

After seven weeks of lockdown from late March through to May, the so-called 'team of five million' had (temporarily) defeated the virus and the country's focus swung back to the border and the threat posed by returning New Zealanders. As a companion piece to Murdoch Stephen's intervention in this issue of *Counterfutures*, this intervention employs Chantal Mouffe's reading of 'Schmitt against Schmitt' as a heuristic device for discussing the figure of the returnee. In an era punctuated by global political, economic, and environmental crises, by a failing neoliberal consensus and rising ethnonationalism, thinking through the issues posed by the figure of the returnee and the antagonisms that it embodies can tell us much about the politics of our moment, providing us a way to think about broader issues of displacement, citizenship, sovereignty, nationhood, and globalisation.

## The Team of Five Six Million: The Pandemic, Political Antagonism, and Anti-Returnee Sentiment

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As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded across the globe in late March the New Zealand government acted in a swift and resolute manner, closing the country's borders and instigating a strict lockdown. After seven weeks of an almost total lockdown, while the virus continued to spread around the world and case numbers rose exponentially in many nations, the country (temporarily) eliminated the virus from its shores. With the so-called 'team of five million' having defeated the virus domestically, the borders would become re-intensified as a site of exclusion. In this context of domestic elimination and intensified border security, and job losses and precarity abroad, many New Zealanders began to return home. In such a way, 'the returnee' became a symptomatic figure, representative of various political antagonisms regarding citizenship, national identity, public health, and border security in the time of the pandemic. These antagonisms transformed the relationship of many domestic New Zealanders to their fellow citizens living abroad, from one of ambivalence and skepticism to one of perceived threat.<sup>1</sup>

Following the political theorist Chantal Mouffe's leftist reading of the notorious conservative political philosopher

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1 See, for example, "It's not so kind" – rise in hostility towards NZers looking to come home,' *RNZ*, 24 June 2020.

and jurist Carl Schmitt, we can think of this re-identification of the returnee as a shift from an ‘us and them’ relation, to one of ‘friend and enemy’, as the returnee comes to be seen as a potential threat to domestic New Zealanders. In this essay, I employ Mouffe’s reading of ‘Schmitt against Schmitt’ as a heuristic device for discussing the figure of the returnee.<sup>2</sup> Here, in an era punctuated by global political, economic, and environmental crises, by a failing neoliberal consensus, and rising ethnonationalism, it is my contention that the figure of the returnee, and the antagonisms that it embodies, can tell us much about the politics of our moment, providing us a way to think about broader issues of displacement, citizenship, sovereignty, nationhood, and globalisation. In the contentious nature of the returnee’s status, we are provided a tangible example of how membership of the demos is not given but always contested and conditional, subject to ongoing political antagonism and articulation.

## The team of six five million

The New Zealand government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic was a swift one. When case numbers rose markedly during mid-March, it moved quickly to a nationwide lockdown. The government’s management of public relations surrounding the lockdown was similarly decisive: it gave clear and consistent instructions as to the expectations of its citizens. The PR campaign was not just competent, but also emotive: stark commercials featuring empty public spaces, daily, imploring broadcasts by the prime minister, and a rhetoric of solidarity and physical (not social) distancing. As a New Zealander living in Sydney at the time, I looked on in envy, as the federal and state governments’ responses were, by contrast, convoluted and disorganised: the permissible duration of a haircut was changed multiple times, as were the precise conditions under which one could eat a kebab in public.

Central to the New Zealand government’s management of the public

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2 Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), 2.

relations of the crisis was the notion of the ‘the team of five million’. This concept lay at the heart of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Covid-19 response, as it sought to generate public buy-in for what was an extremely strict lockdown compared to neighbouring Australia. As a rhetorical device, the team of five million served as an effective means of generating solidarity around the lockdown initiative—domestic New Zealanders were interpolated as an active citizenry, working in unison for the common good. The government’s public broadcasts implored them to make temporary sacrifices to protect their way of life, to ‘not see the emptiness’ nor give in to the sense of isolation and loneliness created by the lockdown, but rather to be strong and resolute, to ‘unite against Covid-19’. The campaign would prove an outstanding success. It motivated the public across different interest groups, as the government secured widespread support for the strict lockdown (if not compliance from its own minister of health at the time), which would ultimately eliminate Covid-19 from its shores—at least temporarily.

With domestic elimination successful, New Zealanders were free to return to ‘normal life’ while much of the rest of the world was still in the grips of the pandemic. The government thanked its citizens for their sacrifices during the lockdown, as the country and its leadership received international praise. With the virus continuing to spread internationally, the focus of both the New Zealand government and the public shifted to the border. Initially, despite issues that would later become apparent, Aotearoa New Zealand’s system of border quarantine was a success, with no new cases managing to pass through. That developing sense of immunity changed in mid-June, when two women who had returned from the UK to attend a funeral were released from an isolation facility in Auckland on compassionate grounds while unwittingly carrying the virus. The pair would travel from Auckland to Wellington before eventually coming down with symptoms and being diagnosed. While this breach of quarantine did not lead to any further spread of the virus, it would mark a turning point in the management of the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the fall-out from the quarantine breach, the solidarity that marked the initial handling of the pandemic started to fragment, with segments of the public

and the media, as well as the opposition, becoming increasingly critical of the government's management of the border and increasingly opposed to returnees.<sup>3</sup>

I returned to Aotearoa New Zealand in late June, after being displaced by the pandemic due to my partner's visa status. At that time, the anti-returnee sentiment was intensifying, and I found myself in the midst of it. Our arrival was the first to be managed by the military—a measure put in place after the issues with the quarantine system were highlighted by the aforementioned border breach—and to be housed outside of one of the major centres, in Rotorua. This late change in our accommodation, the result of an agreement with a supplementary Auckland hotel falling through, saw us directed onto buses and shipped off to Rotorua without communication from government representatives as to the change of plans. Unsurprisingly, this led to some consternation amongst our planeload, which was further intensified by a lack of physical distancing on the four-hour bus ride. When members of our cohort, including myself, spoke to the media about our experiences and the humanitarian and public-health issues regarding how our intake was managed, we were met with public derision—lambasted as ungrateful, 'false Kiwis', and even traitors. Calls for returnees to either pay for their quarantine, or be excluded from entry, intensified.

The following weeks and months would see numerous quarantine 'escapees', the explicit racialisation of anti-returnee sentiment by the National MP Hamish Walker (which I discuss further below), and constant attacks on the government handling of the border by the opposition and the right-wing media. Debates regarding further securitisation of the borders and who should bear the cost of quarantine raged. As the political antagonism surrounding the pandemic and its management intensified, the border and the figure of the returnee remained central to the debate. While some sympathetic to the plight of the returnee attempted to rebrand

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3 The political dissensus around the management of the border must be seen in part within the context of an upcoming election, with National choosing the somewhat ill-fated strategy of trying to sow doubt around the Labour-led government's handling of the border and the pandemic more broadly.

the team of five million as the team of six million—a gesture that would acknowledge and include the one million New Zealanders living abroad—the relative solidarity and sense of the common good that characterised Aotearoa New Zealand’s initial response to the pandemic continued to fragment and dissipate.

## Schmitt against Schmitt

What does this trajectory tell us about issues of displacement, citizenship, sovereignty, nationhood, and globalisation? In thinking through the figure of the returnee and their political significance, I would like to draw on the work of the Belgian post-Marxist political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Building on the critique of orthodox Marxism that she put forward with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe elaborates a compelling reading of the notorious German conservative political philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt, and his critique of the tenuous and conflictual relationship between liberalism and democracy. Reading ‘Schmitt against Schmitt’ as a means of arguing against the prevailing theories of consensus and communicative rationality associated with the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Mouffe developed a theory of liberal democracy that returned antagonism, or ‘agonism’, to the heart of the political process. For Mouffe, agonism is central to the ongoing articulation and negotiation of political hegemony and identity within liberal democracy—a position that she would come to refer to as ‘agonistic pluralism’.<sup>4</sup>

Schmitt was a conservative German political philosopher, and later Nazi party member, who articulated a critique of liberal democracy throughout the 1920s and 1930s founded on what he saw as the inherent conflict between democratic notions of sovereignty and liberal notions of universal human rights. For Schmitt, the fundamental political decision within democracy is the division between ‘us and them’, or in

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<sup>4</sup> Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 2; *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), xii.

his terminology, ‘friend and enemy’.<sup>5</sup> In Schmitt’s framework, ‘democratic logics always entail drawing a frontier between “us” and “them,” those who belong to the “demos” and those who are outside it’.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is seen to be fundamentally necessary in establishing ‘a conception of equality as substance’, a conception which can only be established via ‘the possibility of inequality’.<sup>7</sup> As Mouffe puts it:

What matters [for Schmitt] is the possibility of tracing a line of demarcation between those who belong to the demos—and therefore have equal rights—and those who, in the political domain, cannot have the same rights because they are not part of the demos. Such a democratic equality—expressed today through citizenship—is, for him, the ground of all the other forms of equality. It is through their belonging to the demos that democratic citizens are granted equal rights. Not because they participate in an abstract idea of humanity.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, this basic logic of substantial equality (and in turn exclusion and inequality) is explicit in how democratic sovereignty and citizenship operate—as is painfully obvious in the precarity and lack of political representation of the migrant and the denial of asylum to, and detention of, refugees.

For Schmitt, there is a basic contradiction between the notions of equality posited by democratic and liberal discourses. While democratic equality is based on substantial equality that ‘inscribe[s] rights and equality into’ the political and juridical practices of the democratic nation-state, liberal equality is prefaced on an abstract universalism: notions of personhood and human rights.<sup>9</sup> The denial of the fundamental significance of substantive equality (and hence inequality) in modern liberal democracy

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5 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 26.

6 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 4.

7 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 39.

8 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 40.

9 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 44–45.

leads, Schmitt claims, not to the overcoming of inequality, but rather to its displacement onto another domain: ‘under the conditions of superficial political equality, another sphere in which substantial inequalities prevail (today for example the economic sphere) will dominate politics’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this observation seems somewhat prescient today, as economic inequalities are as pronounced as ever under late capitalism while the ascendancy of neoliberalism and third-way politics has seen the economic sphere framed as ostensibly outside of the political, subject to ‘rational management’ rather than the political contestation.

While Mouffe accepts the validity of Schmitt’s basic critique of liberal democracy, and the conflictual nature of liberal and democratic ideals that underpin it, she rejects his notion of the ‘us’, the people, as an organic or given unity. For Schmitt, while the us is not strictly framed in ethnic or racial terms (as some commentators have claimed), it is nevertheless positioned as a kind of given or organic unity (he provides an alternative example in religious denomination, citing the way that religious affiliation operated as primary to nationality in terms of defining who was and was not a member of the demos in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England).<sup>11</sup> In Schmitt’s schema, the division or delineation between us and them is always given, and hence is foreclosed as a grounds for political contestation. In such a view, there can be no debate as to who is and is not a member of the demos; all ‘division and antagonism’ must be expelled ‘outside the demos’ in order to produce political unity.<sup>12</sup> As Mouffe puts it:

The unity of the state must, for him, be a concrete unity, already given and therefore stable. This is also true of the way he envisages the identity of the people: it also must exist as a given. Because of that, his distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not really politically constructed; it is merely a recognition of already-existing borders. While he rejects the pluralist

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10 Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), 12.

11 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 40; Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 9.

12 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 54.

conception, Schmitt is nevertheless unable to situate himself on a completely different terrain because he retains a view of political and social identities as empirically given.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this point that Mouffe departs from Schmitt, producing her leftist reading of his work while also developing a more rigorous conception of the central role played by antagonism and conflict in the political process in liberal democracy than is allowed in Schmitt's schema.<sup>14</sup> Given her rejection of Schmitt's organic unity of the people, for Mouffe, the central political issue becomes how to produce a form of commonality, an us, that is able to constitute a demos while allowing for the various forms of pluralism—'religious, moral and cultural pluralism, as well as a pluralism of political parties'—that characterise contemporary liberal-democratic societies.<sup>15</sup> She recasts antagonism as central to 'the process of hegemonic articulation'.<sup>16</sup> As she puts it:

Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity. Such an identity, however, can never be fully constituted, and it can exist only through multiple and competing forms of identifications. Liberal democracy is precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications.<sup>17</sup>

This ongoing struggle for the constitution of the people is central to Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. Rather than seeing the division between us and them as organically constituted, it instead comes to be understood as a conflictual process that is fundamental to the ongoing constitution of the

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13 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 54.

14 As noted above, Mouffe is writing as much against the likes of Rawls and Habermas and their notions of 'rational consensus' as she is against Schmitt.

15 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 55.

16 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 56.

17 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 56.

people and the demos as such. For Mouffe, then, the fundamental task of liberal-democratic politics becomes the establishment of ‘institutions which will permit conflicts to take an “agonistic” form’.<sup>18</sup> Agonism in this sense represents a shift from the opponent as enemy (who must be defeated), to the role of the adversary, with which a ‘conflictual consensus’ is negotiated.<sup>19</sup> In such a way, Mouffe responds to the challenge posed by Schmitt’s critique of liberal democracy, but turns it against itself, employing it as a departure point to articulate a radical democratic politics that incorporates difference and antagonism (as agonism) into the heart of its theorisation of the political process. It is important to note here that Mouffe warns us that agonism always runs the risk of becoming antagonism proper—the distinction between us and them always has the potential of collapsing into that of friend and enemy.<sup>20</sup>

## The political figure of the returnee

Returning to the pandemic, I propose that the returnee can be seen to embody the very site of this process of agonism (and antagonism): of the articulation of the people, the demos, and its limits. In the ‘normal’ state of affairs, outside of the state of exception of the pandemic, the New Zealander living abroad is an ambiguous figure: a member of the demos—which is to say, a citizen—one of us, but nevertheless one that perpetually slides towards being other, one of them. As Murdoch Stephens, in his fellow article for *Counterfutures*, articulates, the New Zealander living abroad, ‘the prodigal son’ or daughter, is at once implored to return home to ‘Godzone’ but treated with skepticism when they do.<sup>21</sup> This ambiguous relationship to New Zealanders living abroad is, I argue, fundamentally transformed within the context of the pandemic, as the returnee comes to be seen as a

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18 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, xii.

19 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, xii.

20 Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 5.

21 Murdoch Stephens, ‘Welcome Home, Prodigy,’ this issue.

potential threat.

In the context of the pandemic, what is typically an agonistic relation, of us and them, in which the New Zealander living abroad is ambivalently situated, can be seen to have temporarily broken down into one of outright antagonism—of friend and enemy. The returnee comes to represent the threat of contagion: the possibility of the re-entry of the virus into the demos and the fundamental disruption of the way of life of its people (domestic New Zealanders). This threat is further amplified by economic fears—of fiscal crisis, job scarcity, and unemployment, and the cost of the quarantine system. This transformation from an agonistic to an antagonistic relation can be seen in calls from members of the public, media, and political Right to exclude displaced New Zealanders from return or to limit their numbers, demands that they pay for their quarantine, and public consternation over the presence of quarantine facilities in their communities. While the returnee, as a New Zealand citizen or permanent resident, has the constitutional ‘right of return’—something that is inscribed in the political and juridical structure of New Zealand’s Bill of Rights—this has not prohibited calls from certain quarters to deny these fundamental rights to returnees, or at least to make them conditional.<sup>22</sup>

While leaving quarantine is, of course, fundamentally conditional on testing negative for the virus, the calls for further conditions for exclusion from return are framed by the existing hegemonic structures of class and race that always already mediate inclusion/exclusion in the demos. From the National Party’s proposal to make returnees pay for their own quarantine, to the explicit racialisation of the returnee by disgraced National MP Hamish Walker, who in his attempt to rally public opinion against returnees being quarantined in Queenstown cited concerns regarding people returning from ‘high risk’ countries such as ‘India, Pakistan, and Korea’, yet not the US or UK.<sup>23</sup>

What I think is most instructive regarding the figure of the returnee is

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22 18(2) of the Bill of Rights 1990 guarantees that ‘every New Zealand citizen has the right to enter New Zealand’.

23 Charlie Dreaver, ‘National MP’s comments “disgraceful, racist” – Megan Woods,’ *RNZ*, 2 July 2020; Georgia Forrester, ‘Covid-19: An in-depth look at the origins of New Zealand’s imported coronavirus cases,’ *Stuff*, 2 October 2020.

this very conditionality by which a citizen (or permanent resident), whose status as a member of the demos should by its very nature be given, has in the state of exception engendered by the pandemic become the site of outright antagonism. Here, as a corollary, we may think of the figure of the asylum seeker, whose inclusion in the demos as per the logic of Schmitt and Mouffe is prefaced on the grounds of formal liberal equality (which is to say human rights). Those rights must be agreed to, and extended by, the state in which the asylum seeker is seeking protection, before the claimant achieves a substantive democratic equality through formal recognition of their status as refugee. Despite the discourse of universal human rights, the right to refuge is always subject to inclusion or exclusion relative to ongoing hegemonic articulation. Indeed, this process of hegemonic articulation and its outcomes can be seen in the ongoing political debates regarding refugee quotas and human rights, and the increased prevalence of militarised border security and refugee detention centres in many Western nations—most notably Australia and the US—over recent years.

In such a way, the returnee and the antagonisms that they represent should be understood as part of broader political contestation around the demos and the border, and hence tied up with the plight of both the migrant and the refugee. In a state of crisis, even those whose membership of the demos appears to be given, such as the citizen living abroad, becomes conditional and subject to political contestation. Within such states of crisis, agonistic relations run the risk of becoming antagonistic, as the *them* can quickly become recast as *the enemy*. If the Right were in government, one could easily envisage return becoming conditional on the ability of the returnee to pay for their quarantine, or citizens returning from certain nations deemed ‘high risk’ (a designation that would no doubt be selectively applied) being forced to undergo testing before getting on a plane or excluded from return entirely. Here, the Left must concern itself with the politics of the returnee. We should recognise that the returnee is not a singular figure, whose significance is particular to the pandemic; rather it is a figure inherently tied to the plight of the migrant and the refugee, and the political antagonisms they represent—a politics that will only become more urgent in our era, punctuated as it is, by planetary crisis and catastrophe.