Does philosophy contribute to an invasion complex? Sloterdijk the antagonist and the agonism of Mouffe

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ABSTRACT
The political backlash against multiculturalism alongside the media portrayal of the global refugee crisis would suggest that the spaces for cultural difference have contracted and moved into a mode of transnational crisis management. This article addresses the moral panic over cultural difference by challenging some of the philosophical frameworks that have justified naturalized negative attitudes towards migrants and dismissed the viability of cosmopolitan perspectives. In particular, the author will critically evaluate the antagonistic perspective developed in Peter Sloterdijk’s writings and Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonism. To grasp the complex and hybrid forms of cross-cultural exchanges, the author argues that a more robust vision of cosmopolitanism is necessary.

Why does the presence of cultural difference inspire such hostility? Even if the proportion of people who are defined as a minority is expanding, and the role of cultural difference is assuming greater significance in public life, why is this presence interpreted as such a threat to the nation, and why is the arrival of the other rendered as the apocalyptic end of civilization? The fear of the other, and, in particular, the scapegoating of refugees and migrants, have never been so central to political discourse. In the US President Donald Trump promised to build the great wall and make Mexico pay for it. Prior to the Brexit scenario the leaders in Europe had already launched scathing assaults on multiculturalism. The former French President Nicolas Sarkozy revealed that the real threat to the Republic was women wearing the hijab in public institutions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the “multicultural approach of ‘let’s co-exist and enjoy each other’, this approach has failed, absolutely failed.” This was in step with the then British Prime Minister David Cameron’s announcement that: “State multiculturalism is a wrong-headed doctrine that has had disastrous results.” “Absolute failure”, “disastrous results”, “the end of the Republic”, this hysterical and vitriolic chorus of complaints was rather excessive given that the experimentation with multiculturalism in Europe had been mostly at the symbolic level. Despite the limited application of multiculturalism at a structural level, it should come as no surprise that this political discourse has fanned a populist resentment against public institutions.

The backlash first surfaced during the conservative Howard government in Australia (1996–2007), and was extended by former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who distilled these fears in his imperative: that migrants should “join us not change us”.

One would assume that in Australia, where the concept of multiculturalism was pioneered and the institutional impact has been far more significant, a more balanced approach would be evident. Despite the ceremonial boasts about Australia as the multicultural success story, the political status of multiculturalism is increasingly distorted by fears that reflect both a specific manifestation of an “invasion complex”, and the influence of a new transnational “crisis” discourse. The backlash first surfaced during the conservative Howard government in Australia (1996–2007), and was extended by former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who distilled these fears in his imperative: that migrants should “join us not change us”.

The current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has not moved from the hymn sheet of his predecessors. After the recent bombings in Paris and Brussels, and in an utterly disingenuous manner, he boasted of the “deeper insights” that his own security agencies possessed in relation to those “who are likely to pose a risk”, and was equally quick to criticize the supposedly inferior measures in Europe: “If you can’t control your borders, you don’t know who’s coming or going. Regrettably they allowed things to slip and that weakness in European security is not unrelated to the problems they’ve been having in recent times.” Throughout his tenure he has combined both Howard’s and Abbott’s one-line mantras into a two-pronged slogan: “We will decide who enters this...
country, and we stop the boats. Turnbull’s justification for the review of the Racial Discrimination Act was based on the spurious claim that the current defence of minority rights was impinging on the principles of freedom of speech. This failed attempt to both lower the legal threshold for permissible bigotry, and delegitimize the institutional evolution of minority rights, was another example of how the mainstream political discourse was disconnected from the prevailing demographic realities and cultural sensitivities.

These examples suggest that there is a global political consensus to push multiculturalism into retreat. The demands for cultural integration and conformity to national ideals are no longer expressed in a dialogic form, but twisted into nationalistic imperatives. For instance, the German concept of Leitkultur was first introduced by Bassam Tibi, a German–Arab scholar, to evoke the open space of modernity within which multiculturalism could participate as a force for shaping a new common culture. Despite being conceived as a term that could enhance the space for cross-cultural interaction, Leitkultur was quickly reinterpreted by the Christian Democrats and Conservatives to assert the pre-existence of an essentially monocultural Germanic leading culture. Yet, for all the crisis discourse on multiculturalism, there is a stunning gap between the political rhetoric and reality of lived experiences. Conservative politicians described the failure of multiculturalism to garner public support, but in Australia it has remained a popular and widely accepted principle. The political anxiety over the “Muslim problem” and the chorus of laments over a looming “civics deficit” also bear little relation to reality. One recent study found that Australian Muslims have rates of volunteering that vastly exceed the national average, that much of this volunteerism is directed to non-Muslim-specific activities and that they cultivate neighbourly relations that transcend national and religious boundaries. In another extensive Australian study on multiculturalism and governance, it was noted that, while people born overseas are significantly less likely to feel at home in Australia, they are more likely than those born in Australia to consider it important for them to “fit in” with Australian culture. The same study also stressed that, while young people are moving away from traditional forms of political participation and national belonging, they are significantly more likely to experience cosmopolitan belonging. These findings directly contradict the myth of multiculturalism as facilitating self-segregating ghettoes. Trevor Phillips’s famous claim that Britain was “sleep walking towards segregation” also bears little resemblance to the evidence in the UK that points to the growing residential dispersal and the diverse composition of friendship networks amongst minorities. Statistics show that Muslims are as likely to marry out as White Christians, and the only proof of sustained ghettos and ethnic isolation are the White people who live in places where over 90% of the population is White. Minorities tend to live in neighbourhoods with less than 20% of their own group.

These perduing signs of multiculturalism from below, and globally connected forms of transculturalism, are at odds with the political rhetoric on the death of multiculturalism. It is a banal platitude but it is worth repeating: no culture is an island, all cultures are formed through the interplay with others, they are in a perpetual state of mixing, shape-shifting, boundaries are never sealed and identities are constantly reconfigured through a process of mimicry, borrowing and hybridization. The existence of this process of human interaction and cultural transformation seems hard to refute. What appears to be contestable is the perceived outcome of this process when both the degree of diversity has multiplied, and the frequency of interaction has accelerated. Does this super-diversity and accelerationism in cultural exchange take culture itself to a tipping point? In short, will an intensified cultural dynamic blast culture out of existence? Furthermore, does the positive inclination in globalizing discourses towards transgressing boundaries, mixing of opposites and building expanded networks, reverse the balance of power and shift the advantage away from the embedded constructs, as it welcomes disruptive adversaries as champions of innovation and naively beckons the arrival of rival civilizations as mere spectacle?

In this article I will explore two theoretical perspectives on culture: the antagonistic perspective exemplified by Peter Sloterdijk, and the agonistic viewpoint developed by Chantal Mouffe. These two approaches offer contrasting accounts of the relationship between culture and difference. In particular, it will allow us to focus on how their distinctive assumptions and frameworks produce contrastive views on whether violence inevitably follows from the admission of difference, or the interplay between different cultures can operate within non-coercive channels and ultimately generate creative transformations. Contrasting Sloterdijk’s and Mouffe’s approaches helps clarify not only the differences in their political perspectives, but also reveals a reliance on untested philosophical claims about the primacy of conflict. The point of this article is not simply to counter the errors and opinions with the truth and data on the contribution of minorities to cultural revitalization, or to demonstrate the rates of adherence to the law and civic participation as proof that migrants are good citizens, but rather to explore the conceptual frameworks and cultural assumptions that underpin antagonistic and agonistic viewpoints. To address this nexus between deep-seated fears and wide-open anxieties, I will contend that the concept of culture is increasingly conceived through two
perspectives: antagonism and agonism. The difference between these two perspectives is profound in terms of the contrasting stance towards cultural pluralism. However, there are also some unsettling points of convergence; in particular, there is a shared assumption that conflict is the principle feature of human consciousness and social formation. This emphasis on conflict limits the possibility for cultural exchange, as it provides an irreconcilable stumbling block that infuses the ideal of multiculturalism with a primordial fear, and defers any genuine experience of cosmopolitanism. The politics of fear has purchase in the political imaginary because it draws on a cultural worldview that prejudices the other as an enemy, and defines the home as besieged territory that must be defended. In particular, this article will critique the primordial presumption of misanthropy in human subjectivity and the prioritization of conflict in social formations.

**Sloterdijk and cultural antagonism**

Let us begin by unpacking the fears associated with cultural difference in the extensive writings of Peter Sloterdijk. To see the wider dimensions that are at play in Sloterdijk’s writing, it is useful to avoid any swift reduction of it as either ideological neo-nationalism, or neurotic populism. As a self-styled modern Diogenes, Sloterdijk is a contrarian. He attacks both the delusions in neo-conservatism and the platitudes of progressives. While Sloterdijk’s polemic against globalization does not fall neatly into conventional political position, there is an explicit antagonistic framework that both shapes the status of the stranger and the phenomenon of mobility, as well as predetermines how the function of borders and political institutions are nested in a theory of culture, civilization and cosmology. My aim is to unpack Sloterdijk’s conception of culture and demonstrate how it draws on a primordial theory that places conflict at the heart of both human consciousness and political solidarity. It is by examining the way Sloterdijk naturalizes misanthropy and prioritizes conflict within a given philosophical perspective, that we can also see how he contributes to the wider political discourse that denigrates the identity of migrants and rejects the viability of multiculturalism.

Sloterdijk’s specific views on migration, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are embedded in and easily confused with his political and cultural analysis of globalization. In Sloterdijk’s view, globalization is an economic project for the integration of markets that has also appropriated the cosmopolitan rhetoric of expanding the frontiers and multiplying the points of human connection. Sloterdijk, like a number of other cultural theorists, has come to the view that the cultural logic of globalization leads to the flattening of experience in trivial consumption. Sloterdijk claims that it reduces all forms of symbolic identification to mere transactions in the marketplace, and, in this deterritorialized world, all forms of belonging are stripped down to temporary associations that are devoid of any deep attachments. The net effect of globality is that it has produced a place without identity, a banal zone that privileges the needs of the passers-by over the dwellers, leaving us all adrift in a boring mall that he describes for having “no atmosphere”.

Sloterdijk’s alarmist vision of globalization is not confined to the familiar cultural critique of the McDonaldization thesis, it also extends to a political critique of national sovereignty and a rejection of the welfare state. He has attacked the welfarist model on the grounds that it supposedly encourages, what he calls, a kleptocracy, where the weak will feel entitled to perpetual lifestyle support from the state, and the rich will be forced to sacrifice their elan, curtail their ambitions and bow down in guilt. A similar complaint is also registered in relation to the demands of multiculturalism and the promotion of the “welcome culture” for refugees. Once again, Sloterdijk sees these invocations as coming from pious but naive advocates who, while caring for the weak, also drain the national elan. He goes so far as to conclude that multiculturalism is not just another sentimental example of utopian rhetoric, but a mechanism by which malevolent migrants achieve their goal of “coercive accommodation”.

If we focused on the content of these complaints, we would miss the deeper issues that are also in play. Sloterdijk’s critique of the ascending culture of globalization and the decline in the political authority of the nation state is embedded in a deeper philosophical and anthropological worldview that asserts fear of difference as a fundamental feature of human nature. At the centre of his critique of the role of hyper-diversity and accelerationism in contemporary society is an irreducible conception of misanthropy. Thus, globalization that was supposed to promote a cosmopolitan order of openness, solidarity and compassion with the whole of humanity, results in his view as producing its opposite: a misanthropic condition that is characterized by repulsion, fragmentation and fear.

Misanthropy provides the confusing foundation for Sloterdijk’s critique of globalization and his ultimate rejection of cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, misanthropy is at odds with Sloterdijk’s admiration for the early philosophical visions of the cosmos. On the other hand, it reinforces the political critique against globalization. Despite dedicating long admiring passages in his *Spheres* trilogy on the conceptual radiance of pre-Socratic thought and celebrating its superiority over the zealousness of religious thought, as well as using the grandeur of these philosophical
vistas to highlight both the venal versions of economic globalization, and the poverty of philosophical imagination in the post-Socratic tradition of rationalist scepticism, the overall thrust of Sloterdijk’s argument flips as it then turns towards a total rejection of these poetically brilliant but politically redundant footings of philosophy. The cosmological origins of philosophy are declared as having no purchase in contemporary society.

The tension at the centre of Sloterdijk’s antagonistic image of culture and identity is compounded by the reliance on the classical references to the cosmos image in his trans-historical depiction of the sphere. Again, the authority of this image is confusing, at times his gaze upwards and celestial, but then in more decisive tones he turns downwards and towards the womb. Hence, Sloterdijk’s spherical view of the world is ultimately derived from the presumption of blissful unity in the intra-uterine space, and an ambivalent exile. This coming out into the world also marks the commencement of a lifetime of insecurity and melancholy. For Sloterdijk, the function of culture is both the provision of a spatial sense of security and compensation for the loss of ontological security. Hence, culture is conceived as a bounded space that encloses and nests the individual. While the space of culture as a sphere is defined at first in territorial terms, it is also imbued with the negative identity: it marks the double absence of biological and cosmological claims of belonging. Yet, it is the nexus between culture and territory that is given priority in shaping the “first order” formations of collective consciousness. According to Sloterdijk, all cultures are like cocoons for developing human consciousness. In this enclosure, meaning is formed through the perpetuation of a repertoire of symbols and the adherence to an internal evaluative logic. Cultures, he insists, are distinctive from each other and are defined in opposition to each other. From this view of culture as a fragile sphere and the construction of the other as a life-threatening rival, then it follows that the inclusion of the other can only be accommodated after the liquidation of their agency. Similarly, the promise of a cosmopolitan journey in a globalizing world is condemned as just “parochialism on its travels”.

Thus, as a public policy, multiculturalism is not seen as the benign stimulus for cultural innovation, but is reduced to a malignant facet of globalization that depletes subjectivity until it is reduced to a “splintered para-subject in a universal history of the coincidental”.

The primacy that Sloterdijk attributes to culture as a bounded territory means that membership is also defined in the vigilante binary: either with us, or against us. Sloterdijk avers that the primary focus of humanity is never directed towards open-ended universalist self-image, but always remains fixated on a particularistic sense of self, that is, on its own ethnic group, and therefore the authentic attitude towards the rest of humanity ranges from polite indifference to outright hostility. In his view, the cosmopolitan ideal of compassion in the whole of humanity is blocked by “an inevitable finitude of human interest in others.” This universal claim on the human condition is then backed up by an even more sweeping comment that there is no society that has developed the necessary “misanthropy inhibiting measures”. Human consciousness is confined to a defensive formation, not as being open to everyone and everywhere, but as bound to a small group and enclosed within a specific sphere. Self-consciousness is, in his view, formed in relation to a particular group, and therefore humans are incapable of grasping themselves as “ontologically unified as members of a species that share a single world”.

According to Sloterdijk, humanity is incapable of living in a state of worldly fellowship, for even as people throughout the world have come to recognise that they increasingly face a common predicament in relation to issues such as global warming, transnational terrorist networks and refugee flows, this awareness is interpreted by him as just another expression of the instrumentalization of the idea of the common. This shared awareness is merely evidence of an already commodified knowledge of the planet, in which the meaning of being human is not posed in terms of sharing the physis with the cosmos. Instead of looking upwards at what holds us together, he argues that people live in little spheres, and merely seek the benefits that come from deeper engagements with their own place and the development of thicker social ties. Hence, like many critics against multiculturalism, Sloterdijk promotes the view that there are inherent thresholds of tolerance, limits to human curiosity and predetermined constraints on moral obligations. The appeal for security and self-preservation is therefore put forward not just as a primal human need that is reluctantly prioritized over the sentiment of humanitarian compassion and the aesthetic interests in difference, but rather as a regulative system that is mobilized to exclude the latter so that it does not impact on the former. Hospitality for the other is not only kept in the balance, but also prevented from disrupting the prior and non-negotiable nexus between cultural autonomy and territorial sovereignty.

From this perspective, the sign of the other is never neutral. The other is not just a carrier of a foreign cultural value system, but according to Sloterdijk their entry is an infradiction of what he calls the cultural “immunity” system to the chaos of the world. The other thus poses a risk to the capacity of culture to serve as a discrete protective and nurturing sphere. The mere presence of the other is in itself
interpreted as a demand—not just an innocent being that sets forth a series of interactions, but as a hungry rival that competes for space and launches an assault on the prevailing cultural meanings. To retain its immunity from infection and bolster its defence mechanisms, a culture must both eliminate this rival and also cultivate a belief in its inherent superiority over all other cultures. The relation between self and other, which in his eyes is most powerfully exemplified in the clash of civilizations between the West and Islam, is nothing less than struggle for total domination. There are no bridges across which mediation can occur, no shared space from which new directions can be formed, just a perpetual conflict until one eliminates the other. The battle becomes a zero-sum game, where one side must not only gain ascendancy over the other, but also obliterate the other.

Providing evidence of either humanity’s inbuilt misanthropy, or philosophy’s track record for taming the beast within human nature, is not part of Sloterdijk’s project. While he claims that the bestial tendencies are everywhere to be seen in the media reports, he does little to explain whether this misanthropic condition is derived from an inner psychic drive, or a consequence of social institutions. For the purposes of this article, such historical and sociological queries can be put to the side, as the focus is directed towards Sloterdijk’s assertion of misanthropy as the “first order” experience of humanity. My response to Sloterdijk’s conception of cultural difference will rest on an inherent contradiction within his definition of misanthropy and on the identification of alternative sources on what it means to be human, and finally, whether these alternate philosophical sources also bring us back to the cosmos in cosmopolitanism.

First, we will track the uneven way in which affect is represented in Sloterdijk’s writing. There is either an unacknowledged contradiction that runs throughout Sloterdijk’s writing, or perhaps, more tellingly, there is a disavowal of the ethical precepts and sociological perspectives that he uses to debunk and reject zealotry in others. In his book God’s Zeal, Sloterdijk condemns monotheistic religion for promoting a false sense of exclusivity and its inherent tendency for generating conflict. In this diagnosis, Sloterdijk places special emphasis on the organizing function of “either/or” logic and its propensity towards absolutism. This mode of thinking is at the core of antagonism. In this book he proposes an alternative worldview that embraces “grey areas”, a polyvalent order that is shaded by the relational order of “both/and” thinking, or what he calls the “reality of thirdness”. A similar antidote for antagonistic thinking was also proposed in the conclusion to Rage and Time, where he also advocated for a “post zealotic” ethical perspective where one sees “oneself always through the eyes of the other”, and in the same book he acknowledged the need to build a new world culture that is both founded on “rationally built second order observations” and sustained by a “new set of interculturally binding disciplines”.

Two problems immediately follow from these seemingly cosmopolitan comments. There is the matter of consistency. For when it comes to entertaining a dialogue between Islam and the West, Sloterdijk reverts back to his antagonistic dispositions and viligante binarisms. He misses no opportunity to complain of the “undeniable existence of a lack of will [by the Turks] to integrate [into Berlin]”, or even more generally to condemn Islam as a container of “bitterness and resentment”, and finally to describe radical Islam as a “desperate movement of economically superfluous and socially unusable individuals”. There is no polysemic tinting here! Only zealous righteousness can be heard in his stigmatic linking of migrants, Muslims and terrorists into a singular waste disposal proposal. These rivals are not people worthy of entry into conversation or rational persuasion, but are all lumped into the category of useless zombies imbued with what the former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott described as a “death cult”.

Then there is the deeper problem of ranking the aesthetic, ethical and institutional response to cultural difference as a “second order observation”. This implies that, even with the most sincere Kantian type of cosmopolitanism, there is the implicit retention of violent tendencies in human nature and exclusive social formations as “first order experiences”. In Sloterdijk’s vision of human nature, the capacity to hate the other is a primary experience and the defensive formation of social structures is the first defence mechanism. Having established structures for survival, he also argues that the capacity for caring for others is limited to those in our immediate proximity. This hierarchy rests on a glaring contradiction: on the one hand, attachment and care is fostered by the proximity and particularity of face-to-face relations, whereas, on the other hand, hate and urge for the destruction expands as it moves outwardly and thrives on abstractions. Sloterdijk gives no explanation as to why a violent and hateful emotion can thrive in the very circumstances in which caring and humanitarian sentiments wither. However, this already pessimistic view is compounded by his account of the triumph of bestializing over caring tendencies in the globalizing discourse. In this embattled scenario, cosmopolitanism is disembowelled of both its cosmos and its polity. It should come as no surprise that cosmopolitanism can only arise after the suppression of this “first order” hateful disposition towards others.

Cosmopolitanism is therefore not seen as a constitutive feature of human consciousness, but a learnt social construct, or, as Sloterdijk put it, a “second order” observation, a belated lesson that philosophy can impart to “tame” the beast that is first and
foremost always inside the citizen. As a “second order observation”, a cosmopolitan response is already at one step removed from action, it is, at best, a belated and partial response mechanism. However, in a more recent book of essays, In the World Interior of Capital, Sloterdijk distances himself even further from these cornerstones of normative cosmopolitanism, as he now regards it as a “hubristic belief”. The more Sloterdijk examines globalization, the more convinced he becomes that not only is the philosophical tradition on cosmopolitanism and the political discourse on multiculturalism a mere smokescreen for a bland and homogenized global culture, but it also reinforces his conviction in the primordial antagonism in human nature. His scepticism towards the ethical and aesthetic interest in the other is compounded by a fear that the endgame of globalization is a dreadful slide towards mediocrity and a fear that the rights of the self will have to be subordinated to the other. What seems to motivate his passionate distanciation from the other is what Arjun Appadurai calls the “fear of small differences” and an “anxiety of incompleteness” that culminates in the production of an apocalyptic vision.

This antagonistic perspective on the relationship between culture and difference shapes Sloterdijk’s manic primordialism, justifies his dismissal of the archives of hybrid creativity, allows him to revel in the idea of the cosmos but then take refuge in the tiny nested spheres of culture, and, ultimately, it feeds the fantasy that society can be controlled, or, as he put it, become an “air-conditioned” nation. What lurks within many of his neologisms are the fears of linking identity with mobility, as well as the anxieties over the durability of borders and institutions in a globalizing world. Sloterdijk’s articulation of these fears cannot be dismissed as mere idiosyncratic flaws. They deserve closer scrutiny because they expose the extent to which the politics of fear, or what I have previously called an “invasion complex”, are embedded in a specific and powerful philosophical outlook. If we were to remain in the grip of this worldview, what space is there for cross-cultural exchange, let alone a dialogue between civilizations? Sloterdijk’s philosophical perspective is no different to Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clash of civilizations. The clash results in a zero-sum game: winners eliminate rather than co-exist with losers. When different civilizations cross paths, do they really clash like violent antagonists, or is creative and rational dialogue the hallmark of civilized encounters?

Towards an agonistic theory of cultural interplay

If migrants are not all dangerous, difference does not destroy culture, and, despite the demagogy of some philosophers and politicians, ordinary people from different cultures can find vivid ways to interact, co-exist and produce new forms of belonging, then surely this is a moment to explore alternative philosophical frameworks. In order to capture the extent to which irenic tendencies, ethical relations, aesthetic interests and cosmopolitan capacities operate in everyday scenes, I will now shift my focus onto Chantal Mouffe’s theory of agonism. Mouffe has been engaged in a longstanding project to explain the process by which power and critique are interwoven and how social transformation occurs. Mouffe claims that, while power is registered as a coercive force that is separate to reason and aesthetics, the grip of power in a social order or a cultural form is never permanent and absolute. Power cannot seal itself from resistance, rather it assembles around specific intersections and partial networks. This process of assemblage is anti-essentialist and contingent: “Every order is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices.” Mouffe defines this formation of power as hegemony. The struggle with hegemonic manifestations is also seen as an ongoing process, and Mouffe claims that those who are excluded forge their own counter-hegemonic struggles. Not unlike the antagonist perspective, this theory of agonism also emphasizes the constitutive role of conflict, and the perpetual struggle with difference. However, unlike Sloterdijk’s antagonistic perspective, the agonistic viewpoint stresses that differences are not problems to be eliminated, but are the starting points for dialogue with the other, and also the status of difference is interpreted as the driving force in cultural renewal and social transformation.

At the heart of the agonistic perspective is a faith in the productive role of dialogue with your adversary. It is through dialogue with the other that a hegemonic order or consensus can be reached. However, Mouffe also points out that agreement is never fixed permanently. It is always subject to further critique and contestation. Hence, we can see that consensus in the agonistic conception of culture is always pregnant with dissensus. It is the emergent agreement that holds the culture together, keeps an order in place, but also the residual disagreement that levers open change and invites an alternative order to emerge. In this framework of agreement and disagreement, Mouffe stresses that adversaries have a legitimate right to express their counter-hegemonic worldviews. A key element of the adversarial relationship that Mouffe advocates is defined around its acceptance of the right to the right of difference. Adversaries might not agree with each other, but they defend each other’s right to have different ideas. Thus contestation over difference with the other does not presume the elimination of the other.

Mouffe repeatedly claims that an agonistic perspective is the most appropriate perspective for understanding the process of social transformation
in a liberal democratic framework. She also argues that the benefit of agonism over other perspectives is that it distinguishes itself in its capacity to listen to those who have been rendered voiceless and excluded from the hegemonic spheres. In short, the theory of agonistic politics is distinguished from antagonistic perspectives in that it constructs an arena where deliberation and contestation are at the heart of political critique and social transformation. Mouffe’s most recent collection of essays, Agonistics, takes these arguments one step further as she addresses both the specific role artists play as counter-hegemonic agents, and the more general function of affect and symbolic production in a globalizing world. Mouffe pays particular attention to the way artists reshape what is taken as common sense in everyday life. She expresses admiration for the way artists not only produce images that can reconfigure symbolic relations, but also intervene in the definition of public spaces, and transform the modes of cultural interactions. From Mouffe’s agonistic perspective, the formation of culture is defined through an anti-essentialist prism and also perpetually entangled in a struggle for power over others. Hence, all cultures are seen as being in a continuous and incomplete process of development and transformation. There is no definitive origin or totalizing framework that defines any cultural formation. This partial shape and ongoing dynamic imply that culture is also seen as a site of contestation. Despite this seemingly open-ended framework, Mouffe’s focus on the work of art is directed to overt acts of resistance, and her understanding of creativity is highly rationalist and instrumental. It presents the affective work of art as if it were a more astute form of rational critique and a sharper intervention in public culture. In effect, Mouffe holds back from exploring the aesthetic and affective transformation, and retains the primacy of conflict in subjective and collective formations.

Throughout her writings, Mouffe isadamant that antagonism is not something that can be wished away. Antagonism is considered to be an existential feature of social being, and, as Lois McNay notes, one of Mouffe’s most staunch critics, its primacy is asserted with a “mysterious density and vitalism.” It remains unclear whether conflict is constituted by a specific social order, or all social order is formed through conflict. So, how will an agonistic politics envelop and “tame” this force? If antagonism precedes the politics of agonism, then surely antagonism will also determine the political conditions for its own regulation? Or, put the other way, will any political process and cultural intervention that is agonistic in its nature, have the capacity to both restrain the violent urges in human nature and impose a moral social order? Mouffe does not have direct answers to these questions, but her general argument appears to rest on the belief that “second order observations” and the institutional frameworks of liberal democracy have the capacity to override brute power.

This preliminary critique suggests that agonism suffers the same limitations that Sloterdijk noted in relation to cosmopolitanism, that is, that reasoned debate, ethical relations and aesthetic interests are not “first order” rivals that co-exist with the destructive forces of antagonism, but are to be relegated to a mere second-order construct. In this belated and subordinate role, it is also almost impossible for cosmopolitanism to leap ahead of the violent urges in human nature, and serve as either a retraining force, or provide an alternate moral outlook that encourages integration. Given that the agonistic perspective identifies conflict as a constitutive force in the social order, then this suggests that all other affects, such as curiosity and empathy, are also subordinate to hate and rage, and that the function of engaging with difference in a liberal democratic framework is confined to a belated brake mechanism. However, this untested assumption on the primary force of antagonism and conflict also skews the interplay between culture and difference. For, if antagonism and conflict is the wellspring of culture, then how would the agonistic articulation of difference ascend within a hegemonic formation of culture? The hegemonic order would only permit entry to differences that have been authorized and validated by its own normative order. This in itself would strip other cultures of any critical difference.

Such conceptual problems in the theory of agonism are also evident in Mouffe’s understanding of the material conditions in which conflict is negotiated. For instance, the claim that liberal democratic procedures are the necessary principles for the negotiation of cultural differences preserves that either this framework is already universally accepted, or that the people who are opposed to it can be converted into adherents. In Mouffe’s account of the role of liberal democratic procedures, she acknowledges that conflict can lead to violence when the channels of dialogue are blocked or perverted, but she does not have any explanation of how an enemy, that is, one who is either outside of, or fundamentally opposed to, liberal democracy, will be convinced to enter as an adversary within, let alone as an adherent to it. This appears to be a major stumbling block to the prospects of dialogue in an agonistic arena.

For dialogue to commence in an agonistic arena, and its outcomes to be accepted as productive, Mouffe claims that it is necessary that both parties share liberal democratic procedural assumption and values. This starting point is itself an insurmountable barrier for its opponents and enemies. The two vital starting points to Mouffe’s image of the agona—emphasis on individual liberty over collective conceptions of
culture, and the presumption that democratic procedures are superior to all other political structures—are in themselves barriers to dialogue. There is no indication in Mouffe’s theory of agonism on how the two central ideas of liberal democracy are subject to the same degree of critique that all other perspectives are subjected to. Mouffe rightly states that “society is permeated by contingency and any order is of an hegemonic nature”. Yet, she has nothing to say about the process for questioning the priority of a liberal democratic framework. There is no engagement with the dispute between political ideologies that rest on secular and sacred worldviews, let alone any direct response to competing claims on state institutions made by religious communities. Mouffe’s account of the conversion of social antagonism into political agonism presupposes the voluntary and consensual adoption of two ethico-political standpoints. First, the enemies convert themselves into adversaries as they voluntarily disarm and adopt a non-coercive adversarial stance. Second, the adversaries agree to share the principles of liberal democratic as a common framework for engagement. But how does such a voluntary conversion occur? By what means of intervention—divine edict, rational deduction, aesthetic persuasion—do enemies agree to behave as adversaries and abide by the irenic rules of liberal democracy? Mouffe gives no explanation as to how this conversion actually happens. It is inconceivable that Mouffe would endorse the vigilante attitude of the antagonists and their waste disposal policies. However, the silence towards an opponent’s claims over the starting points of dialogue presents a deep flaw in the model, as it suggests that a certain degree of violence—the elimination of disagreement over the priority of liberal democratic assumptions and values—is necessary before an agonistic worldview can be established. If dialogue is confined to those who already agree with liberal democratic values and procedures, then the preconditions of participation will exclude many of the people that agonism purports to include.

Given these limitations, it is clear that a more nuanced philosophical perspective is necessary. A deeper engagement with the concept of pluralism in liberal democratic theory and a more transparent application in multicultural discourses would also be welcome. While most of the defenders of the liberal democratic tradition have moved on from the defensive reaction against multiculturalism as if it were a threat to national unity, there is still uncertainty over the limits of pluralism and the persistence of a blind spot within the framework. Pluralism is a value that is celebrated, but in the liberal democratic framework it is also balanced against the needs for social cohesion. Hence, the limits that are placed on pluralism can vary significantly. It ranges from a minimum commitment to co-existence with the other, insofar as tolerance can remain within the spectrum of benign indifference and tacit awareness of each other, to a more robust dialogue on mutual recognition and collective wellbeing. Critics of liberal conceptions of pluralism were also quick to point out a fundamental racial blind spot that is evident whenever particularistic values are promoted as universal norms. As a consequence, there still remains an unresolved “struggle at the heart of liberal theory, where a genuine desire for equality as a universal norm is tethered to a tenacious ethnocentric provincialism in matters of cultural judgment and recognition”. While an agonistic framework of liberal democracy is distinct from the antagonistic forms that aim to eliminate the other, there is still the risk that the assumptions embedded in liberal concepts of pluralism, tolerance and recognition can render the other impotent, and foreclose the counter-hegemonic struggle against the dominant order. If the playing field is perceived as uneven and there is anticipation of the experience of diminishment and marginality, then there is the risk, as predicted by Mouffe, that frustration will only encourage new forms of violence. Neither the vigilante binarism of antagonistic politics, nor the presumed neutrality of agonistic liberalism, seems adequate to the task of addressing the cultures of difference in everyday life. Against this xenophobic nationalism and beyond the blind spots of liberal provincialism, there needs to be a more robust vision of cosmopolitanism.

**Conclusion**

At first glance, Mouffe’s agonistic cultural politics would appear to be the counter to the antagonistic cultural perspective of Sloterdijk. The agonist would reject the racist demarcations in antagonistic politics, and the antagonist would accuse the agonist of promoting a blind relativism that surrenders sovereignty. The agonist stresses the interplay between the internal cultural formations and the constitutive outside, while the antagonist sees interaction and exchange as a zero-sum game. The agonist does not seek to turn the enemy into a friend, but insists that as adversaries they must respect shared rule, whereas the antagonist scorns this naive faith in the other and sees the adversary as an enemy in sheep’s clothing. However, on closer scrutiny there are some disturbing points of convergence in these two perspectives.

While Sloterdijk is explicit in his promotion of an ethno-cultural system, Mouffe’s model asserts the inherent superiority of liberal democracy without spelling out the steps towards the conversion to the higher ground of agonism. In both perspectives, there is the problem of the unconverted. What kind of dialogue is possible when the opponent is already stripped of the power to be an interlocutor? What
do we do with those for whom the framework of liberal democracy is experienced as a mechanism for humiliation, marginalization and domination rather than the neutral platform for negotiatiing conflict?

These questions bring us to face the violence in both perspectives. Sloterdijk and Mouffe both assume that genuine dialogue is confined to adversaries, but only Sloterdijk is prepared to speak of the consequences of facing enemies. For Sloterdijk, the space for adversaries is thin and the space for engagement with adversaries is predetermined by the receiving culture. It is not necessarily a paranoid projection, for it follows from the cultural construction, that those who do not share your values are prejudged as being outside the spheres of comprehensible subjectivity and cultivation. Mouffe would recoil from this violent de-subjectification and de-culturalization of a rival, but at the same time, the silence over how to disarm the enemy and define the neutrality of the arena for the agony leaves us in a paralysis. The agonistic perspective sets out to open the channels of negotiation to include the excluded, but it fails to demonstrate how this can be achieved in a context that is already loaded with resentment and resistance. The effective breadth of the agonistic perspective that Mouffe proposes is only as wide as the liberal democratic gate. It can only admit an adversary once they have agreed to play by its rules. If dialogue is confined to those who are already in agreement with the framework of liberal democracy, we are left with a conundrum and risk disqualifying the vast majority of people.

Despite the media hysterics and populist political discourse, there is evidence that cross-cultural exchange is alive in contexts that the antagonistic theory had already defined as a dead space, and it is moving in ways that do not neatly fit into Mouffe’s outline of the agonistic perspective. This suggests that, at the very least, an expanded conception of agonism is necessary. Such a viewpoint is now being developed in feminist critiques of culture and agency. From this perspective, culture is not seen as a defensive formation against the world, but as a relatively open process of sense-making through the incorporation of difference. Similarly, we could excavate more affirmative philosophical approaches towards culture, such as the arguments on creativity developed by Felix Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy and Cornelius Castoriadis. From these perspectives, we could consider how identity, both at the inter-subjective and institutional levels, proceeds from the condition of being-open. Being-open, to the trans-forces of subjectivity and the collective dynamics in social formation, is neither a belated response, nor a learnt construct, but rather, it is a constitutive force in identity and culture. Through the openness of curiosity and empathy, differences are folded together and this aesthetic and ethical engagement is as primary as any misanthropic urge to hate and destroy the other.

These counter-traditions shift the ground from an inextricable antagonism and open new lines of connection towards the other that are also closer to the “folds” of aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Rather than seeing ethical empathy as a product of moral pedagogy, or cultural curiosity as a secondary derivative of normative cosmopolitanism, being-open is expressive of a fundamental capacity for human connectedness. In the everyday scenes of multiculturalism, there is good reason to believe that antagonism is not the only reflex response to the other. For instance, in Australia, multiculturalism was not born from the benevolence of state-sponsored managerial programmes. It sprang from the groundswell of political and cultural activism from within the ethnic communities. To think of it purely within the normative discourse of policy impact is to miss the point. It is a lived experience, a modality of being that gives form to complexity.

One of the explanations of the sustained political attack on multiculturalism is that it amounts to a deferral of the acknowledgement of both the residual racism and ascendence of heterogeneity. Hence, the disavowal of multiculturalism in relation to its supposed perpetuation of the three evils—ethnic ghettoization, gendered exploitation and the incubation of terrorism—was an attempt to avoid the more difficult task of transforming public institutions so that they could actually engage with the existing heterogeneity. Instead, national leaders around the world preferred to rewrite their own social scripts in the mode of reclaiming the nationalist fantasy of transcendental homogeneity. In this article, I have shifted the focus from ideological claims on the costs and contributions of multiculturalism, to a reflection on the conceptual frameworks of difference that entrench the cultural defensiveness and misanthropy as a natural state of being. I have argued that the emphasis should be on an expanded version of the agonistics in everyday scenes where difference is both constructed and negotiated. The agonism of multiculturalism is most evident in the process of folding the foreign in with the familiar, the criss-crossing of differences that announce new convergences and creative transformations. This process of folding makes new borders as it produces creases. It generates new lines of connection as it knots together divergent threads. It also validates the role of artists as mediators that can bridge differences, bend surfaces and translate languages. Mediators extend communication by opening up the points of interaction. In the sphere of culture this requires a disposition towards the diversity of cultural sources and the fluidity in the demarcation of public culture. The articulation of cultural differences within the public domain not only extends the sources from which cultural identity can be formed, but also opens a third terrain. Dialogue over rival forms of public culture also requires a space for imagining new forms. In this model different cultures are not already adjudged as
possessing equal value and therefore equal rights to public resources, rather they have a right to contest the definition of symbolic values, to evaluate the equity in the distribution of material resources and deliberate on the form of public culture.

Notes

1. Chrisafis, "Nicolas Sarkozy." For a broader discussion on Europe and multiculturalism see Joppke, "Retreat of Multiculturalism."
2. Weaver, "Angela Merkel."
3. Sparrow, "Cameron Attacks 'State Multiculturalism.'"
4. Papastergiadis, "Invasion Complex."
5. Vertovec and Wessendorf, Multiculturalism Backlash.
6. Cox, "You Don't Migrate..."
7. Kozial, "Brussels Explosions." For an extended journalistic account of this antagonistic perspective see Phillips, Londonistan.
8. Medhora, "Asylum Seekers." Also see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNws4wNcVQs, accessed November 20, 2016.
9. Griffiths, "George Brandis."
10. Noble, "Everyday Cosmopolitanism."
11. Joppke, "European Looking Glass."
12. Robinson, Multiculturalism and the Foundations, 29.
13. Hartweig, "Politics of Identity."
14. The 2014 Scanlon Report found that Australians expressed broad support for multiculturalism and had positive attitudes towards its role in ensuring social cohesion; however, there was the residual contradiction in that the same research showed considerable concern that immigration from a wide diversity of places and ethnic groups that "stick to their old ways" weaken Australia. Markus, Mapping Social Cohesion; Dunk, "Attitudes to Multicultural Values"; Jakubowicz, "Empires of the Sun."
15. Roose and Harris, "Muslim Citizenship," 481.
16. Yue and Khan, "New Approaches"; Khan, Wyatt, and Yue, "Making and Re-making"; Khan, "New Communities, New Attachments"; Khan et al., "Creative Australia."
17. "Britain 'Sleepwalking to Segregation.'"
18. Finney and Simpson, 'Sleepwalking to Segregation?'
19. Peter Sloterdijk's commentary is stretched across the whole spectrum of his writing practice, from his weighty theoretical trilogy, Spheres, the polemical texts God's Zeal and Rage and Time, as well as the collection of essays, In the World Interior of Capital.
20. See Kraidy, Hybridity; Hazan, Against Hybridity.
21. Sloterdijk, World Interior of Capital, 151.
22. Sloterdijk, Rage and Time, 229.
23. Sloterdijk, World Interior of Capital, 141.
24. Ibid., 196.
25. Ibid., 142.
26. Ibid., 141.
27. Ibid., 177.
28. Ibid., 144.
29. Sloterdijk would probably argue that his conception of culture is neither a symptom of political paranoia, nor a pandering to the narcissism of cultural nationalists. While Sloterdijk may intend to widen the frame beyond national parameters, this does not prevent his arguments from landing in the very place he is seeking to depart from. See his weak defence in the debate with Habermas over the replay of racist ideologies: Sloterdijk, "Rules." See also Fisher, "Flirting with Fascism."
30. Sloterdijk, God's Zeal, 112.
31. Sloterdijk, Rage and Time, 229.
32. Ibid., 223.
33. Sloterdijk, World Interior of Capital, 148.
34. Appadurai, Fear of Small Numbers, 53.
35. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations."
36. Mouffe, Democratic Paradox; Mouffe, On the Political; Mouffe, Agonistics.
37. Mouffe, On the Political, 18.
38. Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, 105.
39. Mouffe, Agonistics, 85–105.
40. Ibid., xiv.
41. Ibid., 84–105.
42. McNay, Misguided Search, 91.
43. Mouffe, Agonistics, 122.
44. Ibid., xi.
45. Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, 102.
46. McNay goes even deeper in her critique: "Mouffe lacks any mechanism to explain how the consensual move from antagonism to agonism is achieved." McNay, Misguided Search, 74. Owing to its lack of a "theory of embodiment" (88) and its failure to directly engage with the voice of the excluded, it produces a "socially weightless paradigm" (79).
47. Mouffe, Democratic Paradox, 105.
48. Galligan and Roberts, Australian Citizenship.
49. Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging.
50. Taylor, "Politics of Recognition."
51. Pollock et al., "Cosmopolitanisms."
52. Beck, Cosmopolitan Vision.
53. Strathern, Gender of the Gift; Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway.
54. Felix Guattari makes an explicit link between creativity and cosmopolitanism. He defines art as a "creation in a nascent state, perpetually in advance of itself", that is, a gesture that does not intersect with the preset rhythms or fall into the available spaces of its own time and place. This movement, he adds, "becomes, at the same time, homeland, self-belonging, attachment to clan and cosmic effusion". Guattari, Chaosmosis, 107. See also Nancy, Creation of the World; Castoriadis, Crossroads in the Labyrinth.
55. Papastergiadis, Turbulence of Migration; Papastergiadis, Cosmopolitanism and Culture; Papastergiadis and Trimboli, "Fold in Diasporic Intimacy."

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and Culture (2012) as well as numerous essays which have been translated into over a dozen languages and appeared in major catalogues such as the Sydney, Liverpool, Istanbul, Gwanju, Taipei, Lyon and Thessaloniki Biennales.

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