

The Three Apples: Agonistic Democracy in the Age of Calculation

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ABSTRACT: From the fall of the Berlin Wall to 9/11, agonistic democracy promised to navigate away from both liberalism and dialectical materialism. How can we renew that discourse to highlight its significance in the times of COVID-19? I answer this question by looking at three articulations of the apple metaphor.

KEY WORDS: Nietzsche, Augustine, William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, post-Marxism

They say that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” But the question is, what kind of apple? We have to avoid the bad ones. Agonistic democracy recognizes two such “bad apples” but COVID-19 also shows that it has failed to pick a third, good one. This is a critical oversight. If the first two apples show how agonistic democracy navigates between liberalism and determinism—a task that was urgent and critical in the period from 1989 to 9/11—the third apple points to a new direction.

THE AUGUSTINIAN APPLE

Agonistic democracy is a relatively recent and contextually specific discourse. It arises in the early 1990s. The first determinative use occurs in William Connolly’s *Identity\Difference* from 1991:

Is there, then, a practice of democracy . . . that responds to the problematic relation between identity and difference? I suspect there is. . . . Let me call this political imaginary “agonistic democracy,” a practice that affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependence of identity\difference. (Connolly 2002: x)

We can discern the first apple in the contrast between “agonistic democracy” and “the dogmatism of identity.” The first bad apple is the Augustinian one. This apple is responsible for the construction of individual identity. As such, it instigates the historical trajectory that leads to the conception of individual autonomy in modernity and its accompanying political articulation in the liberal privileging of negative freedom. The story goes as follows: The establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century precipitates huge disputes about its dogma, none more trenchant than the problem of evil. If God is understood as providence—that is, as omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent—then how can we account for the presence of evil? The answers provided raise huge problems rather than solutions. For instance, if we accept providence, then evil might appear as a property of God, which contradicts his goodness. Or if we suppose that there is a second evil deity, then we implicitly reject providence.

Augustine gave a brilliantly succinct answer to this intractable problem. God endows the human with a free will to choose between good and evil, whereby evil is not a property of the divine but rather of the human. The paradigmatic illustration of this solution is the Fall, when the protoplasts eat the forbidden fruit—the apple—and are thereby stamped with the original sin. The first bad apple, then, is the free will as the basis of individuality.

The Augustinian apple has an unmistakable appeal. Moral considerations are united with freedom and hence with political concerns. This is still prevalent today in liberalism, whether this is articulated in terms of a theory of justice or of communicative normativity as the basis of the construction of the political sphere. Such a moral basis is premised on the free individual who can make rational choices.

There is also a significant drawback for this Augustinian apple. It presupposes that identity precedes difference. On the personal level, this is the identity of the individual who can exercise the free will through individual choices. On the political level, this is the identity of the citizenship conferred by the law. Connolly defines his conception of agonistic democracy in *Identity\Difference* explicitly against the Augustinian conception because any privileging of identity enables a politics that justifies violence. In his next book, *The Augustinian Imperative*, he further adumbrates his “post-structuralist” privileging of difference over identity. Strategically, the rejection of this Augustinian apple entails a suspicion against any politics of consensus that—implicitly or explicitly—privileges identity.

THE NEWTONIAN APPLE

There is a rather absurd story according to which we are to celebrate Newton’s genius for noticing an apple falling under a tree. Does one need to be a genius to notice that? The important insight concerns what the apple represents: it stands for the uniformity and immutability of natural laws. The important point is that

the apple *always* falls under the tree. This can be expressed mathematically, as the laws of gravity, which suggests a naturalist metaphysics according to which there is nothing that can subvert its law—for instance, there are no miracles.

This naturalism of the second apple can be translated into the social and political realm, which is what happened with the discourse of political economy, especially Marxism. The historical materialist law is that there is a predictable outcome of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The proletariat will triumph because its interests will prevail.

Such a “scientific” dialectic has been critiqued on various counts but one of the most significant interventions has been Laclau and Mouffe’s “post-Marxist” *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. They relentlessly demonstrate that the social is governed by articulations whose nature is contingent rather than causal. Thus any pretention that the social can be made to conform to immutable laws that lead to the triumph of the proletariat is nothing but a fantasy. The political sphere is organized at any given time by unpredictable ideas and power arrangements that prevail *hegemonically*, that is, without any inherent rationality.

Subsequently, Mouffe employs the idea of the contingency of hegemonic articulations to expose the paradoxes of “liberal democracy.” Caught between a universalism and a particularism, liberal democracy is no better equipped to deal with social conflict than historical materialism. Mouffe advocates that the antagonism that marks all these different conceptions of naturalism is transformed into an agonism—whence her determination of agonistic democracy as refusing to take a bite of the bad Newtonian apple.

BITING WITHOUT SWALLOWING?

Agonistic democracy rejects the bad apple of individualism responsible for liberalism, and the bad apple of naturalism responsible for historical materialism. This double rejection is indicative of the time in which the discourse is born: Between 1989 and 9/11, between the end of socialism and the end of the “end of history.”

But this rejection of the two bad apples is insufficient. One fundamental characteristic of agonistic democracy is the suspicion against instrumentality. This is a suspicion that has various sources. One is the critique of the “dialectic of Enlightenment” by the Frankfurt School. Another is the castigation of machination in the phenomenological tradition that influences Hannah Arendt—a figure of considerable influence in the discourse of agonistic democracy. And a third derives from French thought that, in the aftermath of World War II and under the influence of figures such as Bataille and Blanchot, views any thinking of means and ends as a marker of enslavement.

Maybe it is not simply a matter of “influence” that leads agonistic democracy toward a suspicion of instrumentality. Maybe agonistic democracy has taken on

board the Christian rejection of instrumentality as immoral, translated into liberal terms that the human is an end in itself and hence morality ought to be impervious to calculations of means and ends. And maybe agonistic democracy also assumes with historical dialectic materialism that any instrumental calculation is subsumed into a stringent causality, whereby the rejection of a historical teleology is taken to require a renunciation of both causal and instrumental ends in how action is conceived. In other words, agonistic democracy maybe has taken a bite from both bad apples—even though it may claim to not have swallowed, just like a former president had not inhaled.

Rather than quibbling about what has gone down the esophagus, it may be preferable to focus on a third apple, one that foregrounds instrumental calculation. This is especially urgent in the time of COVID-19 when calculation is prevalent in a myriad of guises—from the 1.5 meters that we are to keep between us, to the economic cost of the lockdowns, to the grim daily count of lives lost. This third apple—I hold—is indispensable for the current relevance of agonistic democracy.

THE ERISTIC APPLE

This is an apple that is directly connected with the introduction of the term *agon* into discourse by Jacob Burckhardt in the second half of the 19th century. According to *Greeks and Greek Civilization*, the aristocracy that rules in the Agonal Age directs its energies to *useless* competitions such as athletic festivals. More precisely, the *agon* is exempt from calculation of means and ends—it not simply useless, it is anti-instrumental.

As a young colleague of Burckhardt's at Basel University, Friedrich Nietzsche's fascination with the *agon* leads to a reversal of its determination as anti-instrumental. He writes a short essay called "Homer's Contest" in which he argues that the entire "Greek spirit" is determined by the distinction between two senses of conflict represented by two incarnations of the goddess Eris (the goddess of discord): one is bad leading to destruction and anguish, and the other is good because it promotes an *agon* whereby people measure themselves against their peers prompting them to greatness. But Eris has an apple too—one that requires calculation.

According to the story that Nietzsche does not recount—but which presumably any good German classicism reading "Homer's Contest" would have been aware of—Zeus invited all the gods to a celebration but forgot to invite Eris. Incensed, the goddess did what she does best, spread discord. She threw a golden apple between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. The phrase "most beautiful" was engraved on it. All three goddesses wanted the apple claiming to be the most beautiful. Since no god offered to mediate their dispute, they invited the Trojan prince, Paris, to be the judge.

This is the point where the story takes a critical turn. The goddesses sought to persuade the young prince to give them the apple. Hera promised to make

him the greatest politician. Athena the greatest general. And Aphrodite offered to give him as his wife the most beautiful woman. Giving the apple to Aphrodite precipitated a chain of catastrophic events that led to the destruction of Troy: the most beautiful woman happened to be Helen, queen of Mycenae. Her abduction by Paris scandalized and offended the Greeks who laid siege of Troy for a decade, until they managed to sack it and burn it to the ground. The title of Nietzsche's piece, "Homer's Contest," refers to the contest of the Greeks and the Trojans immortalized in the *Iliad*. But this conflict is premised in the competition between the three goddesses. The bad Eris prevailed because Paris made the wrong calculation opting for the most beautiful wife. Three points are worth remembering here.

First, Nietzsche describes the agonistic spirit of the Greeks as the measuring of oneself against others, something that drives one to better oneself which in turn benefits the community. This self-measuring is a calculation as the basis of agonism that, *pace* Burckhardt, is inherently instrumental. In "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche entirely reverses his senior colleague's conception of the agon as the aristocratic expenditure of useless energy.

Second, the instrumental calculation may lead to consequences that are bad, such as the sack of Troy. But it is difficult if not outright impossible to foresee the effects of a calculation. The end might not be achieved because of deficient means—for instance, would the Greeks have abandoned their siege if their final trick, the Trojan horse, had failed? Also, it is impossible to tell whether the alternatives would have been any better. Hera or Athena's offers could have potentially led to greater disasters. This is to recognize that any instrumental calculation is fallible.

Third, there is no better time when Nietzsche's insight that no conception of action is possible without a consideration of calculation than now, the year of COVID-19, in which a change of our routine has made us take note of the relentless demand for calculation. Agonistic democracy can ignore instrumentality at its own peril of becoming irrelevant.

Agonistic democracy will retain its relevance outside the frame provided by the dates 1989 and 9/11—outside the frame of the two bad apples—when it learns to take a bite of the good apple too, the Eristic one that foregrounds instrumental calculation. Or, more emphatically, agonistic democracy can claim an increasing relevance in the aftermath of the pandemic if it bites from the Eristic apple. According to Nietzsche's offering, even the most seemingly apolitical calculation—such as choosing a wife—can have the most wide-ranging political effects. This places a singular exigency on the agonists: focus on the effects of calculation that precede and enable action, even if—or, precisely because—these effects can never be calculated with any certainty. Or, calculate as much as possible to take a bite of the apple offered by the good, not the bad Eris.

REFERENCE

Connolly, William E. 2002. *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.