Questions concerning the civic and political implications of education have long preoccupied democratic theorists. Aristotle famously declared that citizens should be “educated to suit the constitution of their state” and Montesquieu echoed Aristotle in asserting that “the laws of education must be relative to the principles of government.” At present, American education is marred by a crisis this paper describes as neoliberal universality — in which students are defined by educational institutions solely by their staying power as consumers utilizing a service and all difference(s) and disagreement(s) are actively discouraged. This configuration makes civic education thus near impossible because an essential foundation of democratic life is denied: the persistence and pervasion of ideological conflict and disagreement. Building on the work of Chantal Mouffe, this paper attempts to construct a model for the university as an agonistic space of “democratic contestations.” Attempts to transcend conflict and disagreement are futile — since they are naturally embedded in democratic societies. By using controversial issues in the classroom as touchstones for discussion, deliberation, and disagreement, this paper envisages a model of education that can adequately prepare students to be productive and effective citizens.

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