# TALISSE'S OVERDOING DEMOCRACY AND THE INEVITABILITY OF CONFLICT

## CATARINA DUTILH NOVAES

VU AMSTERDAM/UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

ABSTRACT: *Overdoing Democracy* is an important contribution to the literature on (deliberative) democracy, as it offers a sobering diagnosis of the risks and pitfalls of (overdoing) democracy in the form of internal critique. But the book does not go far enough in its diagnosis because it is not sufficiently critical towards some of the basic assumptions of deliberative conceptions of democracy. In particular, Talisse does not sufficiently attend to the inevitable power struggles in a society, where different groups and individuals must protect their own (often conflicting) interests instead of working towards a 'common good.' In this essay, I contrast two different visions of democracy and politics, one based on ideals of consensus and cooperation, and another on the inevitability of perennial conflict. I then briefly present an alternative to deliberative conceptions of democracy that has gained traction in recent decades, known as *agonism*. Next, I offer a short reconstruction of Talisse's proposal, and finally I sketch a critical assessment of some of his main claims and assumptions from an agonistic perspective.

KEYWORDS: conflict, agonism, deliberation, consensus

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN the 1993 movie *Addams Family Values*, Wednesday Addams attends a summer camp, where she and other outcasts are relentlessly bullied and denigrated by the popular kids and by the camp leadership. For a Thanksgiving pageant, Wednesday and her unpopular friends are (unsurprisingly) given the parts of Native Americans, whereas the 'cool kids' are assigned to the pilgrim roles. Plot twist: instead of sharing a peaceful meal as per the traditional script, Wednesday and her friends stage a rebellion, as a result of which an obnoxious girl who played the main pilgrim is tied to a stake, and the camp leaders are roasted over the campfire.[1] This scene draws insightful parallels between different forms of power dynamics and oppression, reminding us that the historical myth of a peaceful meal bringing together different social groups in fact hides a tragic history of dominance and exploitation (Silverman, 2019).

Robert Talisse begins *Overdoing Democracy* (Talisse 2019) also at the Thanksgiving table, but the tone is rather different; he remarks (and laments) that what used to be serene (albeit perhaps dull) family gatherings have now become political battlefields, where

family members with different political inclinations bitterly argue over their differences. Talisse views this development as an instance of democracy overstretching its reach: politics does not belong in family gatherings. By overdoing democracy and letting politics permeate all our social relations, we are in fact destroying democracy. Instead, we should all behave and 'be nice' at family gatherings and other circumstances where politics should not be involved. The contrast with the rebellion staged by Wednesday Addams is striking, and reveals what I take to be the main limitations of Talisse's account, to be discussed in what follows.

*Overdoing Democracy* is a delightful book, despite being the bearer of bad news: the imminent demise of democracy (as we know it). It is extremely well written and packed with compelling insights and illuminating metaphors. It is also an important book, as it offers a sobering diagnosis of the risks and pitfalls of (overdoing) democracy in the form of an internal critique of deliberative conceptions of democracy (internal because Talisse himself identifies as a deliberativist). Since its publication, it has attracted a fair amount of attention, a fact that reflects the bewilderment with which liberal democrats witnessed political phenomena such as Trump's victory in the US presidential election and the results of the Brexit referendum in 2016. These events were not only hard to comprehend from the point of view of classical conceptions of deliberative democracy; they also seemed to suggest that the basic conditions for the existence of minimally successful democracies were under threat, in particular with increasing polarization between different camps.

But *Overdoing Democracy* does not go far enough in its assessment of the risks and pitfalls of democracy because it is not sufficiently critical towards some of the basic assumptions of deliberative conceptions of democracy. In particular, Talisse does not seem to question the assumption that democratic deliberation should essentially be a cooperative endeavor aimed at some form of consensus. In particular, he does not sufficiently attend to the inevitable power struggles in a society, where different groups and individuals must protect their own interests.[2] Indeed, Talisse seems to claim that conflict and polarization are (primarily) *caused* by overdoing democracy. But what if conflict is inherent to any minimally complex social arrangement? The conflicts discussed by Talisse may well arise and exist irrespective of the travails of democracy. By locating the source of conflict in (overdoing) democratic practices, Talisse fails to pay sufficient attention to more plausible sources of conflict in a society such as power relations, clashing interests, competition for scarce resources, inequalities, exploitation, oppression etc., and thus ends up with a rather narrow account of the phenomena in question.

This paper proceeds as follows. In part 2, I contrast two different visions of democracy and politics, one based on ideals of consensus and cooperation, and another on the inevitability of perennial conflict. In part 3, I briefly present an alternative to deliberative conceptions of democracy that has gained traction in recent decades, known as *agonism*. In part 4 I offer a short reconstruction of Talisse's proposal, and in part 5 I sketch a critical assessment of some of his main claims and assumptions from an agonistic perspective.

## II. POLITICS: CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT?

In Chapter 2 of *Overdoing Democracy*, Talisse presents an informative account of what can be described as the classical conception of democracy as a social ideal, which I now briefly summarize. The key problem is how to reconcile the (inevitable) use of coercive political power with ideals of equality: "How could political bossing possibly be consistent with the idea that everyone is an equal?" (Talisse 2019: 50) Equal-vote majoritarianism is not sufficient to ground the legitimacy of political power, as it may entail a form of tyranny: the tyranny of the majority. So it is not enough that a citizen be accorded an equal vote; she must also be given an equal *voice* among her fellow citizens. Public engagement thus becomes one of the pillars of legitimacy in a democracy: even if your political preferences represent a minority view within your society and you must thus submit to the decisions of the majority, your position will (at least in theory) have the same right to be voiced in the public sphere as the views of the majority. Talisse describes this approach as *participationist*, and it has some important implications:

> Participation of the kind envisioned encourages citizens to see themselves as sharers in a common civic project; by participating in this endeavor, citizens put aside their interests as private individuals and, together with others, adopt the perspective of the whole political community, acting for the sake of the common good. Democracy hence is envisioned as equal-vote majoritarianism conducted against the backdrop of a large-scale collection of interlocking civic associations, where individuals come together not as adversaries with competing interests, but as fellow citizens pursuing the distinctive good of the whole. Thus the emphasis is transferred away from the need to produce collective decision amidst conflicting preferences and toward civic processes aimed at fomenting solidarity, community, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging among citizens. (Talisse 2019: 56)

From this perspective, democratic engagement is thus primarily a *cooperative* endeavor where citizens forgo their personal interests in favor of the (presumably determinable and unique) common good. But a limitation of the participationist model thus described is that it does not ensure that all voices are effectively *heard*: "citizens must be afforded not only equal votes and an equal voice, but also an equal *hearing*." (Talisse 2019: 58) Additional conditions must be in place to ensure equal hearing. This is precisely where the highly influential notion of *deliberative democracy* kicks in: democratic outcomes should be the result of *public deliberation*. Talisse summarizes the core of this notion thus:

> The central deliberativist thought is that, in a democracy, collective decisions derive their authority from the fact that, prior to voting, each citizen was able to engage in processes whereby he or she could rationally persuade others to adopt his or her favored view by defending it with reasons, and offering reasons opposing competing views. According to the deliberativist, then, the democratic ideal has at its core an idea of *collective reasoning*. In order for citizens to rule themselves as equals, they must reason together as equals. (Talisse 2019: 59)

So far, none of this is particularly controversial. In fact, the very absence of contro-versy is itself striking: deliberative conceptions of democracy are rather popular, and are often viewed as obviously right.[3] And yet, it is an approach (one might even say an 'ideology') with specific historical roots. Prominent proponents of (variations of) deliberativism include Locke and Mill, and more recently Rawls and Habermas. (The label 'liberal' is also used to refer to this tradition, but here I follow Talisse and use the more precise 'deliberativist.')

The deliberativist thus places high value on the ideal of 'free discussion,' or 'free exchange of ideas,' as Mill puts it (Mill 1999). An assumption underlying (classical versions of) deliberativism is that discussion and deliberation are always possible, and always a good thing (with the exception perhaps of situations of urgency). Another key assumption is that free discussion will always (or at least typically) contribute to clarifying and resolving problematic situations: there is sig-nificant epistemic and practical benefit to be gained from deliberation. Furthermore, many of these thinkers maintain, tacitly or explicitly, that it is (at least in principle) always possible to attain *consensus*.[4] The possibility and desirability of consen-sus follows from the idea that citizens in a deliberative democracy are primarily engaged in the cooperative project of pursuing the common good; a confrontation between the different ideas on *how* to pursue the common good is expected to lead to the overall 'best' proposals being recognized as such by those involved in the deliberative process. Dissent, in sum, is to be overcome, and consensus can be achieved without substantial tradeoffs for individuals.[5]

Alas, these assumptions are often empirically falsified. "Discussions, even dis-cussions that take place under reasonably favorable conditions, are not necessarily enlightening, clarifying or conducive to fostering consensus. In fact, they just as often foster polemics, and generate further bitterness, rancor and division." (Geuss 2019) This need not be a problem for the deliberativist per se, as she may retort that what she is describing is an *ideal*, not the messy reality of human politics. Insofar as it addresses the problem of the *legitimacy* of political power, the deliberativist account does not purport to be descriptively accurate. Habermas for one is happy to concede that most communication in democratic societies does not count as instances of his normative ideal of 'communicative action,' but he does not view this as a serious objection to his theory as a whole (Geuss 2019).

One of the main contributions of *Overdoing Democracy* is taking seriously the challenge posed by these discrepancies between ideals and practices, in particular the phenomenon of polarization, rather than brushing it off. Indeed, from a strictly deliberativist perspective, polarization is both an aberration and a hindrance. It is an aberration because (rational) deliberation should lead to opinions coming closer together rather than further apart (i.e., convergence towards the 'best' proposals). And it is a hindrance because it jeopardizes the very possibility of collective reason-ing, as it may render citizens less competent at formulating arguments to defend their views and less responsive to arguments supporting other views.[6]

Deliberativist conceptions of democracy are thus grounded in a largely *coop-erative* conception of politics, where the possibility and desirability of consensus occupy a key position. There is, however, an alternative strand of thinkers for whom *conflict*, rather than cooperation and consensus, is at the core of politics.

It includes Hobbes, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and more recently the proponents of agonistic conceptions of democracy (Wenman 2013). For these thinkers, rather than engaging in the cooperative project of pursuing the common good, different actors and groups in a society compete for power so as to defend and promote their interests. Adversariality[7] arises when the different interests are in conflict and cannot be simultaneously realized.[8] For the agonist, the deliberativist's focus on consensus in fact amounts to an attempt to sweep the problem of conflict under the rug as it were, which, instead of solving it, is likely to exacerbate it. The point can be further elaborated thus:

> Where liberals and deliberative democrats typically seek to overcome or transcend conflict by bringing it under a set of regulative principles (foundational principles of justice or context-transcending principles of communicative rationality), the agonists insist that these responses actually serve to exacerbate the problem. Instead, we should look to sublimate this hostility by transforming it into more constructive modes of rivalry. (Wenman 2013: xiii)

In other words, conflict in a society cannot be made to disappear by simply 'wishing it away,' that is, by postulating that consensus can always (or even typically) be achieved. Reasonable or rational argumentation will not by itself reliably lead to the resolution of disagreements, in particular when the interests of the different parties are not aligned, or when they do not share fundamental values.[9]

In fact, a focus on consensus may actually end up reinforcing and perpetuating unequal power relations in a society; it may serve to preserve the status quo, given that those who have more power will be in a position to dominate the discussion (whose content tends to reflect their interests and perspectives), or even to 'force' those with less power to concede and compromise. Consensus-oriented politics will tend to be largely conservative, as the 'burden of proof' will fall on those who advocate for change (and thus seek to disrupt the established consensus). "In an unjust society, what purports to be a cooperative exchange of reasons really perpetuates patterns of oppression." (Goodwin 2007: 77) This general point has been made by a number of feminist political thinkers (e.g., Young 2000), who have highlighted the exclusionary implications of consensus-oriented political deliberation. (Young in particular favors *contestation* over consensus as the foundational concept for deliberative democracy, but she is not herself a theorist of agonistic democracy.) The more 'civilized' and non-adversarial these discussions are expected to be, the more exclusionary they will be regarding those who have good reasons to be angry (such as Wednesday Addams at the summer camp), and those whose communicative strategies do not fit the mold of what is considered reasonable, articulate discourse (Henning 2018).

Agonistic conceptions of politics offer valuable insights in that they challenge some of the firmly entrenched presuppositions of deliberativism (at least in its classical versions, e.g., Habermas). As such, even if one does not fully embrace agonism,[10] there is much to be gained from sustained engagement with these views when reflecting on deliberativism's limits and pitfalls[11]—which is precisely Talisse's project in *Overdoing Democracy*. In the next section I turn to Chantal

Mouffe's articulation of agonism so as to later discuss what an agonist might say about Talisse's proposal.

## III. AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY

While the different theories of agonistic democracy differ substantially from each other (Wenman 2013), they all seem committed to three basic tenets:

> (i) an emphasis on constitutive pluralism, (ii) a tragic vision of a world without hope of final redemption from conflict, suffering, and strife, and (iii) a belief that certain forms of contest can be a political good. (Wenman 2013: 18)

The agonist thus posits that pluralism is at the heart of the human experience, which is constituted by a plurality of perspectives, views, ways of life, values etc. Pluralism is not just the starting point to be overcome by means of (deliberative or otherwise) consensus-forming procedures; instead, it is an ineliminable and in fact *desirable* feature of social structures. But where there is pluralism, there is conflict, as these different ways of life will typically not be content with simply coexisting side by side. In particular, on many occasions individuals and groups will become *adversaries* of each other in the sense that they pursue clashing interests (Dutilh Novaes 2020a), hence the tragedy of perennial conflict and strife.

Among the different agonistic authors, Mouffe in particular attributes to democratic institutions the crucial role of transforming (or 'sublimating,' in the Freudian sense) hostility and aggression into constructive forms of conflict and contest. To conceptualize these processes, Mouffe relies on two related distinctions: 'the political,' which is understood in terms of *antagonism*, and 'politics,' which is understood in terms of *agonism*:

> I have developed these reflections on 'the political,' understood as the an-tagonistic dimension which is inherent to all human societies. To that effect, I have proposed the distinction between 'the political' and 'politics.' 'The political' refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. It is a dimension that can never be eradicated. 'Politics,' on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of 'the political.' (Mouffe 2013: 2–3)

In particular, recognizing the inevitability of conflict suggests an articulation of politics where conflict is *managed* rather than resolved:

> Conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated, since the specificity of pluralist democracy is precisely the recognition and the legitimation of conflict. What liberal democratic politics requires is that the others are not seen as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned. To put it in another way, what is important is that conflict does not take the form of an 'antagonism' (struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries). (Mouffe 2013: 7)

Antagonism pertains to conflict in its raw manifestations, which will often lead to violent confrontations; agonism in turn is antagonism 'sublimated,' i.e., tamed and domesticated by means of practices and institutions that allow for fierce but constructive and respectful confrontation. Agonism would stand to antagonism as martial arts stand to unregulated street fights: martial arts, especially traditional ones such as kung-fu or karate, consist in pre-determined rules of engagement, and place great emphasis on respect for one's opponent. Thus seen, antagonism is solely constituted by conflict, while agonism is characterized by a combination of conflict and adversariality with a certain amount of *cooperation*, insofar as it presupposes the acceptance of basic 'rules of engagement' for political disagreement and confrontation. (This kind of cooperation is to be ensured and enforced primarily by institutions rather than being solely a disposition of individuals.) Agonism is however still significantly different from deliberativism in that the latter typically aims at the elimination of conflict by means of consensus-forming procedures, and requires citizens to disregard their personal interests in favor of the (presumed) common good.[12] For the agonist, by contrast, conflict is not to be eliminated but rather *managed*, and citizens continue to primarily defend their interests and perspectives (given the value of pluralism).

Deliberation in particular may play an important role in the sublimation of antagonism into agonism, but other than for the classical deliberativist, it is not expected to lead to consensus. [13] Instead, it is an ongoing process: antagonism remains in the background and raises its head time and again.[14] In fact, Mouffe maintains that denying the perennial existence of conflict and antagonism, which she describes as "the typical liberal gesture" (Mouffe 2013: 3), is particularly dangerous:

> Firstly, the predominant democratic praxis is in denial about the reality of 'the political' and, secondly, and ironically perhaps, this naive renunciation actually exacerbates conflict and makes antagonism more likely, because these tendencies open the door to extremist parties who claim to offer a meaningful alternative to mainstream consensus elites. In other words, the emphasis on consensus provokes a 'return of the political' in the form of a heightened potential for antagonism . . . (Wenman 2013: 181)

Indeed, Mouffe credits the rise of extreme-right populism of the last 20 years to the excessive focus on consensus and disregard for the ever-present underlying antagonistic forces in any society. "Antagonistic conflicts are less likely to emerge as long as agonistic legitimate political channels for dissenting voices exist. Otherwise dissent tends to take violent forms" (Mouffe 2005: 21).

Contrasting with the deliberativist, for the agonist (and for Mouffe in particular) polarization[15] is neither an aberration nor (necessarily) a hindrance. It is not an aberration because antagonism is in fact the baseline, the default state of socially complex arrangements. The deliberativist looks for reasons why polarization emerges; the agonist by contrast expects (various forms of) polarization to emerge constantly, even when antagonism is suitably counterbalanced by agonism. Furthermore, polarization is not (necessarily) a hindrance, as a good amount of dissent is essential for the healthy political life of a society: "in a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that

democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism." (Mouffe 2000: 34) (Notice however that the agonist need not admit that all forms of polarization will be congruent with democratic practices; there may well be pernicious instances of polarization, in particular if they risk to disrupt the fleeting balance between agonism and antagonism.) Indeed, for the agonist, extreme, radical positions in the political landscape serve to energize a democracy rather than to threaten it (that is, provided that they still respect the basic tenets of democratic engagement).[16]

## IV. TALISSE'S OWN BLEND OF DELIBERATIVISM

As indicated by its title, Talisse's main thesis in the book is that democracy can be overdone, and that overdoing democracy may lead to its destruction from within. In this sense, Talisse differs from classical deliberativists who maintain that there is no such thing as 'too much democracy.' "Democracy is overdone when it is enacted in ways that crowd out other social goods that are necessary for democracy to thrive." (Talisse 2019: 25)

Talisse's diagnosis is based on three main components: the sorting of spaces across party lines (which is not caused by overdoing democracy itself but which aggravates the erosion of democratic deliberation), political saturation (i.e., most of our everyday activities come to be seen as manifestations of political preferences),[17] and polarization.[18] Sorting and political saturation entail the disappearance of suitably heterogeneous social environments for inclusive and accessible collective reasoning. Polarization, in turn, tends to make us irresponsive to arguments voiced by those who disagree with us.

> In order to pursue the ideal of self-government among equals, a democracy must strive to be a society in which citizens listen to one another's concerns, examine each other's ideas, and engage together in inclusive and accessible collective reasoning; in short, we must make ourselves *vulnerable* to our fellow citizens' arguments, ideas, and experiences. Only under conditions approximating these can we plausibly see democratic political rule as consistent with each citizens' status as an equal, and thus more than merely the tyranny of the majority. Note, crucially, that this vision of democratic society tacitly presupposes that citizen interactions will occur in politically heterogeneous social environments. The political saturation of social space means that venues of this kind are in rapidly diminishing supply. (Talisse 2019: 94)

The most original element of Talisse's analysis is the claim that this is a problem *internal* to democracy itself rather than a result of external forces: "the problem of overdoing democracy emerges from within the democratic ideal itself" (Talisse 2019: 68). This position contrasts with Talisse's earlier work (in particular with S. Aikin), which was decidedly more optimistic regarding the scope and reach of deliberation (Aikin and Talisse 2013). Now, however, Talisse views the maximalist interpretation of politics implied by deliberativism as a threat to democracy itself.

> [Deliberativism] recommends as extensive an interpretation of the scope and site of democracy as can be plausibly envisioned. Moreover, it prescribes the extension of democracy's reach into any venue where citizens could be

> expected to exchange ideas about politics, and it then prescribes a vision of democracy according to which citizens are perpetually talking politics. It says that democratic citizenship could be exercised almost anywhere, and probably should be. (Talisse 2019: 63)

But if politics is everywhere, political saturation and belief polarization ensue, undermining democratic practices.[19] Thus seen, the solution for democracy's ailments is not *more* democracy, but rather *less* of it: 'putting politics in its place' rather than letting it permeate all aspects of our lives. Talisse thus rejects some of the main assumptions of classical versions of deliberativism as described in section 2. For starters, he denies that (fruitful) discussion and deliberation are always possible, and always a good thing. He also denies that deliberation will reliably lead to the resolution of problematic situations: if the background conditions are not favorable, more deliberation will lead to even more political saturation and polarization.

However, Talisse is still firmly a deliberativist in his endorsement of a vision of politics as a largely cooperative endeavor aimed at the common good, and in his trust in the power of deliberation to ground political legitimacy (naturally, provided that the necessary background conditions are in place and democracy is not being 'overdone'). Moreover, his depiction of polarization as a threat to democracy seems to imply (though he does not state it explicitly) that dissent and differences of opinion are ultimately to be overcome by the establishment of a sufficiently broad consensus. The implication seems to be that radical positions that significantly differ from 'mainstream,' centrist views pose a threat to democracy. [20] Hence, for Talisse, polarization is not an aberration (as it is for the classical deliberativist), but it is still a hindrance for fruitful democratic practices.

To counter the risk of overdoing democracy, Talisse recommends that politics be put in its place: "we can do this by participating together in cooperative social endeavors that are fundamentally non-political in nature." (Talisse 2019: 132) The thought seems to be that, as an antidote to democratic political practices that, in excess, threaten to corrode democracy from within, non-political cooperative endeavors should remind us that we are all in the same boat after all, pursuing a common project. What is required is the cultivation of what Talisse calls *civic friendship*.

> Civic friends need not know each other or interact in any direct way. They need not like each other, nor share a sense of each other's good; they needn't see the other's good as a component of their own good. In fact, civic friends might even dislike each other as persons. Nonetheless their friendship consists in the mutual respect they show one another in regarding each other as sharers in a social enterprise, entitled to play an equal role in shaping and directing that enterprise. Civic friends thus are able to situate their ongoing and often passionate or even rancorous political opposition within a broader context wherein they remain equal citizens, and thus entitled to an equal share of political power. (Talisse 2019: 150)

## V. AN AGONISTIC CRITIQUE OF TALISSE

But how plausible is Talisse's diagnosis and the accompanying prescription? Crucially, he seems to suggest that the phenomenon of overdoing democracy is a fairly recent development, at least in the United States. He thus joins the choir of deliberativists baffled by the apparent regress in democratic practices of the last decade or so (the Internet being one of the presumed culprits—Bartlett 2018), and nostalgic for (allegedly) better, healthier times for democracy in the past. Ideals of deliberative democracy, and more generally the Enlightenment matrix from which they emerged, tend to be resolutely optimistic regarding the 'arc of history': once established, democracy should become self-sustaining and self-reinforcing. Talisse partially rejects this optimism (viewing the problem of overdoing democracy as intrinsic to democracy), but he too seems to be in the grip of nostalgia for an age when democracy was not being overdone. Tellingly, he speaks of *restoring* the right democratic dispositions, implying that once upon a time they were pervasive but have since been waning: "Recall that the problem of overdoing democracy is in part the problem of *restoring* in citizens the disposition concerning political disagreement and cooperation that would make deliberation beneficial." (Talisse 2019: 137, emphasis added)

But was there really ever such an idyllic period (in the US or elsewhere)? Recall that in the early decades of the Cold War, in particular with what became known as McCarthyism, any view that might remotely be stamped as 'communist' was summarily silenced and excluded from public debates in the US. Official racial segregation was enforced in large parts of the country for many decades, with Jim Crow. While class differences have become exacerbated over the last decades in the US and elsewhere (Hoffmann, Lee and Lemieux 2020)—which is itself arguably a crucial factor for polarization, incidentally not discussed by Talisse—there has always been class segregation in civic life and workspaces. If there really was more contact between people across party lines (Democrats and Republicans), it may well be that this pertained primarily to a limited group of (predominantly) white, well-to-do citizens rather than the population at large (though of course this is ultimately an empirical claim that would require further investigation).

An alternative diagnosis in the spirit of agonism would have it that in those periods when democracy was allegedly not being 'overdone,' the inevitable antagonisms present in a society were in fact being swept under the rug. Collective reasoning was perhaps only partially inclusive (Young 2000)—which is not to say that it is now fully inclusive!—and the presumed 'common good' was in fact a reflection of the interests of a limited group of people (though there may have been more efficient mechanisms for wealth distribution, e.g., higher taxation of the super-rich). In other words, conflict and plurality (if not polarization) would have been very much a reality too, but these phenomena would have been suitably masked by an appearance of consensus. Tellingly, some of the most important recent socio-political movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo are often described as 'polarizing,' while in truth their existence simply means that some people are now finally able to speak up against forms of oppression and violence that were present all along. (Similar considerations apply to historical socio-political move-

ments such as abolitionism in the eighteenth and ninenteenth centuries.) In sum, the main limitations in Talisse's analysis seem to pertain the idea that polarization and related conflicts emerge (primarily) as a result of (overdoing) democracy rather than simply existing independently, that is, as a result of inevitable power struggles in a society.[21]

Continuing in an agonist vein, we may recognize that democracy is indeed intrinsically fragile and unstable, but not for the reasons adduced by Talisse. Democracy is fragile because antagonism is perennial, even when suitably contained by agonistic practices. Moreover, given freedom of speech ideals, democratic systems are poorly equipped to deal with anti-democratic discourse, especially if such discourse appropriates democratic vocabulary in the form of propaganda (Stanley 2015). There are simply no easy ways to counter the spread of disinformation in a democracy (Dutilh Novaes and de Ridder 2021; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018).[22] Indeed, as often observed in the (recent) past (and to the dismay of the classical deliberativist), authoritarian, anti-democratic discourse can be quite alluring (Applebaum 2020); historically, many autocrats have come to power through purely democratic processes (Snyder 2017). Furthermore, a system with separation of powers is no guarantee that democratic institutions and practices will not be overturned or corrupted from within (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

The bottom line is that a democracy is fertile terrain for anti-democratic actors to accrue power, in particular by manipulating public opinion in their favor and fomenting hostility (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). The Millian hope that a free exchange of ideas in a society will naturally be truth-conducive is overly optimistic (though there may still be some plausibility to it in special circumstances (Dutilh Novaes 2020b)). This was attested for example by the campaign leading to the Brexit referendum in 2016, where blatant falsehoods were spread and had significant uptake (Geuss 2019).

Should we now extend the courtesy of civic friendship to (those we perceive as) anti-democratic actors and their supporters? Talisse's recommendation that we respectfully treat our political opponents as fellow citizens entitled to their views[23] rings hopelessly naïve when at least some of these opponents are actively undermining democratic institutions from within. (The fact that it's often difficult to tell whether this is the case or not for specific actors—among other reasons, in view of spurious appropriations of democratic slogans—makes the whole thing even trickier.) What's more, the proposal becomes positively outrageous when marginalized and oppressed groups are requested to practice civic friendship towards the very people who actively curtail their (political and human) rights (Anttila 2020) (e.g., systematic voter suppression efforts in the US).[24] Recall Wednesday Addams and the 'Native American' rebellion staged at the Thanksgiving pageant: the scene highlights the absurdity of expecting the exploited and oppressed Native Americans to share a peaceful meal with the pilgrims, as well as the justified anger that the outcast kids felt for all the bullying they had had to endure.

This being said, Talisse's 'civic friendship' proposal is not entirely unreasonable. Responsiveness to arguments from dissenters and overall respect for fellow citizens are generally speaking dispositions to be recommended (at least to a certain degree, and provided that there is sufficient symmetry between 'civic friends'); it

may well be that engaging in non-political activities together could help foster these dispositions to some extent. The problem is that the proposal is mostly toothless when it comes to the real challenges faced by democratic societies (as also argued in (Anttila 2020)). (To his credit, Talisse does recognize that democracy is hard!) Conflicts of interest, injustices, oppression, class disparities, political exclusion, exploitation, political opportunism, anti-democratic interventions etc. are all phenomena that disrupt the functioning of a democracy, but which will not be much affected by us "participating together in cooperative social endeavors that are fundamentally non-political" (Talisse 2019: 132) (nor does Talisse claim this much).

But what (if anything) could possibly 'save' democracy'? Or should we conclude that democracy is simply doomed? As described in the previous section, for Mouffe the key principle to sustain democratic structures is the transformation of *antagonism* into *agonism*. One of Mouffe's examples of an agonistic institution is the European Union, which was created primarily in order to put a stop to the continuous wars that had plagued Europe for centuries (Mouffe 2013). True enough, it is far from obvious that agonism can provide a clear-cut answer to the issue of *how* to keep democracies alive: in particular, one of the objections leveled against Mouffe's agonistic theory is its failure to provide more concrete, implementable procedures whereby antagonism is to be transformed into agonism. But an agonistic perspective at least seems to offer a more realistic diagnosis of the fragility and instability of democratic systems and institutions, one that jibes with a number of other recent influential analyses of the threats hovering over current democratic societies (Applebaum 2020; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, 2018; Stanley, 2015).

However, and perhaps surprisingly, Talisse's notion of civic friendship has interesting similarities with Mouffe's concept of agonism. Both consist in guiding principles on how to behave towards fellow citizens with different political orientations, and both emphasize one's opponents' right to defend their ideas. But it is telling that Talisse still conceptualizes these relationships in terms of *friendship* (even if he clarifies that civic friendship is quite different from 'regular' friendship), whereas Mouffe comprehends agonism as pertaining to *adversariality*, and thus to (self-)interests. What this contrast reveals once again is the unease with which a deliberativist such as Talisse deals with conflict based on self-interest (not only epistemic conflict in the form of disagreement),[25] while the agonist accepts conflict as an inevitable and even desirable feature of social and political realities.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, let us return to Wednesday Addams and her Thanksgiving rebellion. It might be objected that the analogy is not particularly illuminating because the historical background is not sufficiently similar to current democratic societies for the point to carry over. However, my contention here is that current democratic societies, even those that appear to be mostly functional, are much more like the Thanksgiving pageant in *Addams Family Values* (both pertaining to the historical events depicted and to the popular kids vs. outcasts dynamics) than we would like to believe. Significant levels of inequality abound, and have in fact increased over the last decades in the US in particular, but also elsewhere (Hoffmann, Lee,

and Lemieux 2020). What is portrayed as "rational consensus" reached through "cooperation" in fact often corresponds to the interests of the more powerful prevailing over the rights of the less powerful members of a society. When the latter refuse to concede and instead fight back, as Wednesday Addams and her friends did, they may end up being described as 'polarizing' and viewed as agitators who disrupt the social order.

Crucially, a systematic discussion of power relations and significant socio-economic disparities is conspicuously absent in *Overdoing Democracy*. Instead, Talisse seems to focus on groups divided by political opinions but otherwise by and large occupying similar socio-economic positions. For those groups, we might want to recommend mutual 'civic friendship,' but for more asymmetric power relations it is far from clear that civic friendship (with its implication of symmetry) would be appropriate at all. Indeed, to my mind, the suggestion that marginalized groups should extend the courtesy of civic friendship to the very people who undermine their rights sounds just as troubling (and dangerous) as the myth of Native Americans enjoying a friendly meal with the pilgrims.

To his credit, and unlike many prominent deliberativists (Habermas, Rawls), Talisse does not adopt an 'ideal theory' perspective; he is openly interested in 'messy' aspects of social realities. But he does not seem to pay sufficient attention to significant components of these realities such as power relations and conflicts that arise from clashes of interests (not only from 'overdoing democracy'), and to how these phenomena (among others) also make democracy an inherently unstable arrangement—but as Churchill famously said, still less bad than the alternatives.

## ENDNOTES

1. The scene can be watched on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iGbxUAM0ccandt=5s

2. To be fair, in Chapter 5 Talisse does refer to these phenomena, but does not seem to draw substantive conclusions from them.

3. There is however already an extensive literature that discusses the shortcomings and limitations of the classic deliberative conception, see (Mansbridge et al. 2010) and references therein.

4. See Geuss (2019) for a critical assessment of these assumptions.

5. Mansbridge et al. (2010: 66) presents a helpful succint formulation of the classic deliberative notion: "In the classic ideal, individuals enter a deliberation with conflicting opinions about what is good for the polity, but after voicing and hearing the reasons for different options, converge on one option as the best, for the same reasons. Ideally, the deliberation

is based on reason. It aims at consensus and the common good. In most formulations it explicitly excludes negotiation and bargained compromise. It excludes self-interest."

6. "Thus, those subject to belief polarization wind up with views that they cannot adequately support with reasons; moreover, they are also less able to competently engage with the reasons of others. In short, belief polarization produces extremity shifts in our belief contents and in our overall commitment to our viewpoints, but it does not provide us with correspondingly better arguments, reasons, or evidence" (Talisse 2019: 123). I discuss the different kinds of polarization identified by Talisse below.

7. In Dutilh Novaes (2020a), I define adversariality thus: "An individual or group A and another individual or group B are *adversaries* if (a) A has an interest $iA$ and B has an interest $iB$ such that $iA$ and $iB$ cannot simultaneously obtain, or the more $iA$ is satisfied, the less $iB$ is satisfied (and vice-versa), and (b) both pursue their own interests."

8. The claim is not that different individuals or groups will always have conflicting interests and that all social interactions are competitive, corresponding to zero-sum games. Rather, the claim is simply that conflicts of interest will frequently (but by no means always) arise. (Interests can also be aligned, of course.) Moreover, this observation does not entail a strictly selfish, individualistic conception of human nature: humans do display altruism and solidarity, but these manifestations are typically reserved for members of their own group, in what is known as in-group/out-group dynamics (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

9. Isaiah Berlin's notion of *value pluralism* is relevant here: "In Berlin's terms, competing values are often (but not always) 'incommensurable' and 'there might exist no single universal overarching standard that would enable a man to choose rationally between' them" (Wenman 2013: 30).

10. My contribution here should not be taken as a resolute defense of agonism as such (although I do have a fair amount of sympathy for the framework as a whole). The point is rather to further clarify and critically examine Talisse's proposal in the light of a well-developed alternative.

11. Relevantly, Mouffe developed her views as a critical response to consensus-oriented theories of deliberative democracy such as those of Habermas and Rawls (Mouffe 1999).

12. But see Mansbridge et al. (2010) for an alternative articulation of the concept of deliberative democracy where self-interests and power relations do play a prominent role.

13. The cooperative component in agonism in the absence of consensus as a guiding principle shows that cooperation and consensus can come apart. In the deliberativist model, cooperation is tightly connected to the achievement of consensus, but it need not be so.

14. "In Mouffe's view, every consensus appears as a contingent 'stabilisation of something essentially unstable and chaotic,' and this constitutive instability should not be seen—with Hegel, Habermas, or the contemporary theorists of deliberative democracy—as a 'temporary obstacle . . . on the road . . . towards harmony and reconciliation'" (Wenman 2013: 195).

15. Talisse defines polarization as "a condition where political officials and others are so deeply divided that there is no basis for compromise, coordination, or even productive communication." (Talisse 2019: 96) Thus his very definition of the phenomenon already presupposes that polarization has a negative valence. If however polarization is conceptualized in more neutral terms, for example as the presence of extreme, radical positions in a society such that there is great political difference between opponents (what Talisse calls 'political polarization,' Talisse 2019: 97), it need not by itself be a problem for democracy (according to the agonist at least).

16. The agonist is thus ultimately also confronted with the problem of the permissibility of anti-democratic discourse within a democracy, which can destroy a democracy from within (Stanley 2015).

17. "Our social environments are politically saturated. This means that our spaces are socially sorted, and, as politics has become tightly fused with our broader social identities, our everyday activities are increasingly taken to be enactments of our political commitments. The result is that we engage more and more in acts that are imbued with political significance, but nearly always under conditions that are socially homogeneous. Hence our activities qua citizens are rarely engaged with those whose political commitments differ from our own" (Talisse 2019: 120–21).

18. Talisse distinguishes between political polarization and belief polarization. "[P]olitical polarization . . . is a measure of the *political distance* between political opponents. Political polarization is a relation between political opponents, be they parties or individuals. . . . Belief polarization, by contrast, occurs *within* a likeminded group." (Talisse 2019: 97) "[B] elief polarization is the tendency whereby discussion among likeminded people results in the participants shifting to a more extreme version of their pre-discussion belief" (Talisse 2019: 101).

19. "[I]f democracy is to flourish, democratic citizens need to embody certain capacities. As it turns out, many of the requisite capacities are debilitated by belief polarization when it occurs under conditions of political saturation" (Talisse 2019: 35).

20. "In short, belief polarization invokes a change in our beliefs; particularly, it involves a change that renders us more extreme versions of ourselves." (Talisse 2019: 97) But it is not immediately clear why becoming more extreme versions of ourselves is necessarily a bad thing: socio-political movements require passionate individuals to have real impact. With such remarks Talisse reveals what can be described as his 'centrist bias'—see (Anttila 2020) for a challenge to the view that polarization is wholly undesirable for democracy.

21. For Mouffe, it is precisely the failure to recognize and properly deal with antagonism in these purportedly 'peaceful' periods that has led to recent exacerbations thereof. "The political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear by simply denying it or wishing it away. This is the typical liberal gesture, and such negation only leads to the impotence that characterizes liberal thought when confronted with the emergence of antagonisms and forms of violence that, according to its theory, belong to a bygone age when reason had not yet managed to control the supposedly archaic passions." (Mouffe 2013: 3–4)

22. When claiming that belief polarization occurs as much on the right as on the left (Chapter 5), Talisse appears to be instantiating the reasoning pattern known as 'two-sidism': both sides are symmetrically at fault. However, a number of authors have contested this purported symmetry with respect to the US political landscape of the last decade, including (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018) and Nguyen (in this symposium).

23. "[E]ven in the wake of what they consider a seriously flawed democratic outcome, citizens must be able to regard their compatriots as good-faith democratic actors who can be moved by reasons, objections, and proposals for revision; they must be able to trust that their compatriots will continue to act as democratic citizens." (Talisse 2019: 146)

24. Early in the book, Talisse does consider the possibility that the costs of engaging in civic friendship will not be evenly distributed: critics may retort that "the very idea of stepping back from politics is itself an exercise of political privilege, something possible only for those who are unjustly advantaged by the status quo." (Talisse 2019: 26) He then goes on

to say that this worry will be dispelled as he proceeds with his argument, but at least this reader was not sufficiently reassured.

25. But notice that deliberativist ideals can in fact accommodate self-interests if suitably construed (Mansbridge et al. 2010). Talisse himself however does not make much room for self-interest and power relations in his analysis.

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