

## A Critique of Christopher Ryan Maboloc's Appropriation of Chantal Mouffe's Theory of Radical Democracy

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*Kyle Alfred M. Barte*

**Abstract:** I argue that Christopher Ryan Maboloc's deployment of Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic framework to characterize Rodrigo Duterte's politics is a misappropriation. First, I provide an exposition of Mouffe's radical democracy, emphasizing its two crucial features: (1) the objective of the radical reformation of the institutions of liberal democracy so that its ideals—liberty and equality for all—become effective; and (2) the provision of the space to struggle for liberty and equality, espousing the embrace of agonistic conflict (a non-violent struggle between legitimate adversaries) as opposed to antagonism (a violent conflict). Next, I present Maboloc's interpretation of radical democracy and how his application of it to Duterte includes an anti-liberal dimension and the embrace of antagonistic practices, such as violence. Finally, I conclude that Maboloc's mislabeling of Duterte as a radical politician can be traced to a misinterpretation of the two features of radical democracy. I show that Maboloc, contrary to Mouffe, views "radical" as a "radical break" from liberal democracy, while the embrace of conflict means an embrace of antagonistic practices. These misinterpretations are the reasons why Maboloc sees Duterte's anti-liberal and antagonistic actions—despite their obvious incompatibility with Mouffe's radical democracy—as indications of Duterte's radicality.

**Keywords:** Duterte, Mouffe, radical democracy, agonism

Since Rodrigo Duterte burst into the national limelight when he ran for, and eventually won, the Philippine presidential position in 2016, vigorous discussions have taken place among the country's leading political thinkers apropos his relation with democracy. One of these discourses, which until now is still gaining steam despite Duterte's tenure being well over, centers on Duterte's radical politics primarily proposed by

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Christopher Ryan Maboloc, a Filipino philosopher from Davao. As his argument goes, Duterte's politics embodies the radical democratic project propounded by the political theorist Chantal Mouffe. For the latter, radical democracy is a political framework which proposes that democracy can be extended and consolidated by embracing difference, conflict, and dissent.<sup>1</sup> Through Mouffe's language, Maboloc argues that Duterte—by aggressively antagonizing the ruling elites in the Philippines—is a radical politician who has inaugurated radical democracy in the country.<sup>2</sup>

However, a cursory glance at Maboloc's claims reveals apparent divergences in his reading of Duterte as a radical politician with the theoretical wellspring he purportedly comes from. For one, while Mouffe argues that the goal of radical democracy is the extension and consolidation of the principles of liberal democracy,<sup>3</sup> Duterte's politics seemingly moved towards the opposite direction: to the sustained attack of liberal institutions and individual rights. Moreover, while Mouffe thinks that radicalizing democracy necessitates the embrace of conflict and dissent, Duterte's administration appeared to be strongly averse to these elements. These initial observations suggest that Maboloc's appropriation of the Mouffean concept may be marked by some limitations and contradictions that he perhaps did not foresee. In this light, this paper aims to critically analyze Maboloc's deployment of radical democracy in his reading of Duterte's politics by revisiting his conceptual source—Chantal Mouffe.

A project similar to this has recently been undertaken by Regletto Aldrich Imbong, Jerry Imbong, and Patrick Gerard Torres in an article they co-authored, titled "Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte."<sup>4</sup> In it, they criticized the growing radical democratic scholarship in the southern region of the Philippines—whose central figure is Maboloc—by highlighting the disconnect between Duterte's actions and the elements of radical democracy developed by Mouffe. For them, there is a fundamental incompatibility between Duterte's illiberal regime and the radical democratic framework whose prerequisites are liberal democratic institutions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, they interviewed no less than Mouffe herself to share that she distances herself from Duterte and that she is worried about her

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, "Introduction: Tracing Radical Democracy and the Internet," in *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, ed. by Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8–11.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Ryan Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* (Cotabato City: ElziStyle Bookshop, 2022), 233.

<sup>3</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Regletto Aldrich Imbong, Jerry Imbong, and Patrick Gerard Torres, "Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 21 (2022).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

theory being (mis)used to justify illiberal regimes.<sup>6</sup> Because of this, Imbong et al. accuse Maboloc of misusing a theory to develop a position which “appears to be a wholesale apology of the murderous rule of Duterte.”<sup>7</sup> But while I think that their paper has adequately shed light on the aporia in calling Duterte’s politics “radical” in the Mouffean tradition, I also think that a renewed and sustained critique of Maboloc’s arguments is warranted for reasons both practical and theoretical.

Practically, their critique faces the threat of being overshadowed by the growing number of literatures that endorses or ignores, whether wittingly or unwittingly, the theoretical contradictions in Maboloc’s arguments. What is common in the literature—comprised of the anthology *Radical Politics in the Philippines: A Reader*,<sup>8</sup> as well as the individual publications of Ian Clark Parcon,<sup>9</sup> Benjiemen Labastin,<sup>10</sup> Symel De Guzman-Daulat,<sup>11</sup> and Gerry Arambala<sup>12</sup>—is an open acknowledgement of Maboloc’s radical democratic or Mouffean scholarship. Arambala even goes so far as to declare Maboloc as the country’s leading radical democratic theorist.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, theoretically, Imbong et al.’s paper left other potentially problematic areas in Maboloc’s radical democratic thinking unexplored, specifically the former’s (mis)use of the principle of agonistic conflict in Mouffe’s democratic paradigm. Given these factors, this paper intends to practically and theoretically supplement the critique against Maboloc’s radical democratic position. Considering he is unofficially labeled as the “leading radical democratic theorist in the Philippines,” it is perhaps only

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> This work is a compilation of the works of five scholars hailing from the southern region of the Philippines. Maboloc wrote the introduction of the book. Meanwhile, the foreword mentions Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau as their source of the concept of radical politics and Maboloc’s studies as one of their anchors. See Benjiemen Labastin, Menelito Mansueto, Ruben Balotol, Rogelio Bayod, and Gerry Arambala, *Radical Politics in the Philippines: A Reader* (USA: KDP Publishing, 2022), <<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-85224-7>>.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Clark Parcon, “Understanding Duterteism: Populism and Democratic Politics in the Philippines,” in *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 49:3 (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Benjiemen A. Labastin, “Two Faces of Duterteism: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines,” in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue (December 2018), <[https://ses-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2\\_Labastin\\_Special-Issue\\_Dec2018.pdf](https://ses-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2_Labastin_Special-Issue_Dec2018.pdf)>.

<sup>11</sup> Symel De Guzman-Daulat, “Christopher Ryan Maboloc’s Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte,” in *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 26:3 (2022), <<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/budhi/articles/579/7564>>.

<sup>12</sup> Gerry Flores Arambala, “COVID-19’s Impact on Marginalized Populations and Support for the Future: Ozamiz Politics and a Radical Means to Flatten the Pandemic Curve,” in *Handbook of Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Marginalized Populations and Support for the Future*, ed. by Haris Abd Wahab, Jahid Siraz Chowdhury, Siti Hajar Binti Abu Bakar Ah, and Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad (USA: IGI Global, 2021), 99–111.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

right for Maboloc's ideas to be subjected to careful scrutiny. Truly, if the works of the supposed authority figure in the field of radical democracy in the country bear some grave contradictions, which this paper will attempt to expose, this might lead to the formation of a local radical democratic school of thought where some faulty dimensions are taken for granted, proliferated, and used as its foundation. Thus, critiquing the contradictions in Maboloc's arguments will only serve to benefit the burgeoning radical democratic movement in the Philippines.

Echoing Imbong et al., this paper argues that Maboloc's judgment that Duterte is a radical politician who has inaugurated radical democracy in the Philippines is a result of a misappropriation of Mouffe's concept. This paper traces the root of the problem in two exegetical errors that Maboloc has committed. First is a mistake in the interpretation of the term "radical" in radical democracy. As I will fully explain later, Maboloc interprets the term "radical" as a "radical break" with liberal democratic institutions, departing from Mouffe's assertion that the aim of radical democracy is not to treat liberal democracy as the enemy to be destroyed but something that must be radically reformed to make it properly operative. And second is a semantic mistake of the term "antagonism." Antagonism, for Mouffe, refers to the notion that objectivities can only exist by virtue of their differential relations with a constitutive outside. This means that antagonism or conflict can never be eradicated and thus the process of radicalizing democracy necessitates embracing and containing it so that it is not expressed antagonistically—conflict between enemies who want to destroy one another—but rather *agonistically*—conflict where the other is seen as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must not be obliterated.<sup>14</sup> Given this distinction, I will show later how Duterte's conflictual politics is more akin to antagonism than agonism, something which Maboloc did not perceive as a result of him collapsing the two concepts together. These oversights, I contend, are the reasons why Maboloc sees Duterte's politics as radical despite the latter's obvious illiberal policies and antagonistic practices.

The structure of this paper will be as follows. The first section will provide an exposition of Mouffe's theory of radical democracy. The second section will attempt to reconstruct Maboloc's appropriation of radical democracy developed in his book *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*. Finally, the third section will attempt to expose the contradictions in Maboloc's usage of radical democracy in his reading of Duterte's politics.

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<sup>14</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 18–19.

## Chantal Mouffe's Radical Democratic Project

The theory of radical democracy was first sketched by Mouffe in a book, titled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, which she co-authored with Ernesto Laclau in 1985.<sup>15</sup> The book proposed a reformulation of leftist politics after Marxism, which was bogged down by numerous catastrophes and pitfalls, slowly lost credence in the 1970s. The problem with Marxism, as Laclau and Mouffe pointed out, was its essentialist presumptions that “determine *a priori* agents of change, levels of effectiveness in the field of the social, and privileged points and moments of rupture.”<sup>16</sup> Viewed from a postmodern vantage point, they insist that such an essentialist theoretical paradigm is disconnected from the ontic content of modern democracies which they believe is pluralistic and indeterminable.

To emphasize this point, they followed the analysis of Claude Lefort to narrate that modern democracies are specifically characterized by an empty seat of power after the Prince, due to the French democratic revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, was symbolically stripped of his role as transcendental guarantor.<sup>17</sup> With the death of the Prince (or of God in the Nietzschean corpus), the thread which stitched society into a single discourse was loosened, leading to the destabilization of society. This cataclysmic event is exactly what Jean-François Lyotard diagnoses as the “postmodern condition” of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century whose climate of “incredulity towards metanarratives” gave rise to the fragmentation of the social into heterogeneous and incommensurable language games.<sup>18</sup> This condition, according to Mouffe, is a terrain of instability: “a society without clearly defined outlines,” and “a social structure that is impossible to describe from the perspective of a single, or universal, point of view.”<sup>19</sup>

Laclau and Mouffe think that this pluralistic and unstable ground of modern democracies ultimately renders the Marxist metanarrative and central categories untenable. They assert that the postmodern condition of modern democracies makes it impossible to accept the Marxist belief in the universal class, of the linear progression of society, and the historical necessity of a stable and fully-reconciled communist society.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a

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<sup>15</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 178–179.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 4.

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“going beyond” Marxism to reframe the emancipatory struggle using an ontological paradigm better suited to the ontic content of modern democracies is necessitated.

In the process, they updated the Marxist arsenal with new theoretical weapons coming from the latest philosophical developments of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, they borrowed and recalibrated Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony through which society appears as a “discursive space” whose structure and configuration, they wrote, “far from being the only natural or possible societal order, is the expression of a certain configuration of power relations.”<sup>21</sup> In side-stepping the Hegelian/Marxist “unfolding of Spirit or History” thesis, their acceptance of hegemony as the “logic of the social” led them to the perspective that the structure of society is not predetermined but is instead underpinned by power relations. For Mouffe, this means that power cannot be conceived as something external to the objectivity of the social; rather, power is constitutive of objectivity.<sup>22</sup>

From the poststructuralists and postmodernists, Laclau and Mouffe developed the notion of “antagonism” which they consider as the central contribution of their book. They begin by claiming that in a world devoid of essences, the existence of every hegemonic order or objectivity (the inside) is only possible through its differential relation with a constitutive outside that, paradoxically, prevents its completion.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the inside and outside, while incommensurable, nevertheless stand as one another's condition of possibility and impossibility—“possible” inasmuch as an objectivity can only exist through its relational difference with the other; “impossible” inasmuch as the other is always there to prevent the inside's full enclosure or existing in-itself. This irresolvable tension between inside and outside is what they called antagonism.

Armed with these new thinking tools, they developed the project of radical democracy to supplant Marxism as the new project of the Left. What then is radical democracy? More specifically, what does it mean when the term “radical” is placed before democracy? According to Paolo Bolaños, following the definition provided by C. Douglas Lummis, the term “radical” is not a modifier of democracy but points to the actuality that democracy, in and of itself, is fundamentally radical.<sup>24</sup> This means that the term “radical

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>22</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “For a Politics of Democratic Identity,” lecture, available from <[https://www.macba.cat/antagonismos/english/09\\_04.html](https://www.macba.cat/antagonismos/english/09_04.html)>.

<sup>23</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 13.

<sup>24</sup> Paolo A. Bolaños, “Critical Theory and the Prospects of Radical Democracy,” in *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 14:2 (December 2020), <<http://doi.org/10.25138/14.2.a2>>, 22.

democracy” is in fact tautological given how radicality is a feature that is congenital to the structure of democracy. Bolaños’s take, as well as that of Lummis, also reflect Mouffe’s position on the subject matter albeit with slight alterations. The latter, taking as her starting point the constitutive principles of liberal democracy—that all people are free and equal—asserts that “it is not possible to find more radical principles for organizing society.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike Bolaños and Lummis, Mouffe does not suggest that democracy is essentially radical—she is a non-essentialist after all—but that democracy is, relatively speaking, the most radical form of social makeup within the current horizon of our vocabulary of social imaginaries. This is why, in a work written more than two decades after her groundbreaking book with Laclau, she clarifies that the term “radical” must not be confused with a “radical break” from liberal democracy.<sup>26</sup> She asserts that radical democracy does not advocate a total rupture from the existing liberal democratic order despite its associated problems.

This leads to the follow-up question: if democracy is the most radical political order, why is there a need to radicalize it? Mouffe answers this by arguing that democracy’s radicality has been crippled by today’s dominant neoliberal order whose central tenet—liberty of the market—has eroded the democratic principles of equality and popular sovereignty.<sup>27</sup> By privileging the interests of capital, neoliberalism has created an asymmetrical power structure that betrays the liberal democratic promise of dispensing liberty and equality for all. However, Mouffe understands that the point is not to reject liberal democracy tout court. As a product of hegemonic powers, its structure can be rearticulated in ways that are more effective in realizing its ideals.<sup>28</sup> To this end, the “radical” in radical democracy pertains to a politics of “radical reformism” that accepts the principles of liberal democracy as legitimate but engaging with it in order to implement a different hegemonic configuration.<sup>29</sup> The radical democratic project, therefore, can “be conceived as a radicalization of the existing democratic institutions, with the result that the principles of liberty and equality become effective in an increasing number of social relations.”<sup>30</sup> For Laclau and Mouffe, such hegemony will lead to the promotion of

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<sup>25</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Democratic Politics Today,” preface to *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. by Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 36. See also Paulina Tambakaki, “Agonism Reloaded: Potentia, Renewal and Radical Democracy,” in *Political Studies Review*, 15:4 (2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929916635882>>, 580.

<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 12–13.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

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dispositions that, in the words of their commentator Anna Marie Smith, do not “tolerate domination in any form,”<sup>31</sup> and a climate of heightened sensitivity to issues of social justice in all facets of society.

But despite their endorsement of democracy’s radical articulation, they also accept that it would be a dangerous mistake to posit a fully-realized radical democratic hegemonic order. Informed by the principle of antagonism, they understand that the radical democratic discourse leads to the unavoidable process of demarcating it from a constitutive outside.<sup>32</sup> No discourse, after all, is free from power. Hence, radical democratic theory anticipates that its discourse has unintentional anti-democratic or exclusionary effects which, if naturalized, lead to subordination and oppression. Thus, though democracy ought to be radicalized, its process nevertheless must come to terms with the impossibility of its full realization. In a sense, it is possible only as an impossibility—a democracy that is always “to be.”

To this end, instead of envisaging a fully-realized society where all differences are resolved, a project of radical democracy “requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality and of conflict, and sees in them the *raison d’être* of politics,” Mouffe writes.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the illusion of a homogeneous society will only lead to the delegitimization of conflicting alternatives which further implies the disappearance of the possibility of resisting the dominant power at the center. The people, in this context, are rendered politically powerless, reduced to approving the “rational” policies of the expert administrators.<sup>34</sup> Mouffe warns that instead of advancing democracy, this conflict-less terrain actually endangers it by leaving a void for the extreme right to occupy. As she writes:

In this increasingly ‘one-dimensional’ world, in which any possibility of transformation of the relations of power has been erased, it is not surprising that right-wing populist parties are making significant inroads in several countries. In many cases they are the only ones denouncing the ‘consensus at the centre’ and trying to occupy the terrain of contestation deserted by the left.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 119.

<sup>32</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, xvi–xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 7.



This is why the embrace of conflict is vital for the radical democratic project. Such process opens channels through which the excluded and marginalized in a given hegemonic order can contest the established discourse and fight for their liberty and equality. Far from being impediments to democracy, Mouffe thinks that conflict is a sign that democracy is alive and healthy.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that Mouffe does not simply advocate the embrace of violent and destructive modes of conflict. In fact, she distinguishes two types of conflict—antagonism and agonism—while simultaneously privileging the latter over the former. Antagonism is a type of conflict between enemies who want to destroy one another; while agonism is conflict where violence is defused, where the other is treated as an adversary “whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated” and whose ideas we will compete with “but we will not question his right to defend them.”<sup>37</sup> As I will explain later, the failure to separate these two shades of conflict is one of the mistakes which Maboloc has committed.

On the one hand, treating one another as antagonistic enemies actually cannibalizes pluralism by not giving different viewpoints legitimacy in expressing their difference. On the other hand, by treating each group as legitimate adversaries, an agonistic political sphere creates the conditions where pluralism flourishes because different discourses are given the chance to express their dissent against the established order. Given this distinction, Mouffe asserts that “what is important is that conflict does not take the form of ‘antagonism’ (struggle between enemies) but of ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries).”<sup>38</sup> In this case, a radical democratic sphere presupposes an agonistic site where channels of conflict and contestation are perpetually open through which inevitable coagulation of power relations can be disarticulated and rearticulated all in the name of liberty and equality for all.

As mentioned earlier, Mouffe’s concept of radical democracy is stimulating a vigorous discourse among political philosophers in the Philippines thanks largely to one man—Christopher Ryan Maboloc. Since 2016, when his first essay on radical democracy appeared in an opinion piece on *Inquirer.Net*,<sup>39</sup> Maboloc has tirelessly produced a set of incisive and unrelenting analyses of Philippine democracy and the politics of former

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<sup>36</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy* (London: Centre for the Study of Democracy, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> See Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte,” in *Inquirer.Net* (16 December 2016), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/100042/radical-democracy-time-duterte>>.

Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte through the lens of Mouffe’s radical democratic theory.<sup>40</sup> In the next section, I will be presenting his conception of radical politics in the Philippines before I turn to a critical engagement with it in the third section.

### **Maboloc on the “Radical Politics” of Rodrigo Duterte**

As is well known, the Philippines is Southeast Asia’s oldest democracy. But its stagnated development, which pushed it to the bottom of the Asian continent in terms of progress, has earned it the moniker the “sick man of Asia.”<sup>41</sup> In diagnosing the cause of this democratic degeneracy, Maboloc points his finger at one disease: elite politics. Elitism in politics, he says, refers to a situation wherein a privileged group—the elites—dominates and controls “the many aspects of life in the state.”<sup>42</sup>

How did the Philippines arrive at such a situation? Consulting historical accounts, Maboloc explains that the elites who rule Philippine politics today are descendants of past local mestizos and *ilustrados* whose loyalty was co-opted by the country’s former Spanish and American colonial masters.<sup>43</sup> In handing to them the reigns of the economy and the state, the colonial masters laid the groundwork for the emergence of a “centralized” governance in which Filipino elites control the entire archipelago from the central seat of power—Manila—while the margins—the poor, the Bisaya, and Mindanao—are powerless in influencing the affairs of the nation.<sup>44</sup> Maboloc opines that this centralized governance has reduced nation-building in the Philippines today into a “predatory” system wherein the elites extract the country’s resources and exploit the Filipinos to the hilt, driving the country into an “immature form of democracy.”<sup>45</sup>

This defective democracy is the rationale behind Maboloc’s praise for radical democracy. In his mind, the stranglehold of the elites over a centralized political system has created a “politics of exclusion” in which the plural voices of the Filipinos who dwell in the peripheries are not heard.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> At present, Maboloc has produced around ten articles whose theoretical lens falls within the ambit of Mouffe’s radical democratic paradigm. These essays are now collated into a book. See Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*.

<sup>41</sup> William Pesek, “Philippines Still the ‘Sickest Man’ of Asia,” in *Asia Times* (10 December 2021), <<https://asiatimes.com/2021/12/philippines-still-the-sickest-man-of-asia/>>. See also Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 162–163.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Ruled by a single group of self-serving decision-makers, elite politics fails to accommodate differences and plurality in the Philippines, thereby perpetuating oppression and injustice. For this reason, he argues that any type of linear or state-centric approach to governance is doomed to fail since this will simply reinforce the pre-existing, elite-dominated power structures that are so ruinous for the nation.<sup>47</sup> He thinks that for Philippine democracy to progress, radical means are necessitated. It is at this point where Maboloc presents his case for the necessity of radical politics in the Philippines.

Lifting an oft-quoted passage from Mouffe, Maboloc defines radical politics/democracy as “the abandonment of the concept of a perfect consensus or a harmonious collective will and the acceptance of the permanence of conflicts and antagonisms” in democratic politics.<sup>48</sup> Following Mouffe, he claims that radical democracy advocates opening democracy to contestation and antagonism considering its pluralistic and diverse nature.<sup>49</sup> We already know that, for Maboloc, this openness cannot take place under the auspices of elite politics. This is why, for him, to radicalize Philippine democracy, politics has to step outside the established norms of elite politics. In this light, radical politics favors “anti-establishment principles that seek the improvement of the society beyond normative procedures.”<sup>50</sup> These anti-establishment principles, which as we will see later includes using intimidation and violence, is simultaneously a form of escape from the elitist logic and a mode of dismantling the elitist structure of politics. For this reason, he thinks that radical politics signifies a revolt against the elites and the political system which they dominate.<sup>51</sup>

It is from this angle which Maboloc proclaimed Duterte as a radical politician who has radicalized Philippine democracy. For Maboloc, Duterte is radical because he veers away from the conventions of elite politics: “Duterte’s approach, it can be said, is not tied to the strict formalities of a system nor the procedural purposes of protocols. In this way, he can be considered as radical.”<sup>52</sup> His point here is that Duterte does not dance to the tune of the consensual approach of liberal-elite politics. Indeed, Maboloc is highly suspicious of the deliberative or consensual model of political

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Liberalism and Modern Democracy,” in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism*, ed. by Joseph Carens (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 178. Quoted in Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–187.

discourse which he thinks is a mere disguise for the rich and the powerful to advance their interests given that they dominate the discourse process.<sup>53</sup>

Maboloc maintains that, in contrast to this, Duterte liberates politics from the fetters of formal and elitist institutional procedures. He says that Duterte does not care about consensus or compromise; rather, he thinks that Duterte recognizes conflict as the starting point of politics.<sup>54</sup> In Duterte's "radical politics," to borrow the words of Labastin's explication of Maboloc's ideas, "the desire for social change is expressed outside the bounds of the democratic process. Politics is radical. It is *Realpolitik*. It is violent and coercive."<sup>55</sup> Maboloc says that we can see this radicality in Duterte's will and courage to confront the elites. It is often noted that Duterte routinely bullied and even threatened to kill some figures he did not get along with, approaches which attracted many strong criticisms. Maboloc, on the contrary, turned this on its head by claiming that Duterte's bullish practices are not things to deplore because they are simply expressions of his "grammar of dissent" against an uncaring elitist establishment.<sup>56</sup> To this end, he frames Duterte as the symbol *par excellence* of the struggle of the marginalized against elite politics.<sup>57</sup> From the standpoint of radical politics, Maboloc avers that this gesture by Duterte entails the revival of conflict within society.<sup>58</sup> Thus, he proclaims, "with his aggressive and adversarial style of leadership" Duterte has effectively decentered and disarticulated political power in the country, leading to the inauguration of radical democracy.<sup>59</sup>

Considering all this, Maboloc admits that radical politics is disruptive—it breaks away from the usual way of doing politics, and stokes conflict and division "in order to control the state and its political machinery."<sup>60</sup> However, this disruption is necessary given the oppression and injustice which has coalesced into the country's political institutions.<sup>61</sup> Along these lines, he sees Duterte's radical politics as a way of shaking the foundations of society to unsettle and even destroy the roots and stems of elite politics. In radical politics, violence is not anti-democratic but serves a

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Labastin, "Two Faces of *Dutertismo*," 50.

<sup>56</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 36.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 168. See also Menelito Mansueto, "Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model: Duterte and Mass Media," in *Radical Politics in the Philippines: A Reader* (USA: KDP Publishing, 2022), 27–41.

<sup>58</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 232.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

utilitarian function—it antagonizes the elites in order to protect the *demos*.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Duterte’s radical politics, as he puts it, is a “new, non-linear kind of radical leadership that instills fears in the minds of many, but also embraced as a bitter pill to swallow if the country is to rise from its systemic failures.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, for Maboloc, in order for the Philippines to graduate from its defective democracy, radical politics is non-negotiable.

### **Maboloc’s Non-Radical “Radical Politics”**

But are Maboloc’s conclusions theoretically consistent with the radical democratic project? Is Duterte’s politics truly radical in the Mouffean sense as Maboloc vehemently proclaims? In this section, I will subject Maboloc’s arguments through a thorough critical analysis to show that his reading of Duterte’s politics as radical is theoretically disconnected from the Mouffean radical democratic framework that he claims to be using. This misappropriation of radical democracy, as I will show below, stems from errors of semantics. Upon closer inspection, I am strongly convinced that Maboloc has misinterpreted two important Mouffean terms: “radical” and “antagonism.” Let me begin my discussion by problematizing his take of the term “radical.”

As discussed in the previous section, Maboloc frames radical politics as a political approach that necessarily includes veering away from the established liberal democratic institutions of the country given how, for him, these are inextricably linked with elite politics. He is not entirely wrong here as the “capture” by the elites of the Philippines’ liberal democratic order is well documented.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, he thinks that Duterte’s assault against liberal values and ideals—his so-called “dictatorial tendencies”—is indicative of the latter’s radicalism.<sup>65</sup> In fact, he seems to argue that radicalizing Philippine democracy necessitates breaking free from liberalism altogether given that its structure is “rooted in an oppressive colonial past” and survives to this day as an elitist instrument for exploitation.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that for Maboloc radical politics entails a “radical break” from the institutions of liberal democracy.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 18; see also Labastin, “Two Faces of *Dutertismo*,” 49.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>64</sup> See Aurel Croissant and Philip Lorenz, *Comparative Politics of Southeast Asia: An Introduction to Governments and Political Regimes*, 2nd ed. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022); Julio C. Teehankee and Cleo Anne A. Calimbahin, “Mapping the Philippines’ Defective Democracy,” in *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 47:2 (2020), <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2019.1702801>>.

<sup>65</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 74–75.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

Here we see Maboloc missing the point of radical democracy. As Mouffe stated in an interview:

So the problem with liberal democratic societies—*really existing* liberal democracies—is not their ideals; their ideals are wonderful. The problem is that those ideals are not put into practice in those societies. So the question that I think radical democracy is very much about is how to force those societies to take those ideals seriously, to put them into practice.<sup>67</sup>

Based on this alone, it is clear that Mouffe frames radical democracy always within the confines of liberal democracy. Indeed, how could this not be if its main objective is the realization of the ideals of liberal democracy?

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe stresses that although liberalism and democracy are two different political traditions that operate with contradictory logics, the tension between them is nevertheless crucial:

By constantly challenging the relations of inclusion-exclusion implied by the political constitution of ‘the people’—required by the exercise of democracy—the liberal discourse of universal human rights plays an important role in maintaining the democratic contestation alive. On the other side, it is only thanks to the democratic logics of equivalence that frontiers can be created and a demos established without which no real exercise of rights could be possible.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, against Carl Schmitt who refutes the liberal conception of democratic politics,<sup>69</sup> Mouffe thinks that the tension between liberalism and democracy is not something that should be resolved but preserved.<sup>70</sup> This precarious tightrope act between liberalism and democracy—the paradox of democracy as Mouffe calls it—is vital in preserving plurality and heterogeneity in a democratic order constituted by the logic of the homogeneity of its citizens. As she further wrote:

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<sup>67</sup> Chantal Mouffe in an interview, cited in Lynn Worsham and Gary A. Olson, “Rethinking Political Community: Chantal Mouffe’s Liberal Socialism,” in *JAC*, 19:2 (1999), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866234>>, 194.

<sup>68</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, Expanded Edition, trans. by G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 49–59.

<sup>70</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 9.

Once the very possibility of achieving homogeneity is discarded, the necessity of liberal institutions becomes evident. Far from being a mere cover-up for the class divisions of capitalist society, as many participatory democrats seem to believe, such institutions provide the guarantee that individual freedom will be protected against the tyranny of the majority or the domination of the totalitarian party/state.<sup>71</sup>

This shows the contradiction in Maboloc's claim that radical politics involves a "radical break" from liberalism. If we follow Mouffe's framing of radical democracy, the problem in the Philippines is not liberalism but how this has been restricted to the few. Contrary to Maboloc's claim, a radical politics in the Philippines does not include an anti-liberalism dimension no matter how defective liberal institutions are in their current form. Instead, the radical democratic challenge is how to strip off these defects so that liberalism becomes operative in the country.

This brings me to the second part of my critique. In the preface of his book, Maboloc states: "The heart of this work rests in the theory of Chantal Mouffe, who says that politics cannot be based on agreement but contestation. Radical democracy is rooted in the idea of agonism, which means that struggle is something that is inherent to politics, and not consensus."<sup>72</sup> He goes on to say that this precisely makes Duterte a radical politician. He notes that Duterte's politics is not based on consensus formation since a compromise with the elites will only perpetuate injustice. Rather, he says, Duterte's aggression and refusal to compromise embodies the agonism which Mouffe was proposing.<sup>73</sup> There is some truth to Maboloc's words here. He correctly points out that in Mouffe's agonistic vision of the radical democratic sphere, struggles between "left and right wing, private and public interest, individual rights and social goods, among other things" are vital.<sup>74</sup> However, the question remains whether this agonistic terrain—the agon—has indeed emerged during Duterte's rule.

As explained above, conflict for Mouffe can be expressed either *antagonistically* or *agonistically* and that the task of radical democracy is to transmute potential antagonism into agonism. This means that radical democracy is not an apology for crude violence—it does not suggest that

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<sup>71</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 104–105.

<sup>72</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

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others can be eliminated or destroyed, not even the possibility that “the other side can be insulted, humiliated, ridiculed, or treated with contempt” in political engagement.<sup>75</sup> Agonistic conflict means that we have to preserve conflict that is defused of its destructive potential: there is still an opponent, there is still an “us” and “them,” but there is no longer the need to destroy the other.

In Maboloc’s description of Duterte’s radicalism, there is a noticeable absence of a distinction between antagonism and agonism. We can see this in the language he uses to refer to Duterte’s supposed agonistic politics. He says that Duterte’s radicalism is demonstrated by the latter’s will to destroy his enemies to advance his decisions.<sup>76</sup> He tells us that Duterte has succeeded in obliterating the political opposition and that he is indeed a terror to the few who threaten the majority.<sup>77</sup> To accentuate this point, we can again listen to Labastin who observes that Maboloc’s argument for radical politics includes coming to terms with ““undemocratic ways” to deepen and substantiate democracy” making it “violent and coercive.”<sup>78</sup> Note how Maboloc here frames Duterte’s purported agonistic politics in terms that precisely reflect the antagonistic conflict which Mouffe argues radical politics must avoid. Indeed, if our politics includes destroying the opposition and terrorizing the few, the radical democratic vision of a terrain where all groups can contest a centralized power in the name of liberty and equality would be lost. This seems to me that Maboloc may have conflated the two terms. It is thus ironic when he wrote: “The good thing about the President is that he does not whisk away the antagonistic nature of politics.”<sup>79</sup> The irony, of course, is that this precisely makes Duterte’s politics non-agonistic and thus non-radical.

I contend that a huge part of the issue is that Maboloc restricts his reading of Duterte’s politics in the latter’s supposed conflict with the elites. To be fair to him, it is indeed sound to claim that destabilizing the power of an overwhelmingly dominant group (like the elites in the Philippines) is a necessary moment in radicalizing democracy. The problem, however, with Maboloc’s reading is that it is too reductive. There are some indications that Duterte was not as anti-elite as Maboloc portrayed him to be. Indeed, while Duterte vilified some prominent oligarchs in the country, he has also coddled and formed alliances with other elites. Lisandro Claudio may be

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<sup>75</sup> Anna Szklarska, “The Problems with Liberal Consensus: Agonistic Politics According to Chantal Mouffe,” in *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, 10:1 (January 2020), <<https://doi.org/10.24917/20841043.10.1.6>>, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 146.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–26.

<sup>78</sup> Labastin, “Two Faces of *Dutertismo*,” 50.

<sup>79</sup> Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 63.



right when he remarked that “Duterte may talk anti-elite, but he is part of the elite.”<sup>80</sup> We must also put in mind that Duterte’s conflictual approach involved wielding state apparatuses to antagonize not just the elites he disliked but also other groups within civil society, such as opposing politicians, activists, journalists, leftists, and critics in general. As is well known, he and his administration often bullied and red-tagged dissidents, forcing many of them into silence.<sup>81</sup> Some of his notable critics, like politician Leila de Lima and journalist Maria Ressa, received harsh threats from Duterte himself and were eventually arrested in what some people believe are trumped up charges.<sup>82</sup> Because of his propensity of using violent language and threats to curtail dissent, the political scientist Carmel Abao thinks that Duterte introduced a “fear factor” in society where challenging him “has proven to be a great risk for the careers” and lives of dissidents.<sup>83</sup> Concomitantly, Abao observes that dissent during the Duterte regime has become minimal and ineffective.

This tells us that Duterte’s politics, contrary to Mouffe’s vision of an agonistic terrain, was not welcoming to difference and pluralism. Instead of containing conflict to maintain democratic contestation, Duterte has unleashed its full fury, wielding its antagonistic side to bludgeon and force his purported enemies into submission. Thus, against Maboloc’s claim that Duterte has decentralized power in the country, it appears to be more accurate to say that what emerged during the Duterte presidency was a centralized and monolithic power structure that was recalcitrant to dissent and conflict. This is a state of non-radicality where differing groups have

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<sup>80</sup> Lisandro E. Claudio, *Taming People’s Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013), ix.

<sup>81</sup> Data show that during the Duterte administration, from June 2016 to August 2021, nearly 4,000 individuals have been illegally arrested. Majority of these individuals have first been red-tagged either as individuals or as members of organizations which have also been red-tagged by the state. Aside from imprisonment, many who were red-tagged lived, whether real or felt, with constant surveillance and harassment which inclined them into silence. See Teo S. Marasigan, “Red-tagging as a Human Rights Violation in the Philippines,” in *New Mandela* (13 April 2022), <<https://www.newmandala.org/red-tagging-as-a-human-rights-violation-in-the-philippines/>>; Imelda Deinla, “‘Red-tagging’ and the Rule of Law in the Time of COVID-19,” in *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (1 April 2021), <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/red-tagging-and-the-rule-of-law-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>>.

<sup>82</sup> Vince Ferreras, “TIMELINE: De Lima’s Five-year Struggle in Prison,” in *CNN Philippines* (16 March 2021), <<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/3/16/TIMELINE-Leila-De-Lima-arrest-prison-.html?fb>>; “Philippines: Drop Charges Against Rappler, Editor,” in *Human Rights Watch* (30 November 2018), <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/11/30/philippines-drop-charges-against-rappler-editor>>.

<sup>83</sup> Carmel Veloso Abao, “Engaging Duterte: That Space in between Populism and Pluralism,” in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency*, ed. by Nicole Curato (Quezon City: BUGHAW, 2017), 310.

been suppressed, silenced, or violently destroyed. A radical democratic project—along with its hallmarks of liberty, agonistic contestation, dissent, pluralism, and so on—were nowhere to be seen. In this way, Maboloc seems to advance a brand of democratic model which, in the Mouffeian ambit, can never be called radical. Taking all these into consideration, I firmly argue that Maboloc’s assertion that Duterte is radical and that he has radicalized Philippine democracy is a product of a conceptual misappropriation.

## Conclusion

The story of philosophy is a tumultuous narrative punctuated by explosions of disagreements. Arguments, though sometimes unpleasant, allow philosophy to constantly mutate and ultimately endure throughout millennia. The ancient satirist Lucian had a simple reaction to this: damn these philosophers!<sup>84</sup> But without the discomfort of disagreements—had Socrates, for instance, did not disturb and unsettle the preconceived notions of ancient Athenians—(Western) philosophy as we know it would perhaps not have survived the test of time. We must not be surprised then that the philosophical landscape sometimes appears to be, in the words of one philosopher, “a gigantic dogfight, replete with barks, snarls, and the cries of the freshly nipped.”<sup>85</sup> This atmosphere is exactly what the debate over the supposed radical politics of Duterte currently looks like. This paper, then, is my act of jumping into the heart of this debate.

In this paper, I voiced my disagreement with Maboloc’s application of Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy to the politics of Rodrigo Duterte. Unfortunately, when assessed vis-à-vis Mouffe’s formulation of radical democracy, Maboloc’s appropriation of the same concept is plagued by a number of contradictions. First, I contended that he misinterpreted the term “radical” as a form of “radical break” from the existing liberal democratic institutions, thereby enabling him to appraise Duterte’s illiberal regime as radical. This obviously contradicts Mouffe’s radical democratic project which, at its core, is a struggle to realize the promise of liberal democracy in dispensing liberty and equality to all. Next, I showed that Maboloc’s second error lies in the failure to demarcate between antagonism and agonism. This led him to mislabel Duterte as radical despite the antagonistic nature of the latter’s practices.

In contrast to Maboloc’s claims, I showed that Duterte’s anti-liberal and antagonistic politics actually undercut the radicalization of democracy

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Charles March, “The Function of Criticism in Philosophy,” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series, 53 (1952–1953), 135.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

envisioned by Mouffe. While Maboloc insists that Duterte's embrace of conflict is an embodiment of radicality, he has failed to discern that Duterte has actually narrowed down the space of contestation in Philippine society. Conflict during Duterte's tenure was indeed present but it appeared to flow unidirectionally from a merciless center. There was no healthy tension between opposing camps. There was Duterte monopolizing conflict, ready to lash out antagonistically at opposing viewpoints. Calling this radical, in the words of Mouffe, "does not make sense at all."<sup>86</sup>

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Santo Tomas, Philippines*

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<sup>86</sup> Imbong, Imbong, and Torres, "Chantal Mouffe on the Radical Politics of Rodrigo Duterte," 113.

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