Ann Coulter and the problem of pluralism: from values to politics

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Abstract:

This piece operates at two levels: it engages with the debate in political theory over pluralism, but it does so through an analysis of the phenomenon we call 'Coulterism'. Briefly, we regard Ann Coulter as indicative of a more general trend in the political styles and activities that dominate contemporary US politics. Moreover, we also suggest that this trend tends to be too easily dismissed by liberals--liberals who, we suggest, tend to systematically misunderstand it. Furthermore, we contend, no doubt controversially, that Coulter and her ilk in fact succeed in a political critique of mainstream political liberalism in America and that the failure of liberalism to recognise this fact lies at the heart of many of its problems--be they conceptual, electoral, ideological or governmental. Precisely because it cannot comprehend what has been achieved by its opponents, liberalism is unable properly to respond to them. Thus, we undertake a critical consideration of the way in which contemporary liberal political theory regards values as the only meaningful level of pluralism, construes this putative fact as giving rise to a host of problems, and then, in response, imposes its presupposed solutions. In response, we call for a radical, multi-dimensional pluralism; we choose the pluralisation of democracy over the liberal project to protect democracy through normative principles. Such multidimensional pluralism requires that the political theorist act less as a city planner who makes rules and designs models, and more as an explorer who discovers new formations. Thus, we eschew a liberal response to 'Coulterism', suggesting that successful challenges to phenomena such as these can only emerge on the terrain of politics.

[O]ur future would be one of an ever deeper confrontation with pluralism and ... political theory in such a world would produce paradoxes out of platitudes far more than the reverse (White 2002: 474).

Introduction

1. Contemporary liberal political theory has reached its own internal limit--and that limit is politics. When confronted by today's proliferating political claims, the 'normative' approach of liberal political philosophy finds itself on the horns of a dilemma: either it stretches its universality in order to cover more cases, or it hardens its edges in an attempt to maintain critical purchase. But the former choice makes liberal theory so thin that it no longer clothes even the most modest of claims. And in taking the latter approach, liberal theory is forced to declare it 'reasonable' to place so-called indecent peoples beyond the purview of universal human rights. To maintain its commitment to universalism, liberalism must become meaningless; to remain meaningful, it must become illiberal. Divided within itself, the limits of liberalism belong entirely to it alone.

2. While comprised of diverse interests, contemporary liberal thought centres on a few specific, overlapping issues: multiculturalism; thick or thin groundings for justice claims; the contest between secularism and faith; the politics of recognition; and, internationally, attempts to establish some basis for consensus between the 'decent peoples' of the world. In all these cases, liberal thought tends to derive the core political issue (the central political problem that liberalism would solve) from the presumed 'fact' that persons live within reasonably bounded traditions--traditions that then give rise to a primarily cultural value-orientation. Such value orientations are taken to lead to conflict, exclusion and hierarchy within or between traditions in ways that are obviously problematic--and such conflict thus needs to be addressed in one way or another by the liberal state.

3. Liberal theorists are not at all naive, of course. For most contemporary approaches, these central value differences can never be fully eradicated. Therefore, the political 'solution' cannot be the elimination of difference. Instead, in order to be both fair and free, the state must show presumption in favour of the free choice of individuals in matters of cultural tradition and belief--hence it must strive for neutrality among competing traditions. But, at the same time, the state must also intervene into societyand into specific cultural traditions so as to ensure equal treatment and respect of each by all others. Hence, for example, liberal theory argues that the state should institute legislation or procedures to enforce fairness and non-discrimination. In this context political theory sets itself the challenge of designing a system that can achieve two ends: that system must simultaneously hold contradictory values-systems in harmony, while at the same time making it possible to regard this very harmony as a universal value that all can share without contradiction. Political thought strives to be constitutionally non-interventionist when it comes to individual activities, while creating institutions and procedures that cultivate behaviours in individuals that will enable those individuals to conform to constitutional expectation.

4. As these examples make clear, liberal political theory often casts itself in the role of rule maker--or better, game designer. It devotes much of its time to worrying about what rules must be instituted in order to act politically, and it concerns itself primarily with how to justify those rules in a way that gives them the appearance of universality and neutrality. In contrast, our argument begins with the observation that the conflict and the conjoining of rival political interests and perspectives is always already taking place. We eschew the model of game designer precisely because, for us, the game is already under way. Why busy oneself with writing a playbook (much less a rulebook) for a game that is late into its second half? Rather than act as rule makers for an ideal future liberal polity, political theory, we argue, must commit itself to assessing the balance of forces (economic, cultural, legal, intellectual or biological), the forms of activity of various kinds and classes of political actor, and the shape taken by political movements of all kinds and manifested in multiple fora. In other words, it must learn to watch the game. Moreover, if it is not to restrict itself to political sociology, political theory must also ask what it is to be a party to this particular game. What might it mean to act politically in relation to this 'game'? In this respect, then, we deny political theory its desired status as game designer. Political theory, we insist, is always caught up in response to moves being made within the game; theory is itself a form of practice. Here we make a rather unfashionable choice: rather than defend or rearticulate the terms of liberal political theory as a form of moral philosophy, we offer both an analysis of liberalism as a social formation, and a critique of liberal theory.

5. We link this broader critique of liberal theory's approach to politics with its specific understanding of pluralism. When liberal theory surveys the plurality of actions, institutions, practices and procedures before it, it too often sees a clash only at the level of pre-given values and beliefs. It thus construes the challenges it faces in a very particular way (and, not coincidentally, in the way most suited to simulated resolution by moral philosophers). It misleads us into thinking of pluralism as something manifested only at the surface, in the particulars of what people hold in their heads, and thus as something that can and ought to be resolved by finding the appropriate level of abstraction at which differences converge. After having located this proper level, political theorists can then design appropriately abstract political and legal institutions and procedures upon the convergence.

6. In this essay we will show that this proves to be an overly narrow thinking of pluralism. By confining itself to values, this conception of pluralism merely obscures its own latent philosophical and politicalmonism--one that grasps particular political phenomena as reducible expressions of a universal that defines their form and function. William James describes such monism as follows: 'when you come down to reality as such ... everything is present to everything else in one vast instantaneous co-implicated completeness'. This philosophical monism dictates that political theory merely legislate for such completeness. But James of course developed an alternative ontological pluralism, which conceived of the universe as 'strung-along, not rounded in and closed'. In contrast to the narrow pluralism that characterises so many of today's debates within political thought, James describes a pluralism in which 'everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive has ... a genuinely "external" environment of some sort or amount. Things are "with" one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word "and" trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes ...' (James 1909: 321).

7. The political variant of this outlook requires political theory to point out the 'and' and to assist in understanding the flow of 'wild' forces at play in politics--all so that we may orient ourselves in relation to them and act upon them (Bennett 2002). Such a pluralism finds in the variety of existence a source of renewable experimental opportunity (see Connolly 2006). As such, it tends to oppose monopoly in its social as well as economic forms, and finds values-pluralism to be only one temporary dimension or moment within an ontological pluralism that exists both at the level of bodies and their multiple interactions as well as at the level of beliefs and other kinds of institutions.

8. We insist that the politics of pluralism takes shape in actual practices that, as it were, go all the way down and across forms of social organisation: from families to governments, economic organisation to ownership, strategies of communication to structures of feeling. Consequently, as we will argue, political theory, analysis and practice should not respond by taking up the architectural challenge to design the system best able to hold contrasting, conflicting, or contradictory pluralities in place. Instead, political theory should be part of the process of identifying and encouraging all sorts of political and social 'experiments in living', taking part in a kind of 'high-energy' democracy capable of sustaining ongoing transformative experimentalism in production, political organisation, learning and living (Mill 2008 [1859]; Unger 2006).

9. We make this case because we believe that the narrow misunderstanding of pluralism characteristic of mainstream liberal political theory (the mistaking of it for a merely ontic rather than ontological condition) is the conceptual academic analogue of a serious 'real-world' crisis of liberal politics in the United States. For this reason our essay, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, begins with a fairly lengthy theoretical reflection upon the right-wing political pundit and commentator Ann Coulter, and returns to this analysis at a number of points in the rest of the argument. We regard Coulter as indicative and exemplary of a more general trend in the political styles and activities that dominate contemporary US politics. Moreover, we also suggest that this trend tends to be too easily dismissed by liberals--liberals who systematically misunderstand it. Furthermore, we contend, no doubt controversially, that Coulter and her ilk in fact succeed in a political critique of mainstream political liberalism in America and that the failure of liberalism to recognise this fact lies at the heart of many of the problems experienced by liberalism itself--be they conceptual, electoral, ideological or governmental--and by the American polity. Precisely because it cannot comprehend what has been achieved by its opponents, mainstream liberalism is unable properly to respond to them.

10. Having analysed 'Coulterism' we return to current trends in liberal political theory and suggest that this wider political failure of liberalism is connected to a problem within the predominant self-conception of political theory which thinks of itself as involved in the setting and enforcing of very particular sorts of rules. We undertake a critical consideration of the way in which contemporary liberal political theory regards values as the only meaningful level of pluralism, construes this putative fact as giving rise to a host of problems, and then, in response, imposes its presupposed solutions. We conclude, firstly, by advocating a mode of open-ended political theorisation alert not only to the creative aspects of political action but also to the ways in which such theory can make possible new procedures and practices. Secondly, we call for a political theory whose goal is to discover how this creative aspect may promote or encourage a new form of democratic politics. This sort of politics would foster continued transformation of political institutions and practices; it would not accommodate a given level of pluralism but would instead call for broader and deeper pluralisation, thereby committing itself to the growth of a multidimensional and experimental pluralism. As we explain, our fidelity to a pluralism beyond that which liberal theory can imagine reflects a broader commitment to democracy and brings into view a vision of democracy de-linked from liberalism.

Political Theory and the Ann Coulter Question

11. Ann Coulter is a living rebuke to almost all of contemporary liberal philosophy. One of the most successful of contemporary Conservative media polemicists, Coulter breaks every rule of 'fair and balanced' discourse that liberal political theory has sweated to justify and that Fox News openly mocks with its own tag line. Utilising the media outlets of a powerful private and international corporation to portray liberalism as an intolerant creed functioning only to enhance the self-interest of its believers, Coulter is proof that every principle of fairness and equality, for which liberalism has so laboured to dig secure foundations, is almost entirely irrelevant.

12. The Coulter style is instantly recognisable; her visual image and appearance are carefully crafted. She dresses and is photographed in ways that emphasise her big-eyed, blonde femininity, yet overlays this background with sometimes shocking invective and the manner of the school headmistress-cum-dominatrix. She signals sexuality but not availability; she dominates without threatening (at least not straight men). And this is much more than 'mere' image. Coulter's political performances make heavy use of tropes of appropriate and inappropriate gender and sexuality. For example, in 2004 she described the Democratic National Convention as 'the Spawn of Satan convention in Boston' and the women attending as 'corn-fed, no make-up, natural fiber, no-bra needing, sandal-wearing, hirsute, somewhat fragrant hippie chick pie wagons' (Lacayo & Stein 2004). In her 2006 book, Godless: The Church of Liberalism, Coulter turns on widows of victims of 9/11 who had either expressed support for Democrats or had criticised the American-led invasion of Iraq. 'I've never seen people enjoying their husbands' deaths so much', she wrote. 'How do we know their husbands weren't planning to divorce these harpies?' Coulter then concluded as follows: 'Now that their shelf life is dwindling, they'd better hurry up and appear in Playboy' (Coulter 2006a: 108-110). And in March of 2007, addressing the Conservative Political Action Conference, Coulter referred to US presidential candidate John Edwards as 'a faggot' and remained stubbornly unaffected by the subsequent controversy (see Kamilya 2007).

13. Coulter not only advocates 'intelligent design' (an outright rejection of the theory of evolution) but goes further to define Darwinism as liberalism's 'creation myth'. She consistently excoriates liberals as 'treasonous', describing them as people who constantly attack and undermine their own country. And, to the extent that Coulter is known internationally, it is for seeming to share Wahhabi lust for a global religious war. After 9/11 she wrote: 'We know who the homicidal maniacs are. They are the ones cheering and dancing right now. We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them toChristianity'. This is not an isolated remark. Coulter continues to refer gleefully to Arabs as 'ragheads', 'jihad-monkeys', 'tent-merchants' and 'camel jockeys' (Coulter 2006b).

14. On the basis of these radical ramblings it is not only extremely easy but also terribly tempting to dismiss Coulter as a minor media-made irritant, a flaky extremist or just another pundit. And Coulter has, of course, been accused of deliberate distortion, selective misquoting and outright falsification (Franken 2003). But all five of her books, from her 1989 indictment of Bill Clinton through to Godless, have topped the New York Times' best-seller list. Although other denizens of the right have questioned the soundness of her work (e.g. Horowitz, 2003) she continues to enjoy regular media appearances, persists in writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column, and remains very successful on the lecture circuit. It is a safe bet that Ann Coulter is much better known amongst Americans than John Rawls or Joshua Cohen will ever be. Furthermore, while Coulter may be on the edge of the American political spectrum this is simply indicative of how far the centre has been pulled to the right. And it has been pulled there by people such as Coulter, who herself must be understood as part of a much more general and highly successful political style that has achieved national prominence thanks to channels such as Fox News, talk radio and, latterly, internet conservative town-halls and blog fora.

15. Understood in this context, we would contend that 'Coulterism' is one of the most important political developments of our time. If political theorists were like theorists and historians of Art then we would certainly identify 'Coulterism' as a significant and powerful trend in the style and practice of political art: one which has reverberated throughout the entirety of its institutions and forced reactions and adaptations from almost all other artists. Unfortunately, at least from our perspective, political scholars are not like art historians and theorists. Very often we take our cue not from what is happening but instead beaver away at small and focused problems generated from within our own field of action. But phenomena such as Coulterism are central not marginal to politics. And as Quentin Skinner has persuasively argued, political life takes priority over political thought in as much as the former is the source of problems for the latter (Skinner, 1978).

16. But, importantly, this is not to say that political theory must subordinate itself to whatever is happening at the moment and is deemed to be of 'relevance', as if relevance were a criterion objectively disclosed by nature. The activity of describing and defining events and phenomena as problems that politics can and must address (rather than natural accidents or petty irrelevances) is itself a fundamental political activity, and political theory is therefore a dimension of political life (Palonen 2005). To embrace the model of political theory as political problem solver advocated somewhat famously by Jeffrey Isaac is to subordinate our activity not to objective reality but to an already politicised version of it (Isaac 1995; cf. Chambers 2003). In contrast we are drawing attention to the ways in which political theory (although not only political theory) may create its problems and objects out of the stuff of political history--and this includes the present and future as well as the past--rather than out of its own self-regarding practices (Wolin 2006 [1960]). Consequently, political theory must necessarily familiarise itself with and intervene directly into the fields of media, anthropology, cultural studies etc. such that it can grasp and define Coulterist phenomena in their specificity as well as their generality (Brown 2002). This requires a thoroughgoing refusal to confuse the resolution of a problem within academic theory with its resolution in political history--and it may also entail that political theory become somewhat less of a problem solving endeavour overall and rather more one concerned to create and specify problems in artful ways (Finlayson 2006).

17. Unfortunately, throughout the period in which Coulterist practices of political discourse have proliferated, instead of seeking to understand them fully political theory has increasingly fetishised deliberation as a magical solution to all its problems. It has sought to resolve contradictions of social and cultural difference through procedures of public conversation conducted in line with rules thought to accord with a drive to understanding and fairness believed to be immanent within language itself (Habermas 1984). And while such problems have indeed been solved (sometimes elegantly) at the level of theory, politics as it has happened in actual history has had the effrontery to carry on regardless.

18. Of course, one can certainly envisage particular ways in which political theory might directly address Coulterism. Thought from within the frame of deliberative democratic theory, Coulterism is undoubtedly an instance of illegitimate coercive communication shaped by the instrumental concerns of faction or personal profit rather than the universal interest in mutual understanding (Habermas 1979; Habermas 1990). It is also easily definable as a major vehicle of false consciousness and part of what Chomsky and Hermann (1979) have described as the media-military-industrial-complex 'propaganda machine'. But such denunciations make two fundamental mistakes.

19. Firstly, they reduce the ongoing transformation of American political discursive practice to an object that is, as it were, external to political thought: illegitimate discourse or ideological class power. They then treat this object as what the mathematicians might call 'a previously solved problem'. This is a serious underestimation of Coulterist phenomena, positioning them as epiphenomenal and thereby avoiding the labour of identifying and specifying them as a form of political activity. Coulter engages in a distinct form of political-performance-action that exceeds the imagined rules of 'proper' public speech. When called on this transgression, Coulterism not only refuses to apologise but also positively celebrates its own transgression--turning it into a source of legitimacy, construing it as proof that the ideological power of the media really is a tool in the hands of liberalism.

20. And this leads to the second mistake: a mis-characterisation (one might even dare to call it a 'mis-underestimation') of Coulterism as merely irrational, wild ranting. For Coulterism is a performative challenge to the claims of liberal and egalitarian political theory's self-conception as tolerant, neutral and inclusive. To appreciate this we should be honest about the fact that in some respects, and perhaps for some of us a little frighteningly, Coulter and Coulterists echo an aspect of the 'radical democratic' leftist critique of liberalism: that it is a partial world-view, reflective of a particular social or class interest. This challenge was made to liberalism by the New Left in the 1950's when it first argued that the function of liberal welfarism was to contain working class political dissent within the established system, offering people limited concessions of inclusion in return for consent to the very system that excluded them. In the 1960's this was further articulated, for instance by Marcuse as 'repressive tolerance': the requirement of accepting established policies. Marcuse describes this logic as follows: 'It is the people who tolerate the government, which in turn tolerates opposition within the framework determined by the constituted authorities' (Marcuse 1969: 5).

21. More recently the same spirit has been taken on by varieties of post-Marxist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic critics of liberalism, all of which find liberalism to be a project designed to pose as a universal philosophy of openness, all the while hiding its partiality by prescribing in advance the range of viable positions, and thereby dispersing opposition into easily incorporated elements of 'mere' cultural difference (Mouffe 2005; Zizek 1999). One of Coulter's smarter asides is that for liberals of the kind represented by The New York Times 'an ordinary American is a sociology professor in Oregon whose wife teaches tantric sex at the community college' (Coulter 2003, cited in Buckley 2003). And in as much as she inveighs against the self-interested elitism of official liberal culture in this way, hers is an inverted, voluble manifestation of a standard left critique of actually-existing-liberalism. But, importantly, it stages that critique and does not intellectualise it. While liberal theory is preoccupied with rational deliberation and the ultimate neutrality of justice, Coulterism speaks in angry, aggressive, mocking and emotive terms--all the while rejecting any pretence of neutrality. Coulterism remains gleefully, fiercely partisan while denouncing liberals as the partisan ones. And this is not simply--or certainly not only--an irrational challenge to liberalism. It is expressed in a distinct and once well-established register of political discourse: the polemical.

22. Polemic is precisely that mode of political public argumentation that engages directly in disputatious refutation; polemic takes on an established and 'taken-for-granted' mode of thinking and, instead of trying to prove the counter position, tries to unsettle and uproot the opponent. It is the genre of the Philippic. In this sense, Coulterism is not as gratuitously extremist or offensive as it appears to be (especially to liberals). It is calculatedly so. It is vicious and extreme satire. It even has its Swiftian moments. For deliberative liberalism, political speech should not be like this. It should manifest the equal recognition of all parties. In her deliberately exaggerated characterisation of such liberalism as partisan, self-interested, elitist and anti-American, Coulter entraps liberalism into admitting its own confinement within a series of exclusionary rules. If the subjects of this attack respond by crying 'foul' then they offer up proof of the very charge made against them. But if they say that they can tolerate what has been said then they not only give to their opponents a free pass but also confirm the accusation of being too weak and lily-livered to defend themselves. Obviously the charge that liberalism is deviously authoritarian and simultaneously too weak even to take its own side in an argument is logically contradictory. But it proves to be successful when it leads liberal commentators into making the very sort of ad hominem attack they condemn in Coulterists: 'explaining' it all as personal pathology, e.g. she doesn't really believe it, it is an 'act', she and those like her are stupid and/or deranged, dismissing her readers as duped hicks and 'rubes' etc. (Conason 2003). Such provoked attacks--from the political ideology that claims to represent fairness, tolerance and equality--make liberalism appear guilty of being logically contradictory.

23. Every time a Coulterist remark causes outrage or anger, every time it succeeds in causing offence and every time it garners the accusation of having 'gone too far'--or spurs as response the normative injunction 'you can't say that' (always ludicrous since only made when someone has indeed just said it)--this reaction provides evidence not of the failure but of the success of the Coulterist polemic. For it shows that the polemic has effectively put into question what had previously seemed settled and habitual (Arditi & Valentine 1999). Put differently, the polemic has exposed a particular framework of political thought and action as just that: particular and a framework rather than the natural and rational order it claimed to be. Victims, of course, experience this as a violation of the rules, but politically speaking it is a creative extension and rewriting of those rules and it proves effective in sustaining its case for the benefit of its supporters and fellow-travellers. Coulter's offensive epithets are the right-wing equivalent of left-wing chants that range from 'Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today' to 'We're here, we're queer, so get fucking used to it' (see Arditi & Valentine 1999: 1-2). Coulter's offensive epithets, sometimes criticised as too divisive, are precisely intended to be so: to identify and extend the gulf between her objects of attack and the subjects she claims to represent. It is a performative critique that too often leaves liberalism squealing that the world refuses to conform to the liberal description of it.

24. From the structure and effects of this (non) exchange between Coulter and her liberal critics, we may draw broader conclusions. Coulterism as a political phenomenon is indicative of the fact that politics will never coincide with what any philosophy has to say about it. For politics is always the site of a certain kind of excess, a destabilisation that reorders its own spaces. Politics is the activity of recreating and redrawing boundaries and rules. 'Coulterism' is in this sense not only a crucially important contemporary political phenomenon, but also one proper name for a general issue in democratic theory and practice: the limits of the theory of liberal pluralism.

25. Liberal pluralism contains two dominant strands: 'aggregationist' and 'accommodationist'. For the advocate of aggregation, just and right outcomes are only ever the unintended result of innumerable individual choices, decisions and actions. A political system thus facilitates the maximum number of such choices and in doing so supports 'free society', i.e. 'free' in the sense of a society structured so as not to interfere with individual actions. Paradoxically, this means forcibly intervening into the actions of those deemed to be obstructing free choice. That intervention may mean, for economic neo-liberals, restricting the formation of trade unions or, for social-liberal Kantians committed to a social ontology made out of purposive rational ends-pursuers, outlawing prejudicial practices. Meanwhile, for the accommodationist, political liberalism consists of ensuring that justice be done to the pre-political perspectives and interests of various parties, which in turn means regarding them all as equal. For more radical liberals this insistence on justice can itself justify some measure of collective intervention and regulation. In this case, intervention would be designed to ensure equal recognition and participation within the political system--adapted, as the case may be, so as to be culturally appropriate (Young 1990; Parekh 2002). However, since this logic means that procedures and practices must be fair and established independent of the specific characteristics of any particular interest or individual, the logic entails that mainstream liberalism can interfere with the rich and powerful only to a very limited degree.

26. Coulterist politics exceeds these two strands; its spectrum is broader than liberalism because it also calls on populism. By attaching the populist designation to an aspect of Coulterism we do not mean to reduce it to a version of a cyclical phenomenon within American or any other politics (although it may in part be just that). We do wish to draw attention to the way in which Coulterism involves elements of the classic repertoire of populism: it poses a gulf between a corrupt elite, responsible for all errors and evils, and an otherwise good and decent people truly born of the national and godly community. Moreover, populism is also always a way of reinventing that people and reorganising the relationship of elements within the space of the polis, altering the dimensions of political space (Laclau 2005). For instance, one of Coulter's most common rhetorical techniques is that of paradiastole: the re-description of one thing so that it appears as its opposite, the turning of virtue into vice or vice into virtue (Skinner 1996; Palonen 2005). Examples include showing how an act of courage is in fact reckless or demonstrating that meanness is in fact sensible parsimony.

27. Unsurprisingly, Coulter takes a more extreme approach. She finds secularism, the idea that the state should embody no specific confession, to be a state sponsored religion; she describes the egalitarian welfarism of liberals as a way of keeping people poor so that federal employees can continue to be well paid; and she characterizes environmentalism as a project concerned not with care for the planet and all the creatures that live on it but animated by a hatred of mankind and the desire to destroy it (Coulter 2006a). The whole run of charges made by the right of the Republican party--the so-called 'movement' conservatives--function so as to reverse the hierarchy within liberal thinking and to constitute the movement as simultaneously radically exterior to liberalism and on the inside of 'the real America'. This is why the movement can experience itself simultaneously as deeply traditional yet also as radical and subversive. The form is infuriating for left-liberals since movement conservatism refuses to be what it is supposed to be according to their conceptions. On the one hand, the left often imagine themselves to be the radical outsiders preparing to storm the citadel of privilege, while, on the other, liberalism does not know what to do with anything external to it since it imagines it is the philosophy of total inclusion. The genius, if we may call it that, of Coulterism is that in playing the political game in this way it extends and rewrites the rules to trap those who most believe in them. Coulterism thereby defies either aggregation or accommodation.

28. In this respect Coulterism is one of many unpredictable and unsettling political formations of the 'left', 'right' and of no-place. But mainstream liberal political theory, and mainstream liberal politics in general, has difficulty making phenomena such as these an object of conceptual reflection or political action. This is because it tends to imagine political space as flat and to conceive of its own task as that of organising or distributing (aggregating and accommodating) concepts and phenomena across this space in order to attain an ideal distribution and arrangement. The political theorist, on this understanding, thus becomes the architect or planner (a reprisal of the game designer role that we identified earlier) of constitutional structures governing relations between varied properties--all the while ensuring that such institutions are properly 'hooked up' to a unitary but recognised, transparent and therefore legitimate organisation.

29. When faced with a new political form, liberalism initially has difficulties recognising this form as such. This failure to see new forms of politics occurs, first, because the new pieces (to which a place must be allocated) are themselves unexpected, and, second, because liberalism tends to insist that all pieces address themselves in a pre-defined fashion (an argument articulated clearly by numerous critiques of deliberative democracy). If liberal thought does recognise a new political form, then it instinctively asks questions such as 'Can and should this form be accommodated within the given order of liberal interest groups?' and 'How might that order be altered so as to find or create a space for this new identity or group?' Of course, Coulterism, and movement conservatism in general, does not want to be included (despite the fact that the Coulterist critique emanates from within and is made possible by liberalism) and it does not want to accept the status that liberalism could afford it. It goes out of its way to be un-amenable to such processes. But liberalism misrecognises this very resistance and is not quite sure what to do with it. Liberal thought has a tendency to convert factions into the political form it can most easily recognise: the values-based cultural group. But Coulterism is nothing of the sort.

The Problem of 'Values Pluralism'

30. The reduction of pluralism to values and cultural traditions is typical of contemporary writings in which the issue of pluralism is frequently equated with the specific phenomenon of 'values pluralism'. That is to say, the problem posed by pluralism appears to be equivalent to the problem of reconciling a plurality of cultural values within a singular political order. Both Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls--for example, and despite taking strikingly different approaches to the history of political thought and the field of contemporary political theory--concur in their description of a given plurality of religious, philosophical, and moral values. Most importantly, both see this plurality as a fact (Gray 2000; cf. Wentzell 2003). In this sense their value-pluralism is neither a philosophical ideal nor a political position; rather, it is merely a description of the late modern world in which we live. Berlin learnt from Vico that it is part of the human condition to be embedded in contexts that lead us to experience circumstances differently and to derive from them different valuations. We might like to find some kind of measuring stick to hold up to these varied perspectives in order decisively to adjudicate between them. But Berlin rejects utilitarianism on the grounds that our evaluating schema are internally contradictory; he insists that we are 'faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others' (Berlin 2002: 213). For Berlin this is our tragic condition. Differences between some values will be irreconcilable, and the problem of pluralism will prove ultimately irresolvable.

31. On this basis Berlin advocates a politics of pluralism over one of 'monism'--the idea that there is a singular rationality to the universe and the belief in a singular truth that can be discovered through appropriate and proper method and then used to explain the order of the universe (Cherniss & Hardy 2007). Pluralism contrasts completely with monism by depicting a universe that is plural: 'truths' are multiple and conflicted and cannot be discovered by a single method. But for Berlin, because different values can be understood by those who do not share them, some degree of co-ordination and criticism of values remains possible so long as there is tolerance and maximum space for human choice. Berlin thus uses his formulation of the fact of pluralism as a tool for the critical diagnosis of forms of government such as socialism and for the normative advocacy of the kind of liberal government that allows human differences to flourish and thrive. In this way Berlin's values pluralism turns into a political monism. There may be a plurality of values but there is not a justifiable plurality of political orders (nor, by extension, of social and economic orders). Berlin, then, conceives of the fact of pluralism as existing only along one, values orientation or dimension; he does not wish it to exist along others.

32. For his part, Rawls emphasises that the plurality of values are contained within comprehensive religious, philosophical or moral worldviews. That is, we are not confronted merely by individual values but by systems of values within which various philosophical subjects and political citizens make sense of the world in which they live. Furthermore, these are reasonable worldviews, according to Rawls, and this means that reason alone cannot transform the plurality of conflicting values into a singular, ordered set (Rawls 1993: xi). He therefore agrees fully with Berlin's contention that value pluralism is a fact that cannot be overcome, transcended, or somehow undone. But while he continually reminds his readers that this is a fact of the world not to be overcome one can see clearly in Rawls's writings that he finds the fact lamentable.

33. The history of Rawls's own writings, and his overview of them in the preface to Political Liberalism, shows that Rawls himself would prefer to build his own comprehensive moral system (as he did in A Theory of Justice), rather than confine himself to working out a much thinner political conception that can account for the fact of reasonable pluralism. Rawls remains committed to the fact of reasonable pluralism as the starting condition for any theory of contemporary politics, but he does not seek to further or expand these conditions. Rather he attempts to establish what we might call a 'holding pattern' for pluralism contained within specifically moral communities. Political theory must abstract away from the actual pluralities until it finds sufficient consensus out of which to develop a unitary scheme of agreed rules through which we can put everything in its proper place. And this is also the activity of the virtuous citizen whose particular comprehensive doctrine is recognised only in so far as they also subordinate it to the principles of political liberalism. Like Berlin, Rawls conceives of pluralism along a single dimension and institutes a political monism in order to regulate it.

34. Because she recognises this monism within political liberalism Iris Young is able to mount a powerful challenge to it, showing its failure to recognise the radical extent of plurality of identity within contemporary polities; she consistently calls liberals to task for denying this plurality and she repeatedly challenges them to grapple with difference. Yet, in taking Berlin's and Rawls' acceptance of the 'fact' of pluralism to a further, yet logical, limit she succeeds in demonstrating how this is just a way of recuperating plurality back into a unity and universality (Young 1990). Young embraces plurality in order to find it a place. Her encouragement of the recognition of differences becomes facilitation of their detection and authorisation so that they can be brought under the protection of the liberal state. For Young, the minority condition becomes intrinsic to the universal condition of differential identity (Young 2002). The very recognition of this minority condition therefore proves essential for the creation and maintenance of an uncontested universality--within which minorities can be located, placed and policed. Thus, like Berlin and Rawls, Young ultimately fixes in place the very plurality that she celebrates. Everything will be equal in Young's system so long as all minorities do what they are supposed to do (i.e. be minorities within a universe of minorities) and exclusion or oppression fades away precisely because it has been recognised as such.

35. Coulterism cuts across all these logics of pluralism. It is uncontainable by the schemes of Berlin or Rawls since it is so deeply partisan. And this means that it is defined not by the points where it overlaps in consensus with alternative perspectives but by how much it departs from them--by the extent to which it considers them threats to itself and so threatens them back. In so doing Coulterism constitutes a challenge seemingly external to liberalism. But this is a crucial move, since nothing is supposed to be external to liberalism. Of course, Coulterism itself resides fully within liberalism to the extent that liberal principles provide the conditions of possibility for Coulterism's emergence. Nonetheless, the Coulterist critique proves important precisely because it is not recuperable by liberalism. Thus, even if we wish to deny that Coulterism is fully external to liberalism, we must still insist on the importance of the Coulterist critique as an internal limit to liberalism. In other words, the Coulterist performative critique of liberalism applies at the level of liberalism's universal claims, rather than at a level simply contained by liberalism (a level that would entail a merely proceduralist response).

36. We can unpack this logic by looking at the way in which normative theory turns phenomena such as Coulterism into a source of test-questions to pose to itself. It thus asks: can this phenomenon be accommodated by us? When is it legitimate for us to deny status and recognition to a disruptive group or ideology? In short, when faced with a disruptive challenge to its own principles, liberalism attempts the following: 1) to locate a place for this disruptive force within the system, or 2) to find grounds to exclude that force from the system (and then to ignore it). This sorting activity--finding a place for Coulterism--substitutes for both analysis of, and challenges to, Coulterism itself. In this way liberal theory hides from itself the most important feature of Coulterism: Coulterism is itself liberal. As is well known, the substantive political tenets of 'movement' conservatism include the following commitments: to property rights and free trade, to ensuring that government be beholden to the people rather than vice versa; to keeping government limited yet strong; and to the principle of universal moral values embodied in law.

37. The limits to liberalism indicated by Coulterism are thus internal. Paradoxically this is why Coulterism could never be incorporated within the normative framework of liberal multicultural pluralism: the Coulterist performative critique of liberalism finds it to have been improperly liberal. Thus Coulterism constitutes a much more radical challenge to liberalism than that of, for example, Young who seeks to fit minorities into the overall framework of a universal polity made out of difference. Coulterist movement conservatism does not want minority status within any such system; nor does it seek a safe place outside of that system. Instead, it contests the very universals that liberalism necessarily conceives of as incontestable. It makes this challenge not by proposing alternative universals but by seeking to alter the content of the universals already in play. This is why Coulterism can never be reduced to a specific legal or moral problem to be judged by applying general principles to it. Coulterism must be understood as a political phenomena that challenges not the application or selection of principles but their content and definition.

38. The liberal frame of accommodation or aggregation causes it to ask the wrong questions about a political phenomenon such as Coulterism. In asking whether or not it can be accommodated or aggregated, political liberalism is required to assess Coulterism's suitability or acceptability according to its own rules. But this is exactly the charge that Coulterism makes against liberalism. Of course, the response to Coulterism takes this tack because liberal thought regards its own conception of democracy as a logical conclusion--one necessarily reached from the incontestable and factual universal conditions (such as values pluralism) that it took as starting premises. Liberal thought thus regards itself as the custodian of series of rules, the referee in a pre-designed game. But Coulterism, as we have shown, does not follow the rules. Coulterism must be grasped as a political project and all truly political actors seek to extend, reinterpret and rewrite the rules.

39. Politics, we argue, is an inventive activity, in which one creates novel responses to the situations one encounters. Politicians do this all the time, as did the canonical thinkers in the history of political thought (Skinner 1974). 'Democracy' itself, along with other political forms, is such an invention (Ankersmit 1997). Rather than seeking to defend given rules and maintain the given order, political theory ought to be in the business of discovering the formation of new rules--perhaps even facilitating their invention. Coulterism, or any other apparently new political phenomenon, cannot merely be pre-judged by the already existent rules, nor can it simply be made to fit into a rule. Politics can only be judged by the rules that it creates. This certainly does not mean that Coulter must be judged by her own standards. It means that judging Coulter is not only a philosophical or moral task but also a political activity of practical engagement. Thus, political theory must not be understood as the discovery of rules to aid in the management of pluralism; it must be conceived as containing a set of strategies for pluralism's extension, transformation and reinvention in all sorts of directions (and not only those conventionally thought of as progressive). This sort of approach to pluralism has characterised the thought of William Connolly in numerous writings over the course of his career.

40. Connolly's implicit critique of Rawls probably provides the starkest example of a distinct alternative approach to the problem of pluralism. Rather than offering a normative theory of politics based upon the fact of pluralism (as Berlin, Rawls and Young do) Connolly seeks to provide a theory of pluralism as such. For Connolly the fact of reasonable pluralism is not just a given background from which we work, but is itself something to embrace. Pluralism is not an unfortunate constraint but a desirable goal. Of mainstream approaches, Connolly observes: 'social pluralism ... is often presented as an achievement to be protected, while the eruption of new drives to pluralization are often represented as perils to this achievement' (Connolly 1995: xiv). It is this logic that Connolly aims to reverse, turning such pluralisation itself into the coming achievement. Connolly thus conceives of politics not as burdened by the weight of the problem of pluralism, nor as a project to transcend or overcome it. He does not accept pluralism as a condition of constraint for a theory or practice of politics, because politics, for him, is not a project designed to reconcile and manage potential conflict. It is not a search for Rawlsian overlapping consensus. It is not driven by Habermasian communicative action oriented toward understanding. Rather, difference, diversity, even strife and conflict are placed at the heart of Connolly's theory of politics. Politics becomes then, not an effort to quell conflict, to search for consensus, or to overcome the problem of reasonable pluralism, but rather an arena in which the politics of pluralism is played out--a space in which agonistic conflict and an 'ethos of pluralization' are fostered and allowed to thrive and flourish.

41. While Connolly devotes himself to the fullest form of pluralism that he can imagine, and while his is certainly the most thoroughgoing vision of 'radical pluralism', we wish here to take a slightly different approach. Connolly clearly moves beyond 'values-pluralism' but he usually focuses his political project upon one particular dimension of pluralism: namely, that of personal being and identity. That is, Connolly insists on pluralisation in the dimension of values, but such pluralisation is usually fostered and called for by Connolly within the dimension of identity. Indeed, Connolly's call for an ethos of pluralisation (as well as the attendant poststructuralist civic virtues of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness) can be linked to his tacit decision to think pluralism in a primarily individuated dimension.

42. In recent work (2005a), Connolly gives his most direct and comprehensive account of pluralism, both as a metaphysics and as a theory of politics. His vision of politics--especially the idea of politics as pluralism--proves radical and far-reaching, and yet there are moments within this articulation of the project where pluralism and pluralisation seem to presume a certain kind of subject who would take up this project. Connolly rarely writes about the pluralism of collective political entities. And while he repeatedly considers the pluralisation of the self, this always seems to be a pluralisation from within--a work on the self rather than an attempt to grasp the self in relation to broader assemblages or potential hegemonic formulations. For this reason, Connolly's project sometimes seems to be pitched to an individual citizen who is exhorted to adopt the virtues that Connolly describes and advocates. For example, Connolly describes the two central elements of his ethos of pluralisation, as follows: 'If you come to terms with the ambiguous relation between new movements and congealed standards of political judgment ... you might strive to cultivate an ethos of critical responsiveness ... You might, that is, translate the pluralist appreciation of established diversity into active cultivation of generosity ...' (Connolly: 1995: xv). We worry that the framing of these claims could be taken to suggest (perhaps despite Connolly's own intentions) that pluralisation is nothing more than an attitude that an already-given subject decides to embody. This may be why some commentators find it hard to separate Connolly's radical account of pluralism from an ordinary liberal framework (Wenman 2003).

43. Of course, there is nothing wrong with arguing for a radical pluralisation of liberalism. In addition to drawing from Connolly's theory of pluralism as a resource for our own thinking, we have sympathies with such a project. Nonetheless, we conceptualise a drive to pluralisation that can constitute an internal limit of liberalism. That is, we wish to think pluralism against liberalism in such a way that we begin to pry apart the comfortable dyad 'liberal democracy'. For us, pluralisation may be democratic in a way that liberalism can never be. Thus we feel that our project both complements and supplements Connolly's, but we also see the need to make a clear step beyond his approach. Instead of moving from one dimension of pluralism to another, our goal is to think pluralism in multiple dimensions.

44. Faced with a potential show-down with Coulterism, we require more than a liberal response, and more than pluralisation along one dimension. After all, are we really to find Coulterism just another existential faith to be treated with an engaged and generous curiosity? Connolly's own response would seem to suggest otherwise. He is clearly a motivated critic of 'movement' Conservatism, which he characterises as part of the 'capitalist-evangelical resonance machine' (Connolly 2005b). And he is perspicacious in showing that in this formation intelligible affects--such as an existential disposition towards revenge, even an experience of mortality--become entwined in a wider system (2005b: 881). By showing the way in which resentment infiltrates and directs political experiences and interpretations, Connolly effectively resists the temptation to explain these political experiences through a series of reductive causalities, and this enables him to render visible a number of the elements within this particular assemblage.

45. Yet when he comes to recommend strategic action against this machine Connolly seems to remain at the level of personal being and experience. He advocates engagement with the evangelical faith of 'Open Theism' on the grounds that such a strategy can pluralise evangelism from within--motivated not by vengefulness but by care for a fragile world. But it is the philosophy of this movement, the way in which Open Theism can reconfigure experience, to which Connolly is attracted. Elsewhere he recommends the parodic activities of Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert as ways to overturn the effects of media demagogues such as Bill O'Reilly. Colbert's exaggeration of the style of O'Reilly addresses the same affective level, thereby 're-enacting media strategies of inculcation by parodying them'. This move serves to expose these strategies to us just as it opens our experience to awareness of them (Connolly 2006). Ultimately Connolly continues to urge us to be individually attentive to the ways in which resentments are stirred up within us.

46. Connolly clearly grasps the important fact that pluralism has more than one dimension. Our goal is both to grasp, and to work on, those multiple dimensions simultaneously. In other words, multiple dimensional pluralism must do more than think pluralism in each dimension in serial form. Connolly's project reveals the necessity of making this final move because he sometimes fixes one dimension of pluralism while calling for pluralisation in another dimension. His work provides a crucial set of arguments to help us see that pluralism must be thought not as a problem but as a solution. Pluralism does not lie outside of politics, but is a core element of the political. But the drive to pluralisation will always be called up short if pluralisation in one dimension depends upon a freezing of pluralism in a different dimension. To think the logic of pluralism as politics all the way to its logical conclusion, and to derive the political ramifications of this logic, requires an extension of Connolly's project so as to produce a multidimensional political pluralism.

Multidimensional Pluralism and New Forms of Politics

47. The phenomenon of pluralism must be grasped not merely as a narrow, particular issue within contemporary political thought but rather as one of the defining frameworks for contemporary political and theoretical debates over the concept of the political. Mainstream liberal theories are too often resigned to pluralism. Their focus and concern lies only with the attempt to secure order, i.e. to put such an order in place against pluralism. It is this process that requires such theories to regard pluralism as a kind of problem to be solved or managed in some way. In this final section we articulate a different approach to, and understanding of, pluralism. Our argument for a deepening and furthering of pluralisation along multiple dimensions has two crucial corollaries: 1) it suggests a different approach to the practice of political theory, in which the political theorist becomes less of a planner and more of an explorer, 2) it exposes the conflict between liberalism and democracy and reveals a preference for the latter.

48. Political theory must be open-ended and alert to the creative aspects of political action and the ways in which it can make possible new procedures and practices not previously accounted for. Politics works not just on values and ideas. It works on bodies of various kinds: individual bodies and bodies in collective crystallisations (institutions such as families, classes, congregations, armies, parties and so on) and attributes of those bodies (such as beliefs, values, identities etc.). What distinguishes various political movements and activities (including a lot of political theory) is the way in which they specify, organise and enact this arrangement and distribution. But another task of theory lies in observing and encouraging this kind of activity: identifying what is happening, identifying that it is happening, and ensuring that it continues to happen. This sort of project requires recognition of the multiple dimensions of pluralism. Rather than seeking to prescribe rules to maintain the given order, political theory should consider being in the business of discovering the formation of new rules and new objects. That is, the project of political theory must not simply be that of making new formations fit into the rules that are given, but of being part of the process of inventing something new: drawing attention to novel forms, refusing to consolidate them to the set of given rules. We have made a first effort at doing so with our example of Coulterism, since whatever we may wish to say about Ann Coulter, her rhetoric, and her politics, we insist that the responses to her prove utterly inadequate to deal with the political importance of this phenomenon.

49. We should be clear here, however, that the uptake of this argument is not a desire to spur liberal moral philosophy to come up with clearer or stronger answers to Coulterism. In pointing out the inadequacy of the liberal response to Coulterism we are not calling for a better response so much as we are calling out the systemic and pervasive weaknesses of liberalism itself. This inadequacy is a symptom of the limits of the liberal approach to political thought and action. As we noted above, Coulterism indicates an internal limit to liberalism: the point where the attempt to manage forces and identities is challenged by a disordering political force that liberalism cannot simply sort into a predetermined category of interest-group politics. This is why we argue that Coulter marks the political limit within the liberal framework: the politics here involves the creative disordering of positions and persons, identities and ideologies.

50. In this sense Coulterism is a democratic phenomenon. And to the extent that we appreciate the force and power of Coulterism, we do so precisely because the Coulterist critique of liberalism can be read in such a way as to reveal the democratic challenge to, and disruption of, liberalism. This logic requires clarification and unpacking: Coulterism is 'democratic' not because it espouses a democratic philosophy in any specific or particular form (although its populist aspect certainly contains both democratic and authoritarian dimensions). But it is structurally democratic in the sense that it is made possible by the democratic potential inherent within all social relations--a potential for dislocation, inversion and reinvention. To most, Coulterism is scandalous. But as Jacques Ranciere argues, democracy is scandalous. Indeed, democracy is primarily--and beyond all efforts to specify electoral systems or schemes of representation--the scandal of having those rule who have no qualifications to rule (Ranciere 2006).

51. Many critiques of Coulterism seek to resist or deny its disruptive and subversive dimensions. But in doing so, those very critiques can be construed by Coulterism as anti-democratic--or, in the more common language of movement conservatism, elitist. But this response by Coulterism places liberal theory in a bind: either liberalism accepts the Coulterist critique and then acts in undemocratic ways towards her, or liberalism must turn away from liberal principles and toward democracy as we have just described it. This latter alternative would require a radical shift away from liberal legalism and towards democratic pluralism at its fullest extent. It would mean allowing the Coulterist critique to stand normatively in order then to respond to and challenge it politically.

52. Such a move may make many liberal theorists very uneasy, as it requires giving up on a normative pre-judgement of Coulterism as clearly 'out of bounds' or simply 'wrong' in a moral sense. They might worry that there are no limits to the embrace of all pluralism--that any action (no matter how reprehensible or even violent) can fall under the category of 'pluralisation'. However, our interpretation of Coulterism is not designed to make it into an object that could be tolerated. We urge a shift from normative grounds to the political arena not to tolerate Coulter but to mount a challenge against her. To engage Coulter (or anyone else) on the terrain of democratic pluralism does not mean giving up the fight, nor does it mean an abandonment of all reasonable principles to the horrors of relativism. Democracy, scandalous as it may be, contains its own principles. And pluralisation, radical as it may seem, is not the starting point for building an 'anything goes' equation. We all know that murder and violence can be opposed on higher moral grounds, but they can also be opposed from the immanent terrain of democratic principles. To take a life is surely wrong, but it is also, even if banally, undemocratic. As Connolly argues in depth, pluralism is neither a form of relativism, nor a step towards relativism, and pluralists can be militant in defence of pluralist principles (Connolly 2005a: 41). Thus, a turn toward radical pluralisation and an embrace of the 'scandal of democracy' certainly involves moving beyond the heavily-policed limits of liberalism, but it does not call for a transgression of all limits.

53. Moreover, we also wish to stress that the shift from the normative to the political neither amounts to nor requires giving up the theoretical moment. Instead, this shift of terrain calls for the practice a different kind of theory: not justificatory but strategic. A theory concerned to explicate political conjunctures and to identify opportunities for expansion. Doing this sort of theory means posing questions that are rarely, if ever, posed by academic liberal theory. Instead of asking about the extent of toleration, or the justification of its withdrawal we instead ask, of what elements are Coulterist constituencies composed? By what appeals, tropes and interests are they bound together? In what way does Coulterism seek to reconfigure the dimensions of political space? Where might these dimensions be expanded? How might these appeals be turned against it? How might the constituencies be broken up and reordered?

54. The epigraph of this paper draws attention to the paradoxes involved in confronting pluralism. In it, Stephen White suggests that pluralism produces a messy politics, full of remainders. Our engagement with both the theory of pluralism and the political phenomenon that we have named 'Coulterism' are both evidence of this logic. We have insisted that the 'platitude' of problem solving will not do when it comes to pluralism. With respect to Coulterism, we have consistently avoided the easy or instinctual reactions. Our final response also proves paradoxical: one only beats Coulterism by joining it. That is to say, one should not respond by defending the universals that Coulterism attacks but by joining in that attack and by seeking to proliferate the number of forms they take. Thus, the challenge is to prevent Coulter from re-occupying the universal, and this means to do to her what she has sought to do to liberalism. Coulter wants a dirty fight; perhaps we should respect her wishes.

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