Political theorist Chantal Mouffe is certainly not alone in questioning the contradictions and abstractions within current political theory. But what stands out is her emphatic claim that the uncontested hegemony of liberalism puts the genuinely political in jeopardy, a position that pivots upon the assertion that conflict is “integral to human society, that antagonism is ineradicable.”

Identities are formed through conflict. Antagonism is integral to the political, there can be no consensus without exclusion, no form of the political without recognition of a dominant, and no understanding of public or private without identifying an outside, a “they” constructed and dependent upon a “we.” The task of democratic politics, as Mouffe would have it, is not merely to manage conflict but to turn antagonism into democratic agonism, turning enemies into adversaries engaged in the process of irresolvable, paradoxical, and conflictual consensus. There can be coalitions across a range of political sites and wars of position. Admitting that conflict is integral to the political means acknowledging that there are instances where “no rational solution could ever exist.”

What kind of arena or infrastructure would enable such a struggle, would foster the redirection of antagonism into the more productive adversarial? Mouffe suggests that, “Instead of trying to design institutions which, through supposedly impartial procedures, would reconcile all interests and values, the aim of all who are interested in defending and radicalizing democracy should be to contribute to the creation of vibrant, agonistic public spaces where different hegemonic political projects could be confronted.”

It is one thing to call for this kind of counter hege
mmony. It is another thing to be looking for a theory of institutions, but a physical space. Mouffe acknowledges that most contemporary institutions that once stood for the ideal of enlightened and rational democracy appear now as mere currencies embodying post-ideological, fleeting symbols of an early moment in the history of democracy. Indeed, there is such disaffection with democratic institutions today.

Mouffe is not alone in calling for new institutions, or a new public sphere; from very different perspectives, too have figures like Paolo Virno and David Harvey. Virno has advocated for a politics of non-representative democracy to be translated into new institutions, suggesting a “non-governmental public sphere, far from the myths and rituals of sovereignty.” He does not imply a space or form that necessarily has physical consequences, but his concept is predicated upon the idea of public intellect, where publicness articulates a political space. Political space is described by Virno as the potential for “forms of life beyond the State.”

On the other hand, Harvey’s focus on urbanization and the production of space requires that attention be paid to concrete proposals. He demands that the values of political theory be more than inspirational, and he asks of theoretical proposals in the name of a new urban commons, for example, can be enacted in urban space.

Contemporary institutions appear to represent the nostalgia for an ideal of democracy and civilization nearly two centuries old, when in fact: they express in social and physical form the rapaciousness of neoliberalism’s public-private colocation. Take education, specifically higher education, since considered a cornerstone of liberal democracy, and now promoted as a point of entry for the citizenry of the global knowledge economy. Inseparably, the transformations of the university have been at the epicenter of the complex of contemporary socio-economic processes. So much so that it is clear high relief the paradoxical relationships between public and private, institutions and the public sphere, the city and socially-organized urbanization.

Writing in Diacritics in 2012, Andrew Ross aptly characterized the contemporary university as an urban economic motor. A city with a research university is armed with an engine of the knowledge economy, a planning instrument for economic development and growth, and an institution promoting technical innovation within and beyond its physical boundaries. An urban research university makes and competes within new markets for education, and the performance of the institutions within these markets is measured by quantitative means, statistical indicators that define the success of a globally competitive economy. Linking the knowledge-intensive production of research to urban prosperity was deemed fundamental in national economic competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. In infrastructural and socio-political terms, the relationship between institutions of higher learning and their urban environments signals, as Ross would have it, the emergence of a new type of organizational forms. Outwardly it reinforces the legitimacy between public and private, between institution and corporation, is profoundly obscured. A burgeoning administrative staff saddled with a logic of control and the strategies of risk management now neatly manages the university. Such managed conflict resolution ultimately eliminates the possibility for the adversarial to emerge, while dialogue admits plebiscites of opinion, a kind of mirage of the communicative public sphere, but neglects the realities of extant power relations.

Meanwhile, the new public spaces of the twenty-first-century university appear appear luxurious. They are open and flexible, intended to impress, encourage collaboration, and facilitate interaction and communication among users. But ultimately, what does it mean to call for new institutions and new public physical spaces within urban environments? How can we imagine political theory to the challenges presented by spatialized, communicative, management-mediated politics that collate public and private ends?