not push the political outside the context of conflictuality, as the other-neighbour, the other-friend

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12 This articulation of the (good) other-neighbour is not without alternatives, though. For instance, Painter (2012: 524) points out that the other-neighbour is more of an ‘unknown’ in ‘highly urbanized societies [...]’, and Žižek (2008: 59) (following Freud) labels the other-neighbour ‘[...] a thing, a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life [...] disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, when it comes too close’. In his inimitable style, Žižek (2008: 166, emphasis in original) writes: ‘[...] a Neighbour is one who per definition *smells*’.

and the other-ally are also not in a symbiotic relationship with the self, and this difference still has the capacity to generate conflict.

Finally, we should emphasize the workings of contingency, and stress changes over time, where the relationship of particular others with the self changes over time. Alliances can turn into enmities, but sometimes enmities can also evolve over time, where the other as former enemy can shift to a position that approximates to the other as friend. Wallenstein's (2012: 33) brief analysis of the changing French/German relations in the twentieth century illustrates this logic of difference, re-articulating the antagonistic chain of equivalence: '[...] the integration of the two former enemies, Germany and France, illustrated the potential of reversing dynamics. It showed it was possible to move from being enemies to allies, in a relationship that was closer than traditional alliances of convenience.'

## 5. Conclusion

Antagonism and agonism have proven to be valuable concepts in conceiving a relationship between conflict and democracy that does not ignore the structural presence of conflict in democratic societies, but that acknowledges the importance of conflict, caused by the equally structural diversity of positions, interests, discourses, identities etc. At the same time, the strong emphasis on agonism – as a way to think about the coexistence of conflict and democracy— comes at a price, as it results in two problems: the black-boxing of antagonism and agonism, and their dichotomization.

Opening up, and looking inside, these two black boxes allow for more theoretical refinement, but also increase the empirical usability of both concepts. This chapter argues for a 3-dimensional operationalization of antagonism and agonism, identifying the pairs of radical difference vs conflictual togetherness; homogenization vs pluralization of the self; and enemy destruction vs peaceful and non-violent interaction. It is important to stress that these three pairs are indeed dimensions, with many different possible in-between positions, and with undoubtedly many contradictions and discontinuities when zooming in on sub-processes. Of course, other research projects might render other or more dimensions, but this model offers an operationalization that has proven itself in a particular research project (Carpentier, 2017) and offers itself to be further developed in interaction with other theoretical frameworks and empirical research projects.

Moving away from a dichotomy between antagonism and agonism is equally important. This chapter argues for a multiplicity of antagonisms and agonisms,

which implies that antagonism and agonism can (and often do) coexist. Moreover, there is a need to move beyond the antagonistic other-enemy and the agonistic other-adversary, acknowledging the existence of other-neighbours, other-allies, other-friends and others that become re-articulated as part of the self. This unpacking of the other, and acknowledgement of the diversity of others, is a crucial step in improving our understanding of othering, its fluidity and contingency, and its multidimensionality.

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