



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## Plural agonistics

Rivano Eckerdal, Johanna

*Published in:*  
Information Literacy through Theory

2023

*Document Version:*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Rivano Eckerdal, J. (2023). Plural agonistics. In A. Hicks, A. Lloyd, & O. Pilerot (Eds.), *Information Literacy through Theory* (pp. 91-110). Facet Publishing.

*Total number of authors:*  
1

### General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:  
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

This is a preprint of a chapter accepted for publication by Facet Publishing. This extract has been taken from the Author's original manuscript and has not been edited. The definitive version of this piece may be found in Hicks, A., Lloyd, A. & Pilerot, O., *Information Literacy Through Theory*, 2023, Facet publishing, which can be purchased from [www.facetpublishing.co.uk](http://www.facetpublishing.co.uk). The author agrees not to update the preprint or replace it with the published version of the chapter.

## <h1>Plural agonistics

### <h2> Introduction

This chapter presents Chantal Mouffe's theory of plural agonistics with focus on its relevance to information literacy research. Plural agonistics is positioned on the radical strand of democratic theories (see also John Buschman's chapter in this volume). But contrary to other radical theories, it does support the representative liberal form of democratic rule (Mouffe, 2013, xiii). <sup>1</sup> The theory builds on the collaborative work of Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in which they set out to inquire into why left politics was unable to take account of social movements not based on class. They suggested a radicalisation of democracy as a response to the essentialist view of class they identified as dominating the left: "What we stressed was the need for a left politics to articulate the struggles about different forms of subordination without attributing any *a priori* centrality to any of them" (Mouffe 2019, 3).

It has been pointed out that both information literacy practice and research suffer from a lack of theoretical awareness when connecting the concept to democracy. James Elmborg has stated that "[m]uch of the conflict inherent in information literacy as a critical project can be traced to contested definitions of "democracy."" (2006, 196). Plural agonistics is here suggested as a democracy theory that can help us to elaborate the possible connection between information literacy and democracy. However, neither information literacy nor libraries are specifically mentioned by Mouffe. Before moving on to why and how this theory is proposed for understanding information literacy, it can be helpful to present the basic tenets of the theory.

---

<sup>1</sup> Democracy is a form of rule where the people – demos in Greek – hold the power. It has evolved over time and there exists a number of varieties of how it can be executed. The representative liberal form of democratic rule is then one way to realise a democratic regime in practice. Important in such a regime are the democratic institutions that are separated to ensure a division of power. Such institutions include free elections, a parliament, free press, and an independent judiciary system. When we talk about democracy it can refer to these institutions, what Mouffe calls "the symbolic framework within which democracy is exercised." (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 2) See also Rivano Eckerdal 2017, 1012-1013.

### <h3> Outline of the chapter

Next, antagonism and hegemony will be introduced, two important concepts that Laclau and Mouffe developed from which Mouffe's theory of plural agonistics was built. The democratic paradox will then be presented, followed by the role institutions have when addressing the democratic paradox. A second part follows with focus on plural agonistics and information literacy. Passionate decisions and democratic institutions constitute the first topic, followed by a discussion of an agonistic view on consensus and compromises, how politics and ethics should be understood and the impossibility of neutrality when advocating democracy. A closer look at an agonistic view of identity, and a description of how chains of equivalences should be formed follows before suggesting what an agonistic take on information literacy research would entail. The chapter ends with a short, but very important note on the limitations of plural agonism and a conclusion. Throughout the chapter several quotes from Mouffe's writing are included, inviting the reader to be acquainted with her political theory also in her own words.

## <h2> Part one: Core elements of the theory of plural agonistics

### <h3> Antagonism

Plural agonistics starts off by stating that there are conflicts for which there will not ever be any rational solution. This ontological statement is called *radical negativity* or *antagonism*. The phrase *the ineradicability of antagonism*, firmly underscores that antagonism will never be overcome. Plural agonistics is Mouffe's suggestion of a productive way to advocate democracy while taking this reality into account. Recognising severe problems in the present form of rule, plural agonistics proposes a roadmap for continuous development of democracy to enhance social equality. Hence democracy is construed not as an endpoint a society can arrive at, and feel safe at, but as a process. The ineradicability of antagonism will make this process fraught with conflicts and an aim of the agonistic take on a democratic form of rule is to offer ways for those conflicts to unfold without violence.

As individuals we belong to several groups, all important for how we shape our identities. For making this point Mouffe draws on Carl Schmitt's work<sup>2</sup>, while at the same time clearly pointing out how they completely disagree about their conclusions (Mouffe, 2005a, 10-16; 2013, 137-139). Groups are first and foremost formed by making a distinction of what they do not include: by drawing a clear line, a

---

<sup>2</sup> Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), a German political philosopher, presented a critique of liberalism that Mouffe draws upon in her theory. Schmitt is controversial as he was a member of and intellectually supported the Nazi party ([www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-Schmitt](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-Schmitt)). Mouffe acknowledges that he is a real challenge for her but that she found his analysis of the antagonistic dimension of the political. Useful. However, she draws an opposite conclusion of its effects, what she calls to "think with Schmitt against Schmitt" (Mouffe, 2013, 138; see also Mouffe 2005b, 57, note 2.)

demarcation is made between them and us, what Mouffe calls the we/they distinction. The establishing of group identities is therefore always potentially the root to a conflict, an antagonism:

[...] the we/they distinction, which is the condition of possibility of formation of political identities, can always become the locus of an antagonism. Since all forms of political identities entail a we/they distinction, this means that the possibility of emergence of antagonism can never be eliminated. It is therefore an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would have been eradicated. (Mouffe, 2005a, 16)

In order to discern the ontological reality of antagonism from the present shape of democracy, Mouffe establishes a difference between *politics* and *the political* by proposing to call: “[---] this ineradicable dimension of antagonism ‘the political’ in order to distinguish it from ‘politics’, which refers to the manifold practices aiming at organizing human coexistence” (Mouffe, 2013, 130-131).

Politics includes all the arrangements and institutions that are developed in society for the political processes. In the western democracies as we know them it is considered crucial that these include free elections, a parliament, free press, and an independent judiciary system. Mouffe points out that all these arrangements are the outcome of specific historical and social conditions. The political, on the other hand, forms the precondition for the social life of humans. In other words, politics are various ways developed over time to address the political condition for human social life.

At present politics in the western world has a representative liberal form. There are several possible forms of rule, from autocracies to democracy. Democracy can be envisaged in diverse ways (for example as liberal, republican, deliberative or radical). Plural agonistics advocates radical democracy but contrary to other theories endorsing radical democracy, plural agonistics supports the present form of rule but with an agenda to reform and improve it.

The majority of political theories have focussed on offering solutions to problems faced by society, solutions that indicate a possible future without conflicts. From a plural agonistic perspective, these are utopian theories whereas plural agonistics is anchored in reality, recognising conflicts as inherent elements of the human condition and society. Indeed, Mouffe argues that an idealised view of humans as inherently good is dangerous:

It is my contention that envisaging the aim of democratic politics in terms of consensus and reconciliation is not only conceptually mistaken,

it is also fraught with political dangers. The aspiration to a world where the we/they discrimination would have been overcome is based on flawed premises and those who share such a vision are bound to miss the real task facing democratic politics.

To be sure this blindness to antagonism is not new. Democratic theory has long been informed by the belief that the inner goodness and original innocence of human beings was a necessary condition for asserting the viability of democracy. An idealized view of human sociability, as being essentially moved by empathy and reciprocity, has generally provided the basis of modern democratic political thinking. Violence and hostility are seen as archaic phenomenon, to be eliminated thanks to the progress of exchange and the establishment, through a social contract, of a transparent communication among rational participants. Those who challenged this optimistic view were automatically perceived as enemies of democracy. Few attempts have been made to elaborate the democratic project on an anthropology which acknowledges the ambivalent character of human sociability and the fact that reciprocity and hostility cannot be dissociated.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 2-3)

Instead of offering solutions that lead to a future without conflicts, it is emphasised that the always present risk of antagonisms needs to be addressed when drawing up a theory for a democratic society. Plural agonistics therefore offers a way forward to understand how social change can happen without conflicts building up to violence. This is achieved by taming conflicts between enemies into debates between adversaries. Mouffe (2005a, 4) states that

I will reveal how the consensual approach, instead of creating the conditions for a reconciled society, leads to the emergence of antagonisms that an agonistic perspective, by providing those conflicts with a legitimate form of expression, would have managed to avoid. In that way I hope to demonstrate that acknowledging the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in social life, far from undermining the democratic project, is the necessary condition for grasping the challenge to which democratic politics is confronted.

### <h3> Hegemony

The possibility of new antagonisms occurring points to the temporal aspect of democracy as suggested from a plural agonistic perspective: democracy is not an end-point to be reached by a society, but an unending process (Mouffe, 2013, 132).

As social life goes on, new groups are formed, facing new challenges that need to be addressed in order to reach a political solution. Distinguishing groups from one another involves separating them by describing and pointing out what they are not. Furthermore, groups that experience any need to ameliorate their situation also recognise how the present order is putting them in disadvantage. Expressing this and suggesting a change often infringes on other groups' possibilities and situations. All these processes are shaped by our understanding them and expressing them as *the way things are* and the concept of hegemony helps to grasp how fundamental this characteristic of social life is.

Next to antagonism, the concept of hegemony is the key notion for addressing the question of 'the political'. To take account of 'the political' as the ever present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and acknowledging the dimension of undecidability which pervades every order. It requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 17).

This entails that every order is shaped not by how things ought to be but how they have come to be. By acknowledging the contingency of any social order, the possibility to change the present is opened up. Important for making social change happen is to formulate and create alternatives, to engage in *counter-hegemonic practices*.

The struggle between different hegemonies and the fact that this struggle is a never-ending story implies that power is always an issue.

But if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values.  
(Mouffe, 2005b, 100)

It is not certain that the counter-hegemonies that are created are more democratic than the present order. In fact, Mouffe has explicitly issued a warning. Politics is endangered first, because criticism against the democratic form of rule as we know it is not given room within the democratic institutions, and second, because the content of this criticism is not advocating a strengthening of democracy (Mouffe, 2005a, 21).

Much of the criticism arises as people express that they are left out of politics and report discontent with the prevailing neo-liberal hegemony that has focus on

freedom at the expense of equality. The tension between these two concepts is addressed by Mouffe as a fundamental paradox of democracy.

### <h3> The democratic paradox

A common meaning when talking about the democratic paradox is that within democracy opponents of the democratic form of rule must be given a voice. Mouffe, instead, deploys the democratic paradox for describing the tension between two beacons of democracy: equality and freedom. “[...] it is vital for democratic politics to understand that liberal democracy results from the articulation of two logics which are incompatible in the last instance and that there is no way in which they could be perfectly reconciled” (Mouffe, 2005b, 5). It is difficult to give them equal weight.

It is therefore crucial to realize that, with modern democracy, we are dealing with a new political form of society whose specificity comes from the articulation between two different traditions. On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between those two distinct traditions but only a contingent historical articulation.  
(Mouffe, 2005b, 2-3)

That many people criticise the political system is not because the form of rule is outdated but as a reaction to the neoliberal hegemony shaping its present design, leaving many voices out. Plural agonistics is offered as a solution to the current problematic state of democracy by presenting how more people can be included and heard within the democratic institutions.

Neoliberal hegemony positioned the opposition between left and right as obsolete and “political questions were reduced to mere technological issues to be dealt with by experts” (Mouffe, 2019, 4). Mouffe did not welcome this post-political situation but warned that it would lead to people being less interested in the political institutions and to a rise of right-wing populism (Mouffe, 2019, 4). Democracy is declining globally. The Varieties of Democracy Institute stated in their 2023 annual report that for the first time in more than twenty years the world has more closed autocracies than liberal democracies (Papada et al., 2023, 6). More people express a lack of support for democracy and are reluctant to vote in public elections (Foa and Mounk, 2017). In a recent book Mouffe provides a prescription for remedying this tendency. Acknowledging the need to deepen democracy while advocating the plurality of our societies she proposes a left populism (Mouffe, 2019).



In the next few years, I argue, the central axis of the political conflict will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism. And as a result, it is through the construction of a 'people', a collective will that results from the mobilization of common affects in defence of equality and social justice, that it will be possible to combat the xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism.  
(Mouffe, 2019, 6).

### <h3>The democratic paradox and institutions

Democratic institutions are vital for society, but they are never safe from harm. Therefore, they are in constant need of support and defence.

Liberal-democratic institutions should not be taken for granted: it is always necessary to fortify and defend them. This requires grasping their specific dynamics and acknowledging the tension deriving from the workings of their different logics. Only by coming to terms with the democratic paradox can one envisage how to deal with it.  
(Mouffe, 2005b, 4)

The name of the theory, plural agonistics, captures the importance of the heterogeneity in society. In order to address the current democratic deficit, institutions need to recognise and include more people. To reform politics to become more democratic requires emphasising that the demos – people – are not one but many groups, a plurality. Therefore, not one but plural hegemonies need to be created and heard within the democratic institutions (Mouffe, 2013, xiii).

Mouffe's solution to the democratic paradox is the agonistic struggle. When a conflict between groups arises, an important role is played by democratic institutions, as places where the conflict can be given room. Otherwise, the conflict might lead to violence. Therefore, the institutions must offer a way for the opponents in a conflict to meet and debate in order to reach an acceptable solution. In order to do so, opponents must transform their view of each other from enemies to adversaries. As adversaries the opponents recognise each other's rights and the agonistic struggle can take place, aiming for a solution to the issue at hand, bearing in mind that the outcome will most certainly mean concessions from both parts. The underlying we/they- conflict is not erased but a solution is reached in practice.

If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its 'taming', we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call 'agonism'. [...] While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two



sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is 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. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 20)

The ineradicability of antagonism is an unchangeable reality. What can be done is to find ways to handle this situation. That is what the theory entails, it offers a solution to how antagonism can be changed into agonism. It also points out as a "central task of democratic politics to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an agonistic form" (Mouffe, 2013, xii). The democratic institutions therefore play a crucial role as places where the agonistic struggle may unfold.

What is at stake in the agonistic struggle, on the contrary, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured: it is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is always present, it is a real confrontation but one which is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 21).

## <h2>Part two: Plural agonistics and information literacy

Information literacy is not a concept discussed by Mouffe, nevertheless the theory can contribute to our understanding of the concept in productive ways. Some aspects of plural agonistics with significant bearing on information literacy will therefore be discussed.

Plural agonistics can be helpful as it firmly positions information literacy as a political concept. Information literacy is repeatedly presented as one main requisite for people to exert their civic rights and duties (for example ALA 1989; IFLA 2005; Wilson et al. 2011) . Agonistics states that democracy includes solving social conflicts and, when doing so, decisions need to be made. As Mouffe (Mouffe, 2005a, 10) argues "Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives".

Making choices between conflicting alternatives involves considering various types of information. Choices relate to the formation of collective identities and therefore choices imply the involvement of affects. Accordingly, the important role played by decisions in plural agonistics invites us to attend to information literacy aspects of these recurring decisions. Information literacy research can contribute to plural agonistics by opening up and problematising what is happening in relation to these decisions. It would help both to understand in detail the activities that surround and involve decisions as these are made, and to provide analytical tools for developing such activities with awareness on the political dimensions of information literacy.

Before moving on the view on information literacy that is proposed here must be established. Information literacy can refer to many things. It can be a way to describe, for example, activities that concern finding and using information for a school assignment, a work task, or for forming an opinion before everyday life choices are made. It can also refer to the content of activities that aim to train and prepare people for such engagements with information, often at libraries or educational institutions. Furthermore, information literacy can refer to rhetoric arguments for such activities, to research exploring those and also, as in this volume, to theories for grasping how the concept may be understood. A contextual, socio-material understanding of the concept is advocated here. It is also crucial to be aware of the fact that information literacy in itself is a perspective that can be used for describing aspects of activities as people engage with information in various ways (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017, 1025-1027). It is a description made by someone about something being observed. Such descriptions are done by librarians or teachers and further developed and analysed by researchers. Information literacy research can therefore offer a vocabulary for describing information literacy aspects of activities.

### <h3>Passionate decisions and democratic institutions

I would now want to zoom in on decisions. When decisions are made, activities that can be described with information literacy vocabulary takes place. Schematically put, people are likely to base decisions on prior knowledge, look for further information and advice, consider options available and arrive at deciding upon one of them, at least for the time being. In these activities people use, choose and evaluate information and make decisions.

Many decisions are made easily and effortlessly. However there are decisions, like political decisions, that can be more demanding. Political questions concern conflicts between groups with different claims regarding the issue at hand. Decisions need to be made over and over again as issues and conflicts must be solved.

Political decisions are likely to have consequences for the identities of the people involved in making them, as the result will have impact on how the involved people understand both themselves and each other. Since our identities are fundamentally

important for us, decisions that relate to them are not just rational but also emotional ones. Due to the passions involved when making political decisions it is important to emphasise that a radical view of democracy is that of democracy as a conflictual process.

Every identity is relational (Mouffe 2005a, 15). Crucial for the formation of groups are the collective identities that they establish by defining what they are not. To understand how these collective identities are moulded Mouffe turns to psychoanalysis:

According to Freud, the evolution of civilization is characterized by a struggle between two basic types of libidinal instincts. Eros the instinct of life and Death the instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 26)

It is a role of the hegemonic practices to solve the issues at hand although it is known that the underlying conflict will not be solved. Acknowledging the opponents' right to express their view means that the adversaries' solution to the current issue is recognised as legitimate. It is not the solution chosen by the opposing party in the debate, but it is deemed as equally relevant to the own group's solution. This means that the adversaries' solution is not understood as a wrong one but as belonging and being relevant to a different political position.

The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour but her right to defend them will never be questioned.  
(Mouffe, 2019, 91)

People want to be part of groups they feel that they belong to. This is foundational for society to emerge. In Freud's vocabulary the libidinal instinct of love is fuelling this process (Mouffe 2005a, 26). But the ever-present possibility of aggression needs to be addressed. Mouffe proposes that "democratic institutions can contribute to this disarming of the libidinal forces leading towards hostility which are always present in human societies" to solve this issue (Mouffe, 2005a, 26). The democratic institutions are important places where the democratic process fraught with conflicts can be tamed to become an agonistic struggle. Besides the institutions that are part of the formal political arrangements – the politics – there are other institutions, also a part of a viable democratic society. For the democratic outcome it is necessary to involve many institutions. "Democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values" (Mouffe, 2005b, 96).

#### <h4>Libraries as democratic institutions for information literacy activities

Libraries are not explicitly identified by Mouffe as democratic institutions but are described as democratic institutions by Library and Information Science scholars (Hansson, 2010, 255; Rivano Eckerdal, 2017, 1016). It is important that people have the possibility to form their own opinion on topics of their interest. Libraries, including librarians, are important as providers of knowledge required to make informed decisions between alternatives. They can offer support and scaffolding for counter-hegemonic practices. This is one way that libraries as institutions contribute to the democratic process by enabling formulation of counter- hegemonic articulations important to perform the agonistic debates. Libraries, and librarians, form part of the democratic institutions. This can be argued for from the theory even though libraries or librarians are never explicitly mentioned. What the theory lacks is a more precise view on how such knowledge can be created.

Information literacy has gained attention over the years. As a consequence, activities aiming to strengthen and enhance information literacy – more recently media and information literacy – are part of contemporary library practices. Such activities could be developed as opportunities for agonistic debates to unfold. The agonistic debate is an activity in which it is possible to pay attention to information literacy aspects of the activity. As the debate unfolds the parties draw on what they know and relate their arguments to each other. How the parties react to each other and the knowledge claims that are made can be analysed as enactments of information literacy.

As mentioned above, information literacy research provides a vocabulary to describe activities that include how people engage with information to make some kind of use of it: how they enact information literacy. By using this vocabulary we can make descriptions of activities taking place in specific situations, descriptions that are done in relation to a set of norms (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017, 1025-1027). Information literacy research has mainly focused on situations within school settings or related to work tasks. The teacher or the librarian are usually the ones doing the description in school settings, the norms being found in the curricula. Information literacy is relevant in many other situations and an agonistic view on information literacy requires the identification of the actors involved in situations where information literacy is discussed. The descriptions of how the actors are engaging with information become meaningful once the involved parties are identified.

From a plural agonistic perspective, activities at libraries that support democracy in an empowering way are beneficial. Such measures can also be beneficial for information literacy enactments by preparing people for engaging in dialogues and debates. Understanding the agonistic struggle requires training and libraries and librarians can be part of the institutions that provide it. This is another way that

libraries and librarians can contribute to the democratic process by offering not only the resources but also the opportunities for people to engage with information in an empowering way.

It has been pointed out that the approach to activities aiming at promoting or training information literacy will differ depending on what kind of democracy is drawn upon, implicitly or explicitly (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017). The critical analysis of activities with information literacy as a goal allows us to identify the set of norms that are guiding them and thus which view on democracy is supported. Information literacy research can contribute with important knowledge about the norms, including the views on democracy, that are used in information literacy practices (Rivano Eckerdal, 2017).

### <h3>Consensus and compromises

Mouffe opposes deliberative democratic views. One major objection is the view on consensus that diverge from the one elaborated by Mouffe. Radical negativity entails an understanding of consensus as both an ontological impossibility and a necessity in the process of solving conflicts during agonistic debates.

A democratic society requires a debate about possible alternatives and it must provide political forms of collective identification around clearly differentiated democratic positions. Consensus is no doubt necessary, but it must be accompanied by dissent.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 31).

Mouffe also mentions the use of compromises as a possibility in practice “they are part and parcel of politics; but they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation” (Mouffe 2005b, 102).

In both a deliberative and a radical take on democracy the debates are crucial, issues being often solved with compromises reached by consensus. However, for Mouffe this is only a solution in practice. Consensus will never solve the underlying conflict. In other words: usually a consensual solution will mean that one party gains more at the other’s expense. Power is not in perfect balance giving advantage to one party. It is a solution that is accepted for the issue at hand. But it can always become fuel for future conflicts.

The criticism of consensus is of relevance in relation to the understanding of information literacy. Christine Bruce’s ground-breaking thesis, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy* (1997), is an early, important work aiming at conceptually framing the concept. She presents her study in opposition to previous work about information literacy, and Christina Doyle’s work (1992) in particular. One major criticism raised by Bruce (1977) relates to Doyle’s (1992) application of the Delphi

technique method, which aims at producing a consensus definition. Bruce, on the other hand, argued for the varying ways that a complex concept is understood within a group. Bruce used phenomenography to arrive at her relational definition of the concept, which instead presents the understanding of information literacy as a variation of seven aspects (also see Clarence Maybee's chapter in this volume). Bruce's critique of a consensus view and its problematic consequences echoes the critique of consensus as a goal for politics within plural agonistics, albeit from a different theoretical outlook.

### <h3>Politics, ethics and information literacy

The notion of radical negativity does not fit with deliberative democratic views, precisely because the latter aim at consensus and also to describe debates as rational. Mouffe, instead points out that passions have an important role in politics (Mouffe, 2005a, 24).

In 2000 Mouffe reacted to the contemporary political debate as increasingly ascribing political alternatives with a moral register:

What is happening is that nowadays the political is played out in the *moral register*. In other words, it still consists in a we/they discrimination, but the we/they, instead of being defined with political categories is now established in moral terms. In place of a struggle between 'right and left' we are faced with a struggle between 'right and wrong'.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 5)

Due to the democratic paradox – that equality and freedom can never be seamlessly successfully reconciled – such associations are wrong and even potentially a threat to the democratic institutions. When writing this in 2022 democratic institutions have suffered from attacks of various sorts in a number of countries, making the democratic form of rule diminishing globally (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Papada et al., 2023). From a theoretical point of view, Mouffe foresaw such a development.

Recognising the fragility of democratic institutions is of utmost importance. Instead of describing the opponent as wrong it is important to bear in mind that the solution they advocate is of relevance for their group. The recognition of the opponent as an adversary and not as an enemy is not just an initial statement before starting an agonistic debate. On the contrary, it is something that needs to taint the whole process. Showing respect for the solution suggested by an adversary is one way in which this recognition is achieved. If a decision is not in line with their demands, it means that they are entitled to be disappointed. The opponents can continue to formulate their demands for future political debates – a production of counter hegemonic articulations that is important for the democratic process.

To summarize this point: every order is political and based on some form of exclusion. There are always other possibilities that have been repressed and that can be reactivated. The articulatory practices through which a certain order is established and the meaning of social institutions is fixed are 'hegemonic practices'. Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install another form of hegemony.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 18)

For information literacy the connection between decisions and ethics has important implications. With a plural agonistic perspective on decisions, it is not possible to shy away from the consequences that decisions have for the parties making it and those affected by it. Instead of combining morality and politics Mouffe points out that all decisions have ethical consequences and should be interrogated by the ethical. If one group's wishes are set aside by a decision that favours another group, questions need to be asked if the consequences are ethically acceptable.

Refusing to reduce the necessary hiatus between ethics and politics and acknowledging the irreducible tension between equality and liberty, between the ethics of human rights and the political logic which entails the establishments of frontiers with the violence that they imply, this is to recognize that the field of the political is not reducible to a rational moral calculus and always requires decisions. To discard the illusion of a possible reconciliation of ethics and politics and to come to terms with the never-ending interrogation of the political by the ethical, this is indeed the only way of acknowledging the democratic paradox.  
(Mouffe, 2005b, 140)

### <h3>Neutrality

Agonistic debates are activities in which people engage with information in ways that can be described with information literacy vocabulary. One consequence of the importance libraries can have as one of the institutions that scaffolds the agonistic debates is the impossibility of libraries to be neutral. Democracy, regardless of which shape it adopts, always brings with it a certain view about how society should be: it offers a set of norms. These are not neutral. Taking a stand for equality and freedom is never neutral.

In the radical view democracy is understood as a process fraught with conflicts that requires making decisions with concrete consequences for people. How these consequences can give the best possible balance between freedom and equality is emphasised, but – recognising that a perfect balance is unattainable – equality is favoured.



One rationale for libraries is that they are places where people can freely develop their opinion and therefore, libraries need to be neutral. A plural agonistic view on democracy points out that this is impossible, insofar neutral equals being passive. In order to remain relevant to as many as possible it is important that library staff uphold a professional role welcoming and supporting a plurality of voices. That the idea of objectivity and neutrality can be addressed in diverse ways by librarians, has been shown in empirical research (Rivano Eckerdal and Carlsson, 2022).

To further the theoretical understanding of information literacy and its practical consequences for libraries it is helpful to draw on Nora Schmidt's typology of different views of a neutral library and the consequences they have for librarianship (2020, 274-284). She discerns between passive, active and culturally humble neutrality. The latter is described in the following way:

The library observes that power relations in society privilege certain voices, so they produce a biased [...] "central" communication accompanied by respective information resources. In consequence, the library works towards balancing the observed bias, hence furthering social justice.  
(Schmidt, 2020, 282)

Schmidt's typology was developed for discussing libraries' collection development. It is also useful for discussing a plural agonistic take on information literacy. The humble view of neutrality fits well with a plural agonistic approach in its support for social justice. As stated above, information literacy is positioned as a political concept with an agonistic view. Both libraries and librarians have a vital role to play in society, a role that can be strengthened and developed further. When doing that it is important to bear in mind that one's understanding of neutrality is always political.

### <h3>Identity

Decisions form an important part of activities that can be described as information literacy enactments, and they can have consequences for people's identity. Mouffe rejects the idea of the existence of an essential identity, instead she talks about "forms of identification" (Mouffe, 2013, 45). Zooming in from the statement of radical negativity, plural agonistics understands individuals as being part of different groups with varying claims. The formation of these groups is shaped by what Mouffe calls the *constitutive outside*: what unites people is awareness of what they are not. For both group and individual identities, it is important to discern what group one is not belonging to.

The aim is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference which is often constructed on the basis of a

hierarchy, for example between form and matter, black and white, man and woman, etc. (Mouffe, 2005a, 15)

As individuals belong to several groups, they are heterogenous internally but form a unity externally. As the basis for the collective identity is what the group is not, attention is paid to other groups outside the own, and a relation is created built on difference (Mouffe, 2005a, 15). When collective identities are formed, a *we* is created as opposed to a *they* – the constitutive outside. This can be unproblematic but may give rise to conflicts.

In the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a 'we' which can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'. This does not mean of course that such a relation is necessarily one of friend/enemy, i.e. an antagonistic one. But we should acknowledge that, in certain conditions, there is always the possibility that this we/they relation can become antagonistic, i.e. that it can turn into a relation of friend/enemy. This happens when the 'they' is perceived as putting into question the identity of the 'we' and as threatening its existence. (Mouffe, 2005a, 15-16)

In situations where a conflict occurs between different groups what happens is that in one way or another the collective identity of each group is questioned. Given how important our identities are to us – albeit not in an essential understanding but as how we relate to each other – such situations evoke emotions. Therefore, Mouffe argues, the political is not only rational but also by necessity include emotions.

To acknowledge and give room to passion within politics is important for well-functioning democracies. Mouffe derive the crisis of democracy from politics not realising and acknowledging this.

A well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions. This is what the confrontation between left and right needs to be about. Such a confrontation should provide collective forms of identification strong enough to mobilize political passions. (Mouffe, 2005a, 30)

Wayne Wiegand, exploring the role US public libraries play in people's everyday life, found the stories to which they provide access to be very significant for people. Library users have witnessed how reading stories provided at a public library help them make sense of the world and how, in many cases, it is a transformative experience (Wiegand, 2015). Wiegand refers to this significant role in terms of literacy but not information literacy. He concludes that from users' perspective libraries do not live up to the Library and Information Science's rhetoric about being

vital for democracy. Wiegand's conclusion draws from a specific interpretation of the democratic role: it should manifest itself in people's knowledge about political processes and democratic theory (Wiegand, 2015, 362). However, from a plural agonistic view on democracy, the role that public libraries play in people's lives as places in which people's identities can develop is a democratic role. Envisioning how things could be different should also include ideas about how things could be better. Choosing between political alternatives that present how to proceed for making the change happen is not only a rational process:

There is an important affective dimension in voting and what is at stake there is a question of identification. In order to act politically people need to be able to identify with a collective identity which provides an idea of themselves they can valorize. Political discourse has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving them hope for the future.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 25)

Carol Kuhlthau's (2004) inclusion of feelings alongside thoughts and actions in her model of the Information Seeking Process is an example of how emotions previously have been brought to attention as relevant for information seeking within Library and Information Science. In plural agonistics, emotions are related to collective, not to individual identities. What is shared is the holistic approach to how people interact with information, in which the rational and emotional are intertwined.

An important difference with the model of 'deliberative democracy' is that for 'agonistic pluralism', the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.  
(Mouffe, 2005b, 103)

People react to the situations they are involved in, and emotions influence their reactions. Therefore, emotions must be brought into politics. For information literacy this realisation implies that interactions with information needs to be understood as holistic experiences with possible consequences for people's identities (also see Annemaree Lloyd's embodiment chapter in this volume).

### <h3>Forming chains of equivalences

There are many social movements, and these have various goals and diverse political interests. In order to make social change happen, alliances between groups that share similar claims must be established. Laclau and Mouffe mention this as the formation of *chains of equivalences*.

In the face of the project for the reconstruction of a hierarchic society, the alternative of the Left should consist of locating itself fully in the field of the democratic revolution and expanding the chains of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression. *The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy.* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, 160)

Focus is then on accepting differences between groups but forming temporary alliances. This allows for more voices to be heard. The formation of chains of equivalences is a way to move towards a more equal society. Given the current discussion and division within the left, plural agonistics proposes a way of reconciling different social movements and offers a way for them to work together in order to achieve social change.

Groups can make change happen through the formulation of counter-hegemonic practices. When formulating these practices, it is possible that they cause opposition from one or more groups due to their other claims. This is the moment when the different groups must recognise each other as legitimate opponents and engage in an agonistic debate. Libraries with their resources and staff are providing the infrastructure to develop the knowledge needed for these debates. They can also be the places where the debates can unfold. This constitutes examples of activities that can be analysed as enactments of information literacy.

### <h3>Researching information literacy with an agonistic view

When considering adopting an agonistic theory in research it is important to bear in mind, as already mentioned, that information literacy is not something that is existing in any objective or observable way. Instead, it is a description of certain activities that involves information. Therefore, in order to study information literacy from an agonistic perspective attention must be paid to situations involving such activities, which makes ethnographic methods apt for the task. To gain insights not only into what is happening but also into how the parties understand what is happening, a combination of observations and conversations, either in the form of interviews or more informal, is suitable (Rivano Eckerdal, 2013).

Combining plural agonistics with other theoretical approaches contributes a theoretical lens that positions information literacy as a political concept and also takes a stand for a radical view on democracy, striving to enhance social equality. Suggestions for theories that could fit well with it are practice theories and theories with a socio-material focus (see chapters by Jutta Haider and Olof Sundin, and by Annemaree Lloyd). The strong ontological emphasis in plural agonistics opens for a combination with post-humanist theories. One such example is a combination of

plural agonistics with ideas developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that formed the theoretical basis for suggesting an understanding of libraries not as a noun but as a verb (Rivano Eckerdal, 2018).

### <h3>Limitations

Agonistic debates are only possible for parties that recognise each other as legitimate opponents. Thus, the theory does not answer the problem of how to solve conflicts in situations when this is not the case.

A democratic society cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries. The agonistic approach does not pretend to encompass all differences and to overcome all forms of exclusions. But exclusions are envisaged in political and not in moral terms. Some demands are excluded, not because they are declared to be 'evil', but because they challenge the institutions constitutive of the democratic political association.  
(Mouffe, 2005a, 120-121)

This reservation could be pointed out as a major flaw of the theory, but it can also be argued to be a call for the imperative to reform democratic institutions to avoid (further) violence. This reservation also has consequences for library practices when they are understood as institutions that have a role as providers of knowledge and space for agonistic debates. There will be situations when a conflict arises in which one or both parties do not recognise their opponent as legitimate or question the legitimacy of the institution. Then the door to a proper agonistic debate is closed. Discerning if an agonistic debate is at all possible is therefore an important and difficult task that is bestowed upon librarians, a task that requires ethical awareness.

### <h2>Concluding remarks

Plural agonistics is here proposed as a valuable contribution to information literacy research and practice as it accentuates information literacy as a political concept. As shown, it is a theory that productively can help us to understand the link between information literacy and democracy. Democracy is never neutral, and the plural agonistic democratic theoretical perspective is positioned in the realm of radical democracy. But, contrary to other radical democratic theories, plural agonistics supports the liberal form of democratic rule.

The ineradicable dimension of antagonism is a perspective that does not strive to formulate a utopian ultimate goal towards which it is important to strive regardless of cost, an endeavour most likely involving brutal repression of resistance. This ontological statement is beneficial not because it is optimistic but because it starts with the realisation that power always corrupts. Furthermore, it does not fall into the

trap of prescribing for itself a way forward where a peaceful future is foreseen for everyone if agonism came into power. At the same time, it is constructive because it does not stop at stating that power always corrupts but formulates a way forward to work towards a more democratic – understood as more egalitarian – society. The approach is to change the focus of aspirations, from focus on future goals to focus on the situation here and now and how the situation can change.

Plural agonistics highlights how institutions are crucial for democracy by being sites for agonistic debate; it is within the democratic institutions that enemies are shaped into adversaries that are able to debate issues related to dissimilar views on situations.

Mouffe prescribes a way to change the prevailing hegemony by producing counter-hegemonies, and strives to prevent the erosion of existing institutions from within. Libraries are important institutions both as places in which people can learn, from both fiction and non-fiction, envision and articulate possible counter-hegemonies, and debate them. These are information activities that here are construed as including information literacy aspects. Institutions need to be defended and, in every decision made, political solutions must be questioned ethically in terms of whether they offer better terms for most people. New articulations should aim to include those that are excluded today.

The increased polarisation that we are witnessing are understood, from a plural agonistic point of view, not as caused by the debate but by the failure to politically shape conflicts, within the democratic institutions. Conflicts are ever potentially occurring due to the ineradicability of antagonism. The democratic institutions, including libraries, in society have a crucial mission to help shaping and taming those conflicts, antagonisms, into debates, agonism.

With the help of plural agonism mundane everyday activities are connected with their social role, importance and impact. Such mundane activities include, for example, activities in which people interact with information in ways that are possible to describe as enactments of information literacy. If we understand those situations better, we become better equipped for developing and defending our institutions, including libraries, to well-functioning institutions in a pluralist democratic society.

On the contrary, it is by finally acknowledging the contradictory tendencies set to work by social exchange and the fragility of the democratic order that we will be able to grasp what I have argued is the task confronting democracy: how to transform the potential antagonism existing in human relations into an agonism. (Mouffe, 2005b, 135)

## <h2>References

ALA (The American Library Association). (1989) *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report*, Chicago: American Library Association, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>.

Bruce, C. (1997) *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy*, Auslib Press.

Doyle, C. S. (1992) *Outcome measures for information literacy within the national education goals of 1990*, Final report to the national forum on information literacy; summary of findings, ED351033, ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources.

Elmborg, J. (2006) Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, **32**(2), 192-199.

Foa, R.S., and Mounk, Y. (2017) The signs of deconsolidation, *Journal of Democracy*, **28**(1), 5-15.

Hansson, J. (2010) Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism and its relevance for library and information science research. In Leckie, G.J., Given, L.M., and Buschman, J.E. (eds.), *Critical Theory for Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines*, 249-257, Libraries Unlimited.

IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions)(2005) *Beacons of the information society: the Alexandria proclamation on information literacys and lifelong learning*. <https://www.ifla.org/publications/beacons-of-the-information-society-the-alexandria-proclamation-on-information-literacy-and-lifelong-learning/>

Kuhlthau, C.C. (2004) *Seeking meaning: a process approach to library and information services*, Libraries Unlimited.

Laclau, E., and Mouffe, C. (2014) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition, First published 1985, Verso.

Lührmann, A., and Lindberg, S.I. (2019) A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, **26**(7), 1095-1113,

Mouffe, C. (2005a) *On the Political*, Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2005b) *The Democratic Paradox*, First published 2000, Verso.



Mouffe, C. (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Verso.

Mouffe, C. (2019) *For a left Populism*, First published 2018, Verso.

Papada, E., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Gastaldi, L., Köhler, T., Lundstedt, M., Natsika, N., Nord, M., Sato, Y., Wiebrecht, F., and Lindberg, S.I. (2023). *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023*, University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute),  
[https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf)

Rivano Eckerdal, J. (2013) Empowering Interviews: Narrative Interviews in the Study of Information Literacy in Everyday Life Settings, *Information Research*, **18**, paperC10.

Rivano Eckerdal, J. (2017) Libraries, Democracy, Information: Literacy, and Citizenship: An Agonistic Reading of Central Library and Information Studies' Concepts, *Journal of Documentation*, **73**, 1010-1033.

Rivano Eckerdal, J. (2018) Equipped for Resistance: An Agonistic Conceptualisation of the public Library as a Verb, *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, **69**, 1405-1413.

Rivano Eckerdal, J., and Carlsson, H. (2022) Plastic Policies: Contemporary Opportunities and Challenges in Public Libraries' Enactment of Cultural Policy, *Nordic Journal of Library and Information Studies*, **3**(1), 1-25.

Schmidt, N. (2020) *The Privilege to Select: Global Research System, European Academic Library Collections, and Decolonisation*, Diss, Lund University.

Wiegand, W. (2015) "Tunnel Vision and Blind Spots" Reconsidered: Part of Our Lives (2015) as a Test Case, *The Library Quarterly: information, Community, Policy*, **85**(4), 347-370.

Wilson, C., Grizzle, A., Tuazon, R., Akyempong, K. and Cheung, C.K. (2011) *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers*, UNESCO,  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001929/192971e.pdf>