

Examining the Conflictual Political:  
Alternative Agonisms for Democratic Designs

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**Abstract**

Democratic theory struggles to understand the conflictual quality of the democratic experience. Agonist literature has better achieved this recognition, founding democracy on a political dimension that is irreducibly conflictual. Yet, the study of agonist thinkers has often excluded much of the diversity in agonistic thought. Further, widely-accepted models such as deliberative democracy have ignored conflict, pointing the field towards unity and peace by rational deliberation. Therefore, this thesis reapproaches agonist literature, presenting three cases of ‘alternative agonists’, to examine what the agonistic tradition still can offer to the perils of democracy. This thesis contributes to the discourse on democratic conflict by engaging with Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Claude Lefort who each offer a definition of the political that rests in conflict. It argues that a comparative analysis of their writings reveals unique meanings of the ‘conflictual political’ that impact the way we think and do democracy. It offers new potentials for understanding the fundamental meaning of democracy.

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To my friends, for getting it.

To my family, always.

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## Introduction

### i.1 Facing the Conflict

On a trip to a local thrift store with my younger brother, I warned him that while the shop was one of my favorites, it was also quite chaotic and unorganized. I told him that he may become overwhelmed or anxious browsing through the racks of disordered second-hand clothing and stacks of antiques. Upon entering the store, my brother said that he felt a strange sense of comfort in the chaos around us; he felt more secure in this store than any of the neat and orderly shops we had been in that day. While my warnings were intended to give relief to what I felt was a stress-inducing environment, it was by relaxing into the chaos that my brother found comfort. In the case of democracy, theorists have often played the role of the older sibling, warning of democracy's struggles with the conflicts of plurality and unlimited freedom and the chaos that these bring about. These warnings can be justified; as the perils of democracy are very much felt by the political community.

Yet, as democratic theory has recognized the supposed threat of conflict, the response has not been to relax into the chaos. Instead, much democratic theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has responded to the great conflicts of its time by working towards internal peace, imagining of post-conflict democratic societies that promise the harmonious coexistence of plural viewpoints.<sup>1</sup> Following World War II and especially the end of the Cold War, much of democratic theory in the Anglo-American world transitioned towards an "end of politics" – think Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*.<sup>2</sup> The image of an end to war – and the end of democracy's biggest external threats, totalitarianism and communism – saw democratic theorists seeking to affirm democratic values in

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<sup>1</sup> See Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003) and David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

the absence of those pressures. With relief from these external threats at the end of the century, the tradition of theory-on-the-defense was largely dispelled, leaving room for theorists to focus on achieving their visions of utopia.<sup>3</sup> In turn, conflict within the democratic community was theorized as something to be solved and resolved,<sup>4</sup> or worse, hidden and ignored. This does not mean that the stress-inducing environment of democratic conflict has changed, but that our understanding of it has shifted.

This tendency is often referred to as ‘antipolitics’.<sup>5</sup> The argument is that antipolitics is meant to provide ultimate answers, solve problems, and overcome conflict by removing the very need for politics.<sup>6</sup> By attempting to remove the inconvenience of conflict, antipolitics opposes that which defines politics. The opposition to de-politicization is at the core of this present research. The focus of this thesis is the developments in democratic theory from the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century, which display the emergence of new democratic models that give a renewed place to democratic conflict.

The birth of deliberative democracy was seminal point in the shift of democratic theory. This tradition, heralded by thinkers such as German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, has become a widely accepted theoretical model for the foundations of the legitimacy of democracy. It should be noted that deliberative democracy is quite diverse in its origins and manifestations.<sup>7</sup> Still, as

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<sup>3</sup> See *Collective Wisdom: Principles and Mechanisms*, edited by Hélène Landemore and Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and David P. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> David Held, “Deliberative Democracy and the Defense of the Public Realm” from *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 243.

<sup>5</sup> Dick Howard argues that this shift began much sooner than the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, citing the development of political economy, the American Declaration, and conservative politics in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century as “the culmination of a tendency that has been inherent in the long history of Western political thought.” See Dick Howard. “A Note to the Reader” from *The Primacy of the Political*, vii-xv. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Howard, “A Note to the Reader”, vii-viii.

<sup>7</sup> Bachtiger, et al. “Preface” from *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. André Bachtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, Mark E. Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), v.

Antonio Florida points out, the “deliberative turn” of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century – which can be traced to Habermas and John Rawls – and its ideas of communicative action and discourse ethics were adopted by many within and without the discipline.<sup>8</sup> The problem that many of these models address stems from the stated desire to ignore or remove conflict from politics by positioning moral – or in some cases, economic – concerns as the core issue of democratic politics.<sup>9</sup> Beyond warning of the conflicts of plurality that democracy tends towards, models like deliberative democracy aim to make the issue of conflict secondary. They adopt the idea that conflict can be solved by rational deliberation and an ideal speech situation, as it relies on a “so-called “moral point of view”<sup>10</sup> governed by impartiality and where an impartial assessment of what is in the general interest could be reached.”<sup>11</sup>

Habermas is but an exemplary case of this larger problem in democratic theory that is well-identified in deliberative models. Habermas aligns with iterations of deliberative democracy that aim to “[improve] the quality of democracy” where traditional definitions have failed.<sup>12</sup> His presentation of deliberative democracy, like much of the theory since the 1970s, sought to solve the political conflicts of plurality. In *The Inclusion of the Other*, published in 1998, Habermas points to a “conceptual dichotomy” between “liberalism” and “republicanism” (or “democracy”) that he claims is incapable of addressing these struggles.<sup>13</sup> The difference of interests and value-

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<sup>8</sup> Antonio Florida. “The Origins of the Deliberative Turn” from *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. André Bachtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, Mark E. Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 49.

<sup>9</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 746.

<sup>10</sup> Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”, 751-752.

<sup>11</sup> See Hélène Landemore’s discussion of “epistemic democracy” in Hélène Landemore, “Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy.” *Social epistemology* 31, no. 3 (2017): 277–295.

<sup>12</sup> Held, “Deliberative Democracy and the Defense of the Public Realm” from *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 232.

<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 241.

orientations between liberalism and republicanism do not display any possibility of ‘consensual resolution’ as liberalism is oriented towards radical individual liberty whereas republicanism prioritizes equality and popular sovereignty. According to Habermas, this dichotomy does not invalidate democracy, but leaves room to readjust the relationship between strategic action and political discourse.<sup>14</sup> As a solution, he suggests the adoption of a rational moral perspective, defined as the democratic process itself, and touts this rational morality as a much needed universal grounding for democracy.<sup>15</sup> Habermas places emphasis on the process of “political opinion and will formation”, relying on institutionalized procedures of communication to ensure inclusive expression of both strategic action, opinions, and will, by an intended channeling of communicative power through legislation into administrative power.<sup>16</sup>

Habermas’ early theory is grounded in the presupposition of an ideal and ever-present ‘reason’ in political deliberation.<sup>17</sup> This moral of rationality is said to respect everyone and create solidarity in the “flexible we” of plural societies.<sup>18</sup> Partnered with communicative action, this rational morality should provide a “surety for social problems that threaten integration” by way of the ideal of consensus.<sup>19</sup> What would this achieve for democracy? According to Habermas: universal inclusion in reasonable and fair results.<sup>20</sup> In all, this tradition ought to solve the conceptual dichotomy of liberal democracy and expedite the process of achieving fair results, as its moral point of view claims to provide inclusive channels for plural opinions. As told, Habermas does recognize an internal conflict in liberal democracy, but aims towards the relief of this tension.

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<sup>14</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 243-245.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 298.

<sup>17</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 287.

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, xxxv.

<sup>19</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 251.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 239 & 246.

What alternative models of democratic theory grasp that deliberative democracy does not, is that conflict is not a solvable condition of democracy. It is the very definitive characteristic of the political and that which allows for the sustainability of democracy. This is the perspective I will defend throughout this thesis.

What we have come to call ‘agonistic theories of democracy’ – which, too, emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century – defend this definition of the political. Agonistic theories recognize the plurality of democracy to be constitutive of its apparatus and because of this understand that conflict is consubstantial to the experience of democracy. These truths are grounded in a definition of the political dimension that favours “the ontological primacy of antagonism”,<sup>21</sup> defining the political as autonomous, a-historic, and inherently conflictual. Agonism offers a concept of the political that allows us to come face-to-face with the chaos and disorganization of democracy; to sit in the conflict and find comfort in it.

Still, there is no doubt that models such as deliberative democracy have been dominant on the academic scene.<sup>22</sup> Why is that the case? Mark Wenman argues that agonistic theories are less conventional: “[agonism engages] with the strands of continental thought associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism. For this reason, agonism is frequently misunderstood by those working in the mainstream of the Anglo-American academy, and is sometimes dismissed as at best incoherent, or worse, as dangerous and nihilistic.”<sup>23</sup> The de-politicization of deliberative models is favoured over the often abstract and difficult-to-decipher writings of agonistic thinkers that remain in the margins to the Anglo tradition. In his own analysis, Wenman uses popular agonist

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<sup>21</sup> Arata D. Yamamoto, “Why agonistic planning? Questioning Chantal Mouffe’s thesis of the ontological primacy of the political” *Planning Theory* 16, no. 4 (2017): 384.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Wenman, “Part 1” from *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Wenman, “Part 1”, 3.

thinkers William E. Connolly, James Tully, Chantal Mouffe, and Bonnie Honig to prove that agonists have been at the front of innovation in democratic theory and to “further develop the agonistic perspective.”<sup>24</sup> Still, like much work on agonism, Wenman neglects several other agonists, especially those within French democratic theory.

Understanding the depoliticization of deliberative models and the greater shift to antipolitics, what does the agonistic tradition still have to offer to the perils of democracy? With the diversity of theories of agonism in mind, this project will introduce three thinkers as alternative agonistic models that challenge the dominant mode of democratic theory. By focusing on Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Claude Lefort’s theories of democracy, the aim of this research is to reconsider the meaning of the ‘political’ and how these alternative conceptions impact our present understanding of democratic politics. The concept of the political interrogates the neutralization of the political sphere and demands a focus on the antagonisms of human relations.<sup>25</sup> I will argue that each definition of the political presented in this thesis reveals a neglected but essential dimension of human relations. Therefore, the common understanding of democracy ought to be either thought of in a different way or fundamentally *is* a different way. This project reveals that while the varying theoretical sources each of the three thinkers relies on offer a unique pathway for recognizing the antagonism and agonism of the political, each posits conflict as that which grounds the democratic apparatus and enables human flourishing. A comparative interpretation of the projects of Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort, demonstrates that commonly accepted models of deliberative democracy have failed to provide resources for understanding conflict and that these alternative agonist theories offers the means we need to rethink contemporary democratic societies.

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<sup>24</sup> Wenman, “Part 1”, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Marchart, “Politics and the Political: Genealogy of a Conceptual Difference” from *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), 44-45.

While they have been underrepresented, this project asserts Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort as central figures in the tradition of democratic theory.

## i.2 Methodology and Outline

To bring to the forefront alternative agonistic perspectives in the field of democratic theory, this thesis adopts a multi-angled approach, using both a philosophical and historical methodology. It favors the philosophical, treating democratic conflict raises perennial questions of human relations. From this, an exegetical analysis of each thinker's theory, focusing on their concept of the political, follows their logical implications and the answer(s) to the question of democratic conflict are presented as such. In addition, the theoretical sources from which each thinker develops their conflictual account of democracy are treated as a kind of philosophical context for their thought. For Mouffe, this is Carl Schmitt; for Rancière – Aristotle and Plato; and for Lefort, it is founded in Machiavelli.

Both Mouffe and Rancière, writing in the mid to late 1990s, respond to deliberative models, often referring directly to the hegemonic hold of Habermas' work.<sup>26</sup> Mouffe and Rancière each argue that while Habermas' approach to democratic politics recognizes a kind of conflict, it has failed to grasp to the conflictual political dimension, continually claiming to assert political solutions while simultaneously dismissing the political from his theory. For Lefort, he responds to totalitarianism and the failures of communism, as he recognizes the sliding relationship between these systems and democracy.<sup>27</sup> Each thinker adopts a critical view of history as movement away from the political; in this case, the ahistoric political must be saved from history.

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<sup>26</sup> See Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" and Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Steven Cooran (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 8.

<sup>27</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 14.

This comparative analysis allows for a unique view of agonist literature that recognizes the tradition's similar aims, but accounts for its thinkers' divergences. The parallels between Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort will not only affirm the way in which they each challenge the rigidity of consensus models like deliberative democracy, but also how elements of their theories challenge one another. As I will demonstrate in the three chapters, there is much disagreement amongst democratic theorists, and even agonists, on how to define the political, democracy, and how the two interact. Based on this comparative analysis, I argue that the three thinkers propose a necessary contribution to a perennial question, especially considering the hegemonic hold that the consensus model has maintained in democratic theory.

I do not claim to have found the correct answer to my presented question, but resolve to contribute to a progression of the understanding of these ideas and have accessed features of these concepts that are useful to thinking and doing democracy. I echo W. B. Gallie when I say that, in this project, there is the potential for "endless disputes for which neither of these explanations *need* be the correct one."<sup>28</sup> This is affirmed by the fact that Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort focus on conflict, rather than conflict resolution. It is the intention of each thinker to maintain the antagonistic, paradoxical, and flexible character of their theories.

Considering that these thinkers aim to infuse conflict and paradox into the understanding of the political, their writing style often follows a similar approach. Many of their critics point to inconsistency, vagueness, and complexity as setbacks in their method.<sup>29</sup> Rancière himself states that "he never intended to produce a theory of politics."<sup>30</sup> Mouffe remarks that her theory of

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<sup>28</sup> W. B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, no. 56 (1955-1956): 169.

<sup>29</sup> Stefan Rummens, "Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle?: Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic Model of Politics" *Constellations* 16, no. 3 (2009): 388.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière. "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière" *Parallax* 15, no. 3 (2009): 114.

agonistic pluralism does not have any political content, meaning that it does not offer a practical map for how politics should take place.<sup>31</sup> Lefort argues that democratic society must be understood as “an infinitely malleable entity, open to assuming all specific forms on condition that none will be definitive.”<sup>32</sup> In addition to their refusal to dive too deeply into the practical or concrete application of their work, it is their projects themselves that resist being formed into a systematic philosophy of politics. Each thinker – to varying degrees – resists inflexible structure and hierarchy, and maintains that hegemony can always be contested. In short, their methodological approaches match their theories.

Despite that fact, the following chapters will establish a systematic analysis of the democratic theories of Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort, presenting their conflictual political as an “essentially contested concept” to both complexify conventional readings of their work and to illuminate the challenges they raise.<sup>33</sup> Particular attention will be paid to the theoretical origins that each thinker uses as foundation. The first chapter argues that while Chantal Mouffe’s agonism has been well-addressed by both her supporters and critics, her paradoxical discourse on the radical negativity democratic theory still holds a strong justification for agonistic optimism. The second chapter argues that, by naming Aristotle and Plato’s work as the beginning of the political, Jacques Rancière reveals the internal and intentional mistakes of the political that make it so conducive to the conflicts of democracy. The final chapter argues that Claude Lefort’s identification of the symbolic dimension of the political maintains a detachment from any of the ‘real’ community calculations that Mouffe and Rancière tend towards. The thesis concludes with a further reflection

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<sup>31</sup> Hansen, A. D., & André Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism: an interview with Chantal Mouffe.” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 15, no. 3 (2014): 266.

<sup>32</sup> Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power” from *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post-war France*, ed. M. Breaugh, C. Holman, R. Magnusson, P. Mazzocchi, and D. Penner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, 167.

on the convergences and divergences between these thinkers and what this says about how democracy ought to approach conflict.

## 1. Relief in the Paradox: Chantal Mouffe's (Re)Justification of Agonistic Theory 1.0

### Introduction

In an interview published in 2014, Chantal Mouffe reflects on the influence and impact of her work on agonism, radical democracy, and the limits of pluralism.<sup>34</sup> Clarifying her initial purpose for developing this kind of work, she states that, seeing the continued acceptance that liberalism was receiving, she felt the need to intervene politically in the democratic moment, and decided that the best way to do so was to “critique liberal political theory and show that there was nothing political about so-called political liberalism.”<sup>35</sup>

Seven years on from this statement, rationalist liberal ‘politics’ maintain hegemony in Western political culture, and although Mouffe’s work has provided possibilities for challenging this tradition, her call for a change in the democratic perspective has not yet solidified the conditions for radical change in the field. Long-held political traditions, such as deliberative democracy, maintain a chokehold on political theory, while simultaneously remaining vague on what the political actually is. All the while, questions on pluralism and how to address its relentless ability to keep democracy in a state of constant precarity are left unanswered. Due to a lack of definition of the political, we can see democratic society clinging to the norms and promises of deliberative democracy, such as consensus, reason, and individualism. Since the end of the Cold War, the dialogic model has long-promised the end of conflict, reaching back to Enlightenment values to assure some ‘peak’ of political organization and development.<sup>36</sup> Mouffe argues that the end of the Cold War should have been used as an opportunity to deepen the democratic project since the enemy was “shattered”, but, instead, it saw a centring of both ends of the political spectrum and claims of a final progress of democracy: democracy had reached its

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<sup>34</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 263.

<sup>35</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism.”, 265.

<sup>36</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 1.

peak.<sup>37</sup> Looking to its current status, with democracy in a state of crisis, and dealing with some of the most obvious conflicts of plurality, it has become ever more clear that this utopic peak of the political is not much more than a hard-argued myth.

What is simultaneously true, is that there is great potential for the re-articulation and reassertion of democracy, and this chapter will argue that this potential can be found in the agonistic theory of Chantal Mouffe. While her work has been critiqued by many who oppose the agonist tradition, I assert that her advocacy for agonistic pluralism is uniquely useful. Unlike other popular agonists, her work embraces antagonism, but still upholds a democratic optimism that paves a way forward for democracy. In particular, she is critical of the loss of the political dimension, or of “post-political” democracy, that has now ignored the innate conflict of the political, aiming, instead, towards the consensus and reconciliation of difference.<sup>38</sup> Still, she ensures that there are agonistic paths to channelling and managing this conflict. Amidst her theoretical critique, Mouffe’s goal is practical; she calls for a vibrant agonistic space for contestation that can mobilize the antagonistic tendencies of democratic reality towards legitimate adversarial relations.<sup>39</sup> Opposed to the centring of the left/right divide and dialogic theorists’ attempt to do away with old antagonisms, Mouffe calls for consensus on ethico-political democratic principles but asks for an acceptance that there will always be dissent on the interpretation and implementation of these values in political institutions.<sup>40</sup>

All this considered, this chapter demonstrates that there is still merit in Mouffe’s approach. There is a current need for a theory of agonism that can approach the specificity of the

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<sup>37</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “The Radical Centre: A Politics without Adversary (1998)” in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 159.

politically indeterminate field of democratic theory. It has become abundantly clear that the traditions by which we think democracy are not cohesive to understanding plurality. Thus, Mouffe's theory has been chosen here – despite its flaws – for its ability to balance both the radical negativity of a conflictual political dimension and an optimistic view of the potential for democracy.<sup>41</sup> This chapter argues that Chantal Mouffe's theoretical work, with its foundational definition of the political, critique of deliberative democracy, and advocacy of agonism, provides a way forward to accepting the 'negative' aspects of the human condition that are necessary when theorizing democracy in relation to plurality.

To validate this argument, this chapter assumes three tasks: first, it will undertake an analysis of Mouffe's definition of the political dimension, positioning antagonistic friend/enemy relations as the formative and most necessary element of the political (1). Then, Mouffe's theory will be placed in opposition to deliberative democracy, particularly German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for the purpose of problematizing the prevalence of the dialogic tradition and illuminating the manner by which the dialogic framework fails to understand antagonism, passion, and collective identities (2). Finally, a way forward will be paved by Mouffe's promotion of agonistic democracy, which she defines by its channeling of conflict by institutionalized channels. Here, I will focus on necessary amendments to her theory which will justify its contribution (3). This examination of Mouffe's theory will begin with antagonism and move towards agonism – from the political to politics – as Mouffe's vision intends to mobilize the former into the latter.

### 1.1 A Much Needed Definition: Locating Mouffe's Political Dimension

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<sup>41</sup> Paulina Tambakaki, "The Task of Agonism and Agonism to the Task: Introducing 'Chantal Mouffe: Agonism and the Politics of Reason.'" 20, no. 2 (2014): 1.

To summarize Mouffe’s definition of the political to one element would be to say that the political dimension concerns antagonism.<sup>42</sup> By Mouffe’s accord, difference is expressed in the political dimension by we/they distinctions that are considered to be ineradicable to the human condition.<sup>43</sup> These we/they distinctions are not mere difference, but the existential conflicts that result from difference, and thus cannot be solved by technical experts and are not meant to be resolved by liberal rationalism.<sup>44</sup> These distinctions are produced by the recognition of the other, “constitutive outside”, or “exterior”, that is in conflict with the definition of the ‘we’ or ‘inside’, and may appear to threaten its existence.<sup>45</sup> The re-assertion of this antagonistic dimension breaks tradition with liberal understandings of the political. In fact, Mouffe argues that liberalism, in its attempt to “establish peaceful coexistence among people with different conceptions of the good”, dispels a genuine understanding of the political. What remains are moral and economic disagreements – arguments between competitors that take place in the moral and economic dimensions that claim to be resolved by rational deliberation.<sup>46</sup> Of course, in Mouffe’s critique we see that this is not the case. The political can never be fully eradicated; therefore, liberal societies will find that antagonism takes place in other spheres, drawing energy from various human endeavors.<sup>47</sup> The we/they distinction is maintained, but the potential to mobilize these antagonisms into fruitful, democratic, agonistic relations is lost.

With this in mind, it is evident that Chantal Mouffe desires to solidify the definition of the political in her work. By consequence, her theory of agonism is rooted in an assertion of her redefinition of the political. Reapproaching *On the Political* (2005), *The Democratic Paradox*

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<sup>42</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2010), 23.

<sup>47</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 12.

(2010), and *Agonistics* (2013) is a first step in understanding these roots; by tracing the theoretical roots of Mouffe's writings back to that of 20<sup>th</sup>-century German thought, one can find the starting point for a way forward for her democratic theory.<sup>48</sup>

In each of these texts, Mouffe makes clear that the foundation for defining her 'political' can be found in the work of controversial German political thinker, Carl Schmitt.<sup>49</sup> For much of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, to use Schmitt in a liberal theory would have been unacceptable due to his public and substantive support of German National Socialism before and during WWII. However, more recently, thinkers such as Mouffe have revisited Schmitt for the convergences found in their critiques. In her 2014 interview with Hansen and Sonnichsen, she justifies her use of Schmitt for his critical perspective – “the specificity of the political, the friend/enemy distinction, that liberal theory because of its individualism is blind to the political” – but she deviates from Schmitt on what he draws to be the consequence of such critical stance.<sup>50</sup> His radical critique of liberal democracy, which is founded, like Mouffe's, in a redefinition of the political, allows for a retrieval and repurposing of certain elements of his theory.

*Embracing and Surpassing Carl Schmitt.*

Published in 1932, Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* concentrated the political in one relationship: that between friend and enemy.<sup>51</sup> According to Schmitt, the political, at its core, is not attached to a state, regime, or specific entity of people.<sup>52</sup> The political is, for Schmitt, but a distinction made between a 'we' and a 'they', beyond any secondary category of morality, aesthetics, economics, or otherwise.<sup>53</sup> Every consensus between a 'we' is a decision that assumes

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<sup>48</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 267.

<sup>51</sup> Schmitt et al., *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>52</sup> Schmitt et al., *The Concept of the Political*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

the creation or identification of an excluded ‘they’.<sup>54</sup> The identified groups may be founded in some moral, aesthetic, or economic justification, but this relationship can always be reduced to a mere union or separation.<sup>55</sup> While Mouffe does not rely solely on Schmitt’s definition, she chooses to appropriate this concept as a useful starting point while still recognizing its shortcomings.

Mouffe’s work shows a specific attraction to Schmitt’s clear separation of the political dimension from any secondary concerns. Mouffe agrees that while democratic politics, and democratic theory, has relied on moral or economic justification to define enmity, conflict is much more innate than these theses allow. Further, in its separation, Mouffe considers the political to be of central importance to human society. For both Mouffe and Schmitt, all of human relation and conflict can be reduced to a simple opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that emerges from the inherent difference of plurality. Both thinkers consider the antagonistic character of these relations to be the most essential dimension of understanding human behaviour and the functions of society. While for Schmitt, these oppositions are used to justify isolationist international politics and nationalism, Mouffe uses them to understand the human need for collective identities and ‘radical negativity’.

Mouffe thinks that common democratic theory, such as Habermasian deliberative democracy, ignores these elements of human behaviour because it fails to properly define the conflictual political. As is articulated in *On the Political*, so-called “post-politics” maintains focus on consensus and reconciliation by the way of rational deliberation.<sup>56</sup> In this case, the political appears as a management of solvable differences, where all parties involved should

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<sup>54</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Schmitt et al., *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 1.

come to rational agreement. Deliberative theorist Jürgen Habermas stressed that the political must transcend “competing forms of life...conflicts and oppositions” or else “we will end up with something resembling Carl Schmitt’s understanding of politics.”<sup>57</sup> In a way, Habermas was right. Mouffe’s, and especially Schmitt’s, understanding of politics does rest upon a kind of conflict that can appear quite extreme. But Mouffe counters the Habermasian liberal idea that the primacy of the political is antithetical to good democracy.<sup>58</sup> For Mouffe, it is not conflict that threatens democratic flourishing, but it is an erasure of this political, and erasure of existential friend/enemy distinctions, that threatens our understanding of democracy. For Mouffe, these friend/enemy distinctions are innate to human behaviour; therefore, they are irreconcilable. Further, for Schmitt there is always the potential that these divisions can be pushed to extreme violence.<sup>59</sup> Comparatively, theorists such as Habermas have assured that the field treats moral dilemmas and economic disagreements as mere bumps along the road on the journey to peak social organization. By utilizing but taming Schmitt’s concept of the political, which claims that “were this distinction to vanish then political life would vanish altogether”, Mouffe presents a vision of democracy that is not founded upon a Schmittian violence or a Habermasian solving of conflict. Instead, Mouffe offers the surprising claim that conflict ought to always sit at the core of the democratic understanding of plurality, but it can be pacified by democratic channels.

In a critique of her engagement with Schmitt, German political scientist Martin Beckstein clarifies an important aspect of the interaction between Mouffe and Schmitt. In Mouffe’s dialogue with Schmitt, she uses his work to illuminate concerns beyond the material. In his 2011 piece, “The dissociative and polemical political: Chantal Mouffe and the intellectual heritage of

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<sup>57</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Schmitt et al. *The Concept of the Political*, 49.

Carl Schmitt”, Beckstein asserts that while the political dimension is foundational in Mouffe’s critique of real democratic institutions, of greater concern is its importance in our ontological condition.<sup>60</sup> Her work denies any ‘peak’ political organization because, to her, the political is a concern of the very being of humankind – it is beyond any progress of history.<sup>61</sup> As a society, the concern should not be to reach a ‘best’ regime, as regimes are tied to the temporal experience.

Instead, Mouffe pushes us to consider the existential and ontological experience of the political. As stated in *Agonistics*, “to think politically requires recognizing the ontological dimension of radical negativity.”<sup>62</sup> This aligns her work with a thought tradition described by Arata D. Yammamoto as “the ontological primacy of antagonism”, in which other radical thinkers such as Jacques Rancière and Claude Lefort also participate.<sup>63</sup> Still, it should be considered that while Mouffe identifies the political as ontological, she deems *politics* to be ontic. Mouffe determines that, indeed, politics ought to be concerned with progress; with the improvement of the practices and institutions that create order in society. However, for Mouffe, the political is not bound by this same line of progress. She maintains that the political is concerned with the very constitution of society and the organization of human co-existence.<sup>64</sup> As will be discussed in later paragraphs, the political as distinctly ontological and antagonistic directs Mouffe’s democratic theory towards a focus on the mobilization of these distinct elements rather than the pursuit of their elimination.

While Schmitt provides some theoretical foundation for the antagonistic and ontological political dimension, Mouffe’s work must divert from his concept, as Schmitt’s political does not

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<sup>60</sup> Martin Beckstein, “The Dissociative and Polemical Political: Chantal Mouffe and the Intellectual Heritage of Carl Schmitt,” *The Dissociative and Polemical Political* 16, no. 1 (2011): 35.

<sup>61</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), 15.

<sup>63</sup> Yammamoto, “Why agonistic planning? Questioning Chantal Mouffe’s thesis of the ontological primacy of the political”, 384.

<sup>64</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 9.

accommodate plurality. Recall that his work has particular implications for international relations; his advocacy for state-to-state friend/enemy relations requires a certain homogeneity within collective identities, explaining his advocacy for nationalism. However, for Mouffe, the very concept of the political is rooted in plurality. It is her assumption of difference that defines the political dimension and reveals antagonisms.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, and stemming from this fact, identity is also formed by the we/they distinctions of the political. According to Mouffe, identity can only exist by the establishment of difference.<sup>66</sup> Rooted in concepts presented by Henry Staten, and later Jacques Derrida, Mouffe insists that identity is a relational occurrence that demands a “perception of something as ‘other’ which constitutes its ‘exterior’” and defines both the ‘outside’ and the ‘we’ inside.<sup>67</sup> This is elaborated well by Mouffe in her 1994 essay, “For a Politics of a Nomadic Society”:

Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity (i.e. the perception of something ‘other’ than it which will constitute its ‘exterior’), then we can begin to understand why such a relationship may always become a terrain for antagonism... Looking at the issue of identity in this way transforms the way we think of the political. The political can no longer be located as present only in a certain type of institution, as representative of a sphere or level of society. It should rather be understood as a dimension inherent in all human society which stems from our very ontological condition.<sup>68</sup>

For Mouffe, a recognition of otherness, that which you are not, allows the establishment of that which you are. From this, identity is formed. From Schmitt, Mouffe maintains a recognition that while the difference between us and them does not necessitate antagonism, antagonism is always a potential.<sup>69</sup> Where she distances herself from Schmitt, is in the consequence of this argument.

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<sup>65</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 35.

<sup>67</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “For a Politics of a Nomadic Identity (1994)” in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin. (New York: Routledge, 2011): 148-149.

<sup>69</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 31.

Schmitt argued that because of the antagonism of the political relationship, pluralist democracy is unviable. He advocated for we/they distinctions from state to state but did not accept the notion that pluralism can exist inside political communities.<sup>70</sup> Because of this, he necessitated authoritarian order to eliminate any internal difference in the community. On the other hand, Mouffe's solution is found in affirming the antagonistic potential of collective human relations and aiming this potential towards agonistic relations.

*Hegemony and Identity.*

James Martin recognizes this theory of identity as the basis for Mouffe's conception of hegemony and an analysis of hegemony is imperative in facilitating the later discussion of agonism and agonistic relations. For Mouffe, hegemony is the expressed order of power which emerges from the we/they struggles for identity. As Martin describes it, Mouffe's concept of hegemony, developed in collaboration with Ernesto Laclau, is "the clash between different groups and classes revealed in numerous hostilities, conflicts and forms of violence."<sup>71</sup> This idea of 'hegemony' is how Mouffe understands political power; wherein power is the expression of the political distinction through group identities coming into direct conflict with one another, fighting to be solidified in society by the hegemonic expression.<sup>72</sup> Mouffe elaborates:

This point is decisive. It is because every object has inscribed in its very being something other than itself and that as a result, everything is constructed as difference, that its being cannot be conceived as pure 'presence' or 'objectivity'. Since the constitutive outside is present within the inside as its always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent. This implies that we should not conceptualize power as an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves. This point of confluence between objectivity and power is what we have called 'hegemony'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., "Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism", 267.

<sup>71</sup> James Martin "Introduction: Democracy and Conflict in the Work of Chantal Mouffe." in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

<sup>72</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 21.

To reiterate, there is no essential form of identification. Identification hinges on a recognition of the ‘other’, who is existential, but not essential. This means that while identities may be “crystallized” in the hegemonic expression, they are still precarious. These acts of power are always at risk of change because identity is contestable.<sup>74</sup>

Note that this concept of hegemony, which rests upon ideas of power and identity, is in line with Schmitt’s conception of the political. Where Mouffe takes this notion of the political and applies it on the functions of regional politics, Schmitt’s goal appears broader, using the political to explain war-like relations between states. But it is Mouffe who describes the inner-workings of democracy as war-like. She reframes Schmitt’s violent and dissociative<sup>75</sup> conception of national identity, in which identity occurs by a forcefully negative relation to an other, to conceptualize her own idea of collective identities. This, in turn, justifies her larger theory of agonism.

According to Mouffe, the antagonistic concern of the political, which is expressed in hegemonic struggle, must be tamed.<sup>76</sup> She realizes that deliberative democracy has attempted to tame the struggle of democracy by hiding its true nature. But instead of facing the antagonistic characteristic of pluralistic democracy, the Habermasian model proposes a rearticulation of democracy by communicative terms.<sup>77</sup> The dialogic tradition continually fails to isolate a clear definition of the political, focusing instead on the elimination of conflicts towards consensual harmony. This initial failure animates Mouffe’s critique of the liberal tradition, and this critique is no better illustrated than in her critiques of Jürgen Habermas.

## 1.2 Opposing the Status Quo: Habermasian Deliberative Democracy and De-politicization

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<sup>74</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 49.

<sup>75</sup> Marchart, “Politics and the Political: Genealogy of a Conceptual Difference”, 36 & 38.

<sup>76</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 268.

<sup>77</sup> Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?”, 746.

Throughout each of her discussed works, Mouffe criticizes democratic theory for its recent tendency towards dialogic harmony. She ascertains that theoretical traditions, such as deliberative democracy, have lost their understanding of the political dimension in their relentless pursuit of reconciling conflict. Because of this loss, Mouffe considers that democratic theory, and democracies in practice, are ill-equipped to function politically as the continued depoliticization cannot account for the radical negativity of human behaviour.

A continual target for Mouffe is German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In many ways, Mouffe's theory of agonism answers the same question posed by Habermas, which is: how can democracy change its thinking about plurality in order to manage the continual theoretical struggle between the two? The whole of Habermas' democratic theory is an attempt to alleviate this struggle between democracy and plurality. However, Mouffe understands that the theoretical can never truly be solved and instead mobilizes the radical negativities of its reality. In the following paragraphs, I will turn focus to Mouffe's critique of Habermasian deliberative democracy, addressing three components of his theory that, despite their similarities, act to substantially drive these thinkers apart.

This analysis will demonstrate both the theoretical and practical ways that the dialogic framework has failed in its struggle with plurality, establishing the need for Mouffe's agonism. Each divergence in their works is treated as confirmation of the fruitfulness of their opposition. First, I discuss the relevance of conflict, demonstrating that Habermas accepts conflict as a rationally negotiable element of political deliberation that should result in a logical consensus. This is in opposition to Mouffe, who envisions antagonism as irreconcilable, recognizing it as an existential concern and the founding aspect of the political struggle. From here, Habermas' favouring of reason over emotion will be analyzed. This will demonstrate how communicative

action eliminates the importance of passion in the formation of collective identities, as elucidated by Mouffe's critique. Finally, the 'dichotomy' or 'paradox' of democracy will be addressed, using the divergence between Mouffe and Habermas on this point as evidence of deliberative democracy's misunderstanding of collective identities.

*Antagonism.*

It would be inaccurate to argue that Habermas' democratic theory does not facilitate *any* discussion of conflict; rather, his issue with conflict is a misunderstanding of its relevance. As stated, Mouffe views the general transition to deliberative democracy as a substantive loss of the true political dimension, in which antagonism is expelled from the democratic process in a focus on the compulsive rationalization of political deliberation. Mouffe condemns Habermas in this critique, calling his theoretical work an unrealistic ambition towards "rationally accepted results", rather than any true pursuit to recognize the political.<sup>78</sup> In pursuit of these rational and harmonious results, Mouffe argues that deliberative theorists sacrifice what has thus been described as the political dimension.

This deliberative position is not compatible with the antagonistic neo-Schmittian<sup>79</sup> we/they distinctions that, for Mouffe, are innate to the experience of plurality. She advocates for a maintenance of we/they divisions, claiming that "the very content of left and right will vary, but the dividing line should remain because its disappearance would indicate that social division is denied and that an ensemble of voices has been silenced."<sup>80</sup> For Mouffe, Habermas' deliberative democratic theory is emblematic of this tendency to attempt the achievement of consensus by blurring the lines, or 'centring'. This is a centring that, by logical development,

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<sup>78</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 87.

<sup>79</sup> Marchart, "Politics and the Political: Genealogy of a Conceptual Difference", 43.

<sup>80</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 120.

must dispel with the irreducible element of antagonism. In some cases, the ‘other’ may be turned to a moral or economic enemy, where they are dealt with as mere competitors. But Mouffe’s agonism proves that, when expelled, these antagonisms are most likely pushed outside of traditional channels, causing conflict in other spheres. What Mouffe fails to properly accentuate in this critique, but is further debated by her critics, is that Habermas does give certain consideration to antagonism and even values its place in democratic politics.

For instance, in her attempt to reconcile their theories, Professor Gulshan Khan presents a minimization of the difference in Mouffe and Habermas’ acceptance of antagonism. In her 2013 piece “Critical Republicanism: Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe”, Khan asserts that Habermas does, in fact, recognize the “inevitability and value of conflict” and that “as Habermas sees it, the only way to prevent a situation of escalating conflict – what Mouffe calls relations of antagonism – is for inter-subjective actors to come to some understanding about the normative regulations of strategic action.”<sup>81</sup> Khan’s point cannot go ignored, as there is evidence in Habermas’ writings that conflict is recognized, but is seen as a barrier to good democracy. I do not accept this as proof of reconciliation between the theorists, but it is proof that Habermas theory does leave some space for conflict.

It is Khan who clarifies that Habermas’ acceptance of radical individualism acknowledges that plurality comes with conflict. As is seen in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas assures that conflicts are presupposed in communicative action and he suggests that these conflicts be legitimated and constrained by the “binding force of rationally motivated beliefs and the imposed force of external sanctions.”<sup>82</sup> From this, Khan deduces that Mouffe and

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<sup>81</sup> Gulshan Khan, “Critical Republicanism: Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe.” *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no. 4 (2013): 328.

<sup>82</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 27.

Habermas both agree with the ‘binding’ of political communities by way of decided norms and they both push for limiting of conflict by outside sources.<sup>83</sup> For Mouffe, this is a decided ‘thin consensus’ of liberty and equality, but encouragement on conflictual interpretation of these values; for Habermas, consensus rests on rationality and the assumption of finality in decision making.

It is clear, then, that Habermas does give consideration to the potential for antagonism. He calls this the “risk of dissension” that could emerge from “better reason” and newly learned alternatives; however, he argues that stability will be maintained against these risks because they are assured to be rationally motivated and are secured by the success of social integration.<sup>84</sup> While Habermas accepts the ‘danger’ of conflict, it is still an inconvenience to the flourish of democracy. It is promised that rationalism can resolve many of these conflicts. Khan’s comparison only affirms the opposition of Mouffe and Habermas in this regard. Khan references Habermas’ advocacy for the negotiation, bargaining, and compromise of norms of rationality. According to Habermas, those engaged in communicative action must deliberate on the norms that will bind society.<sup>85</sup> This is not what Mouffe would like to achieve. Instead, Mouffe contends that democracy is grounded on the binding ethico-political principles of liberty and equality, but that even these are predicated on a “thin consensus.”<sup>86</sup> Mouffe asserts: “an agonistic democracy should provide the possibility for a confrontation between different and conflicting interpretations of the shared ethico-political principles.”<sup>87</sup> Finality should always be avoided and potential for conflict should be encouraged. Much like Khan is unable to reconcile Mouffe and

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<sup>83</sup> One must assume Khan is referring to Mouffe’s ‘agonistic channels’. Khan, “Critical Republicanism: Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe”, 328.

<sup>84</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 36.

<sup>85</sup> Khan, “Critical Republicanism: Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe”, 328.

<sup>86</sup> Rummens, “Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle?”, 377.

<sup>87</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 266.

Habermas as theorists, Mouffe deems antagonism as unsurpassable, but assures that their difference is manageable.

This difference in Mouffe and Habermas' approach to antagonism explains how both thinkers conceive of political action. Mouffe thinks that the relevance of antagonism in the political confirms that it is a hegemonic struggle rather than a deliberative one. Mouffe explains that existing hegemonies decide the immanent interpretation of these ethico-political principles and that oppositional hegemonies fight for the power to implement their own.<sup>88</sup> This is incompatible with the Habermasian dialogic framework. Recall that Habermas positions antagonisms as negotiable conflicts that can be strategically reconciled to a rational consensus. According to Mouffe's critique, these rational consensuses are solidified as aspects of reason or logic, claiming them to be universal and unchangeable.<sup>89</sup> Because the nature of political deliberation is measured against some transcendental rational morality, it is assumed that political decisions are a rational consensus that all rational beings could arrive at.

However, for Mouffe, rational consensuses are the myths of a dialogic framework that has misplaced the true political dimension and its innate, irreconcilable antagonisms by assuming that political decisions can reach some kind of universal and logical final ground.<sup>90</sup> Mouffe maintains that any consensus in a liberal democracy "is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations."<sup>91</sup> For Mouffe, dialogic consensus is the revelation of but *one* organization of the political, commonly asserting one hegemony as the reasonable endpoint. To believe that this endpoint is somehow achievable, given the antagonistic nature of human behaviour, is a great mistake, for Mouffe. Above all, Mouffe argues that "the

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<sup>88</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

refusal to acknowledge that...a society is always hegemonically constituted through a certain structure of power relations leads to accepting the existing hegemony and remaining trapped within its configuration of forces.”<sup>92</sup> By Mouffe’s argumentation, it is the inability to properly think of hegemony that binds society to solidified power structures.

There is real consequence to this thinking. Mouffe argues that these consequences can be detrimental. Mouffe predicts that by accepting existing hegemonies, political conflicts will only be driven outside of democratic politics or directed against it, manifesting as anti-establishment, populist, and radical social movements.<sup>93</sup> In comparison, Mouffe’s description of antagonism recognizes the existential and irreconcilable nature of conflict and allows for the co-existence of multiplicity by mobilizing conflicts as agonistic struggles.<sup>94</sup> This establishes an “undecidability” or “lack of final ground” in Mouffe’s politics, wherein things could always be differently, because they can always be articulated into a new hegemonic expression.<sup>95</sup>

*Reason.*

Recall that Habermas theory rests upon a binding force of rationality. As told by Stefan Rummens’ 2009 article “Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle?”, “as a result of its rationalistic premises, [deliberative democracy] refuses to accept that political oppositions cannot be resolved by rational means and that politics is ultimately about making decisions on undecidable terrains.”<sup>96</sup> Mouffe recognizes these undecidable terrains and takes issue with the elevation of rationality, claiming that the core of the deliberative democratic tradition, in its

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<sup>92</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 63.

<sup>93</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 69.

<sup>94</sup> Martin “Introduction: Democracy and Conflict in the Work of Chantal Mouffe”, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 30.

<sup>96</sup> Rummens, “Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle?”, 377.

reluctance to embrace antagonism, perpetuates the dismissal of the “the role played by the affective dimension” in the political.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, Mouffe argues that Habermas’ work perpetuates a long held liberal preference for reason over emotion. Habermas builds upon the common liberal tradition of practical reason, but transcends its concept of reason by creating an authoritative morality accessed through language.<sup>98</sup> This allegiance is developed in *Between Facts and Norms*, and referred to as “communicative action”, wherein the practice of communicative action is said to activate this innately-held human capacity for rationality and dictates that public discourse will be grounded in a universal reason that is accessed in the dialogic or linguistic medium.<sup>99</sup>

The Habermasian concept of reason promises that all humans can adopt some kind of “intersubjectively extended perspective” where norms and identities are binded on the basis of this moral rationality.<sup>100</sup> Habermas portrays humans as always potential rational creatures whose motivations can be followed by logical explanation. In theory, this should smoothen the democratic political process by assuring that consensus can be reached by all ‘rational’ peoples. The consequence of this moral rationality is that it ignores the war-like antagonistic behaviour that has been affirmed by Schmitt and Mouffe. One cannot accept that plurality causes conflict and dismiss the fact that with conflict comes emotion.

Mouffe recognizes this failure of the rationalistic conception of democracy, which upholds the binary tension between reason and emotion. In favoring reason, the dialogic model cannot understand the force that emotion plays in the political and in the binding of collective identities. Carl Schmitt claimed that when a collectivity identifies an enemy in an opposing

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<sup>97</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 95.

<sup>98</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 3.

<sup>100</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 31.

collectivity this is the most “intense and extreme antagonism.”<sup>101</sup> Mouffe agrees that this intensity cannot be overlooked. For this critique, Mouffe relies on German psychologist Sigmund Freud, who presents the idea that human groups are held together by an affective power: “Eros.”<sup>102</sup> In this context, Eros is considered a libidinal or instinctual driving force that binds group relations. It is often referred to as passion:

...the rationalism and individualism dominant in liberal theory do not allow one to understand the crucial role played in politics by what I have called ‘passions’: the affective dimension which is mobilized in the creation of political identities...For liberals, everything which implies a collective dimension is seen as archaic, something irrational that should not exist anymore in modern societies.<sup>103</sup>

By Mouffe’s critique, the elevation of reason in the deliberative model subsequently devalues and dismisses so-called ‘passions’. Due to deliberative theorists’ tendency to ignore antagonism, what is presented as a logical dismissal of unnecessary or backward human functions, is the discreditation of an intrinsic and influential human force. Mouffe maintains that identification as a democratic citizen must be secured by passionate *and plural* allegiances to democratic values, rather than a singular universally-held rational morality.

To reiterate, Mouffe emphasises that, in the rationalist tradition, “passions are erased from the realm of politics, which is reduced to a neutral field of competing interests. Completely missing from such an approach is the ‘political’ in its dimension of power, antagonism and relationship of forces.”<sup>104</sup> Once again, Mouffe’s critique can be sophisticated by looking to her interlocutors. While Mouffe relies on Freud’s concept of Eros to justify the assertion of passions in the political, in his 2011 chapter, “The Political Mind and Its Other”, Ramón Maiz suggests that critiques ought to move beyond “the classical reason/emotion dichotomy” by engaging with

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<sup>101</sup> Schmitt et al., *The Concept of the Political*, 29.

<sup>102</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 96.

<sup>103</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 237.

<sup>104</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 30-31.

accounts of both passion and reason in interdisciplinary literature.<sup>105</sup> He does not see the productivity in a continuation of this binary classification. To ground this argument, Maiz reviews literature from many fields that concerns reason/emotion dualism. According to Maiz's review, the work done on this topic in psychology, sociology, and neuroscience affirms the "misleading dualism" that is so present in political theory, and especially deliberative models, but offers a more relevant and sophisticated justification for not only the assertion of passions, but the recognition that emotion is, in fact, involved in reasoning: the dichotomy is a myth.<sup>106</sup>

Maiz clarifies Mouffe's critique, describing it as such: "according to them, collective identities cannot be explained by relying solely on the argumentative and symbolic nature of reality. In contrast, emotions are crucial to account for them."<sup>107</sup> While Mouffe's later works retreat, in part, from this dualism, Maiz recognizes Mouffe's existing requirement of both an instinctual expression and a formative aspect of the political. Furthermore, he critiques Habermas for the 'motivational deficit' that his theory of collective action sanctions, wherein the deliberative model ignores the emotional bonds that normally drive human action. This is considered, by Maiz, as correlative to the "exaggerated emphasis that [he] places on consensus" which makes no room for the passion-driven conflicts of collective identities.<sup>108</sup> In all, Maiz suggests:

Far from promoting a pendulum-like movement between the two extremes of the binary code, that is, far from arguing for 'more passion' in politic...what is required is to re-think the articulation between emotional and cognitive elements in politics. This is necessary in order to analyse the irreducible dimensions of decision-making: social mobilization, public contestation and the conflicting relations between collective identities.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ramón Maiz, "The Political Mind and Its Other: Rethinking the Non-Place of Passions in Modern Political" in *Politics and Emotions: The Obama Phenomenon*, ed. Marcos Engelken-Jorge, Pedro Ibarra Güell, Carmelo Moreno Del Rio (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011): 65.

<sup>106</sup> Maiz, "The Political Mind and Its Other", 29-31 & 43.

<sup>107</sup> Maiz, "The Political Mind and Its Other", 63.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 65.

What Maiz adds to Mouffe's critique of Habermasian deliberative democracy is that while Mouffe appeals to the notion of *Eros* to liberate passion from its opposition to reason, Maiz draws from literature in psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience that has concluded that emotions are a crucial element to human functioning – including the political.<sup>110</sup> His work offers the perspective that when political theorists, including Mouffe, uphold this dichotomy between reason and emotion in their critiques, it maintains the space between the two and assures the opportunity for emotion to be othered and for reason to be transcended. It is by way of modern knowledge of human functioning that we can affirm Mouffe's initial assertion that affect plays a crucial role in the process of identification, and therefore, better understand political action.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps reason and emotion are not two separate functions, but of the same drive. All considered, it is evident that the Habermasian framework only affirms the transcendence of reason, leaving emotion or passion behind, and because of this is proven to be incapable of dealing with the complexities of the political. Habermas, and the larger consensus tradition that he is so exemplary of, is not equipped to understand this dimension of human behaviour that Mouffe presents so well.

*Individualism.*

The fact that deliberative democracy, and the liberal tradition more widely, highly values individualism only solidifies Mouffe's critique. Individualism makes it very difficult to comprehend, and often requires opposition to, the formation of collective identities. As is articulated in *Agonistics*, liberalism understands identity as an individual presence or essentialist 'being' rather than a political act which demands the exclusion of an other.<sup>112</sup> Habermas likewise

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<sup>110</sup> Maiz, "The Political Mind and Its Other", 44.

<sup>111</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 176.

<sup>112</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 30.

claims that liberalism only presents private interests in a collective by strategic acts of power.<sup>113</sup> In his review of liberalism, he does not see liberalism as embracing any description of collective identities as somehow innate or natural. Because of this, he argues that the individualism of liberalism will always be in tension with the principle of popular sovereignty. Mouffe and Habermas agree on this point. Mouffe refers to this tension as a “paradox”<sup>114</sup> and Habermas names it a “conceptual dichotomy.”<sup>115</sup> By both accounts, it is the democratic tradition that attempts to assert group identities. Habermas refers to these as “quasi-natural solidary communities”<sup>116</sup> and Mouffe as “collective identities.”<sup>117</sup> Both admit that this internal paradox, or dichotomy, between liberal individualism and democratic collectivism creates an unavoidable tension.

However, while they agree on the problem, their responses to this tension come into direct opposition. In *The Inclusion of the Other*, Habermas proposes a “third way” democratic theory, apart from liberal and republican models, that, following his assertion of consensus, suggest “weaving together negotiations and discourses of self-understanding and of justice.”<sup>118</sup> Echoing earlier remarks, he claims that “this democratic procedure grounds the presumption that under such conditions reasonable or fair results are obtained.”<sup>119</sup> Mouffe claims that this transition away from the liberal/republican dichotomy is not the clever solution that Habermas assumes it to be. Once again, Mouffe sees that the deliberative model of democracy cannot properly account for paradox, conflict, or exclusion, as it continually reverts to attempts at diverting from or ignoring these negativities. Whenever it appears as though Habermas has

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<sup>113</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 239.

<sup>114</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 1.

<sup>115</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 242.

<sup>116</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 131.

<sup>117</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 10.

<sup>118</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 246.

<sup>119</sup> Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 246.

landed on the correct critique, he attempts to solve it. Habermas misses what Mouffe reveals, which is that these ‘negative’ aspects of democracy need not be overcome, but, in fact, constitute the very texture of political life. By cause, the expression of Habermas’ theory lacks the proper recognition of the political dimension. As Mouffe asserts, it is vital to understand that they cannot be reconciled.<sup>120</sup> All this considered, the conflict between the logic of liberalism and democracy should not be avoided. Mouffe assures that to account for the innate human tendency towards collective identities, these two logics ought to be stabilized: not in a deliberative negotiation between the two, but in a contamination of each.<sup>121</sup>

Khan, again, wants to reduce the chasm between Habermas and Mouffe on this point. She blames the thinkers’ opposition concerning collective identities on a misinterpretation of Habermas. According to Khan,

Indeed, [Habermas] recognises that any consensus on epistemological and moral claims is intrinsically fallible, and therefore it is always subject to the possibility of revision and change. The goal of political theory for Habermas, as well as for Mouffe, is to create ‘unity [on contested norms] in a context of conflict and diversity’. His acknowledgement that ‘there can be no inclusion without exclusion’ also steers away from the idea of a fully inclusive procedure, and resonates with Mouffe’s claim that ‘collective identities can only be established on the mode of an us/them distinction’. Indeed, [Habermas] says that any ‘political community that wants to understand itself as a democracy must at least distinguish between members and non-members’.<sup>122</sup>

However, in *Between Facts and Norms*, we see that this convenient description of Habermas as a supporter of fluid or interchangeable collective identities is complicated. Indeed, Habermas maintains a commitment to the liberal tradition of individualism, referencing “communicatively acting subjects” who are expected to act singularly based on consensus.<sup>123</sup> While the fallibility and conflict of identification may be realized by Habermas, its relevance in his work is often

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<sup>120</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Khan, “Critical Republicanism: Jurgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe”, 330.

<sup>123</sup> Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 119.

misplaced. He sees this as a risk to consensus, where for Mouffe, consensus itself is founded on conflict and conflict cannot be done away with. It ought to be mobilized.

Mouffe demonstrates that by ignoring how collective identities are inherent to the political dimension, people can join movements that acknowledge their identities, their passions, and antagonisms, and potentially radicalize those identities. These movements may affirm existing collective identities, assuring a cathartic space for identification that is not offered in deliberative democratic systems. And at their most extreme, these identities may be mobilized in direct opposition to democratic systems or values.<sup>124</sup>

The political demands a we/they relationship. There are dimensions to antagonism, passion, and collective identities that are irreducible in human societies.<sup>125</sup> For Mouffe, this is inherent to human beings as political animals, who will always attempt to fulfill their passion. Additionally, these are negativities that cannot be overcome dialectically.<sup>126</sup> When people are offered an enemy, whether imagined or not, it can be an intense emotional experience. It allows their passions to exist in politics. To demonstrate this point, Mouffe draws comparison to the rise of populist movements, calling to the way in which, for many, they provide a collective identification and space for conflict where it is not often recognized in traditional channels.

This comparative analysis of the theory of Mouffe and Habermas establishes that deliberative democracy does not have the capacity to comprehend the democratic experience because of its initial failure to define the political. Because the political dimension is expelled in Habermas' work, difficulty in recognizing antagonism, passion, and collective identities follows. The discussion of antagonism clarifies that the conflicts emerging from plurality cannot be

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<sup>124</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 59.

<sup>125</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 119.

<sup>126</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 15.

reconciled by way of consensus. By favouring consensus and dispelling with antagonism, deliberative democracy pushes for a centring of the political spectrum, failing to recognize the inherent differences in society.<sup>127</sup> This theoretical character demonstrates an integral incapacity to deal with plurality and to enact hegemonic change; as a result, we/they distinctions manifest in conflicts between the people and the establishment.<sup>128</sup> As Mouffe argues, this further marginalizes and radicalizes movements that long for a hegemonic alternative.

This issue is only compounded by the liberal tradition of elevating reason and suppressing passions. Throughout her works, Mouffe demands an acceptance of innate human passions, claiming this acceptance can demystify the long-held idea that political decisions and societal bonds are predicated solely on self-interest or some transcendent moral rationality. The interdisciplinary work of Ramón Maiz clarifies this argument by offering evidence that passion is not a concept in opposition to reason but could be intrinsic part of human logic. Finally, Mouffe's critiques of Habermas' political theory reveal his liberal-leaning support of individualism that disregards the human compulsion to form collective identities.

From this definition of the political and attacks against Habermasian deliberative democracy Mouffe gives warning of what is to come if democratic theory does not make change. She argues that there are two options if the currently accepted model of the dialogical framework is maintained: first, a multiplicity of various 'sub-political' struggles – struggles that occur in realms outside of the true political – which, according to thinkers like Habermas, can be dealt with through dialogue and rational consensus. As has been demonstrated in the past few decades, these sub-political struggles are most often manifested in the moral register, turning political conflict into ethical or quasi-religious enmity, where oppositional forces perform conflict as the

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<sup>127</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 67.

<sup>128</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 65.

forces of good and evil.<sup>129</sup> Sub-political struggles can also be seen in social movements. Second, and emerging from the first, an ignorance of political antagonism enables the forthcoming of essentialists and fundamentalists who claim to fight “a backward struggle against the forces of progress.”<sup>130</sup> This subverts conflict from any real ‘us’ and ‘them’ to a combat with history itself.<sup>131</sup> Neither of these options are a plausible way forward for democracy. These options demonstrate the perpetuation of a shallow politics that promises the reconciliation of conflict, but instead only shifts it into other spheres, allowing for festering tensions to become radicalized.

With all this in mind, Mouffe does not settle into lamentation on the currently accepted democratic model. Instead, she offers a way forward, suggesting “what democracy requires is drawing the we/they distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy.”<sup>132</sup> Mouffe’s work provides a unique way of thinking democracy. Elucidated wonderfully by Paulina Tambakaki, Mouffe has not only used her insight on the political dimension to not only act as a “springboard of critique”, but also provides a “useful lens to challenging and disarticulating mainstream modes of thought.”<sup>133</sup> Her opposition to the democratic traditions of the past several decades have acted as a first step towards much needed change.

### 1.3 The Thin Consensus: A Way Forward for Democracy

Up to this point, this chapter has exposed Chantal Mouffe’s definition of the political and represented the consequence of its loss. The analysis of her 21<sup>st</sup>-century works illuminates the abject failure of democratic theory to define the political dimension, revealing how theories such as Habermasian deliberative democracy suppress the political. Deliberative democracy, and

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<sup>129</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 57.

<sup>130</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 50.

<sup>131</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 50.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>133</sup> Tambakaki, “The Task of Agonism and Agonism to the Task”, 1.

liberalism more broadly, have valued consensus, reason, and individualism as core tenets of the democratic project. In opposition, Mouffe's definition of the political, in its antagonistic and ontological dimension and its innate recognition of passion, collective identities, and hegemonic struggle, has succeeded at recognizing that real conflictual relations are irreducible to human behaviour. But as noted in *Agonistics*, "one of the main challenges for pluralist liberal democratic politics consists in trying to diffuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations."<sup>134</sup> It is from this place that Mouffe offers her way forward, expressed in 'agonistic pluralism': that the dimension of the political/antagonism ought to be maintained but sublimated in the democratic process to the more manageable category of the 'adversary'.<sup>135</sup>

While liberal traditions approach the challenge of pluralism by an attempted expulsion of the political dimension, Mouffe re-articulates the goal of democratic politics as converting antagonistic relations into ones of 'agonism'.<sup>136</sup> For Mouffe, agonistic pluralism must aim to sublimate the "struggle between enemies" into the "struggle between adversaries"; making these antagonistic relations more manageable for the democratic process.<sup>137</sup> Converting the antagonist to an adversary is not an elimination of conflict. This perspective legitimizes conflict within the democratic model, wherein the enemy is recognized as such, but is also considered a legitimate democratic opponent who holds an alternative interpretation of how democratic values should be implemented.<sup>138</sup>

It is important to distinguish that while agonistic pluralism does not aim for some harmonic consensus, there is a "thin consensus" that occurs in the legitimation of adversaries.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 39.

<sup>136</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 101.

<sup>137</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 34.

<sup>138</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 102.

<sup>139</sup> Rummens, "Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle?", 377.

Mouffe's democratic theory demands "coming to terms with the constitutive nature of power", and therefore, "relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony or transparency."<sup>140</sup> Instead, agonistic pluralism asserts a conflictual consensus, wherein both parties agree on the core ethico-political principles of democracy: liberty and equality.<sup>141</sup> Yet, this consensus is founded upon the assumption that plural interpretations of the principles will be held by adversaries. By Mouffe's conception, in allowing a common space for antagonism to be expressed – by making room for the political in politics – "adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent's right to fight for the victory of their position."<sup>142</sup>

These hegemonic victories are recognized as "temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation"; by this accord, democratic decisionism is always contestable and can never reach a final ground.<sup>143</sup> In addition, the thin consensus affirms we/they relations and provides the proper channels for these conflictual relations to be mobilized towards democratic goals; passions are given a democratic outlet.<sup>144</sup> In this conversion of antagonism to agonism, in which confrontation is regulated by democratic procedures, a true expression of the specificity of pluralistic democratic politics can be envisaged.<sup>145</sup>

Mouffe enters this conversation with the conviction that other popular theories of agonism are conceived as "agonism without antagonism."<sup>146</sup> Mouffe argues that other agonistic theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, Bonnie Honig, and William Connolly, are not sufficient in

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<sup>140</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 100.

<sup>141</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 102-103.

<sup>142</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 34-35.

<sup>143</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 102.

<sup>144</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 36-38.

<sup>145</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 37.

<sup>146</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 134.

maintaining the political dimension, because, much like Habermas, they avoid the pain of the political; their acceptance and assertion of pluralism is softened and declawed by focusing on ideas of persuasion (*Arendt*) or contestation of selves (*Honig*) and by lacking a recognition of the limits of plurality (*Connelly*).<sup>147</sup> Mouffe theorizes in response to this perceived gap in agonistic literature, recognizing that democratic theory was in need of a “metaphoric description of liberal democratic institutions.”<sup>148</sup> Engaging with her interlocutors, Mouffe reveals the overt need for a democratic theory that does not shy away from the servitudes of the political, because an ignorance of its penchant for conflict only allows conflict to be subsumed by other areas of society.

According to Mouffe, because agonistic pluralism is an analytical theory, “it does not have any political content.”<sup>149</sup> This means it does not offer a practical map for how politics should take place. Yet, Mouffe’s theory of agonism provides one of the most detailed descriptions of a concrete way forward for democracy. In particular, it provides a way forward for accepting certain ‘negative’ aspects of democracy and limits of plurality that have been ignored in the “unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism” that has been so-influenced by deliberative democracy.<sup>150</sup> While this hegemony in democratic theory and practice has maintained but one way of establishing democratic politics and existing as a democratic citizen, Mouffe’s theory opens space for the multiplication of “the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values.”<sup>151</sup> Mouffe’s work has allowed for

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<sup>147</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 23-26.

<sup>148</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 19.

<sup>149</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 266.

<sup>150</sup> Hansen & Sonnichsen, A., “Radical democracy, agonism and the limits of pluralism”, 266.

<sup>151</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 96.

greater democratic possibility for the last several decades, but I argue that there is an underrepresented optimism in her theorization.

Mouffe's agonistic theory offers a particularly hopeful and practical way forward for democracy that embraces the conflict of the political, recognizes the antagonistic condition of human relations, and finds an outlet for these antagonisms to be manifest by adversarial channels. Although her use of Schmitt appears to threaten a violent idea of collective identities, Mouffe finds in agonistic pluralism a method of relieving the relationship between democracy and power.<sup>152</sup> Her aim is to "acknowledge the existence of relations of power and the need to transform them, while renouncing the illusion that we could free ourselves completely from power."<sup>153</sup> Instead of relying on promises of unity by "rational persuasion", Mouffe legitimizes adversarial enmity, converting conflict by temporary and thin consensuses.<sup>154</sup> Mouffe's theory is not without fault, but there is great value in allowing interlocutors the opportunity to untangle those faults. As told by Tambakaki, there lies significant value in Mouffe's ability to "challenge the readers to reflect on what it means to work with(in) and against politics."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?", 753.

<sup>153</sup> Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?", 753.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 755.

<sup>155</sup> Tambakaki, "The Task of Agonism and Agonism to the Task", 1-2.

## 2. Comfort in Contention: Finding Stability in Jacques Rancière's "Impossible Regime"

### 2.0 Introduction

Jacques Rancière's democratic politics is a challenge; both as an active fight against the common landscapes of democracy and as a theory of any concrete cohesiveness. The French philosopher was aware of these challenges, acknowledging the instability of his concepts. In a reflection of his method, he calls his theory a "dramaturgy of politics" that travels through unstable concepts:

[These concepts] don't mean the same thing from the beginning of the travel to the end; firstly because the travel is a fight too, a multi-waged fight where the end emphasis can be on different aspects; secondly because the travel – or the fight – continuously discovers new landscapes, paths or obstacles which oblige to reframe the conceptual net used to think where we are.<sup>156</sup>

Rancière's account of these defiant and instable concepts appears as a night sky: full of flickering stars that come in and out of focus – you can attempt to record their characteristics and positions but their apparent refusal to be named and ordered challenges your perception moment to moment.

In this way, his method and theory converge. Both his approach and his political theory are positioned as antagonistic and precarious, as he uses each to contest against the rigid understandings of democracy. It is Rancière's description of the political itself that challenges these modern narratives of democracy. His definition of the political is blended and equated with his definition of democracy, equality, and anarchy; each are defined by their interruption in an assumed order of the political community. From this, he confronts common understandings of democracy on multiple fronts.

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<sup>156</sup> Jacques Rancière, "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière," *Parallax* 15, no. 3 (2009), 120.

Firstly, Rancière's work confronts the methodology of his contemporaries, taking issue with political theorists' manipulation of the democratic approach. He tells of a field that both hates and justifies democracy; of theorists that, in their criticism, resort to a distortion and reformation of the concept to fit their utopian visions of a democratic regime.<sup>157</sup> Further, his look into political theory allows for a challenge to long-held ideas of what democracy is or ought to be. He puts aside the 'ought', instead, looking behind him to base his theoretical foundations on thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato, two of democracy's original haters. The use of Plato and Aristotle as both creators of this hatred for democracy and as those who originally theorized democracy itself, grounds Rancière's vision of democracy in a distinctively conflictual description of the political.

An examination of Rancière's work rests upon defining this political dimension. His redefinition of the political as a conflictual dimension uncovers "major wrongs" in the both the traditional and common organization of the democratic communities.<sup>158</sup> Each of Rancière's critiques is infused with contention, as he dismantles long-held ideas of what democracy and politics truly are. While these multiple challenges to the democratic tradition bring forth images of a war on democracy – a democratic salient surrounded on every angle by the combative Rancière – I will argue that his multi-angled challenge to the democratic tradition can also be one of democracy's greatest allies. His focus on these unique conflicts of democracy reveals a dimension that is worth considering: that the conflicts of democracy are not a technical issue in the organization of democracy, but are built into its' very personality. For that reason, his original enterprise is well-suited to address the specific question of how democracy deals with

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<sup>157</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, (London & New York: Verso, 2014), 4-5.

<sup>158</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

conflict. While much of critical democratic theory is interested in the external struggles of democracy, this chapter argues that Rancière's distinctively radical approach to understanding democracy is needed to redefine democratic values and to identify that conflict does not arise by error but is built into democracy's foundations.

This chapter will present Rancière's concept of the political to reveal its contributions to a larger defense of democracy. This is not a simple task. Because of the aesthetic and poetic character of his work, locating a sharp description of Rancière's theoretical concepts can be difficult. That said, I will use his writings in *Dis-agreement*, *Dissensus*, and *Hatred of Democracy*, to analyze their content through a lens of agonism and organize his theory of democracy into four distinct categories. First, I will ground Rancière's theory in his use of Aristotle and Plato's 'miscount' of the community, as it is used to trace the emergence of the political dimension (1). Then, I will position this political dimension as the foundation for democracy, as democracy intervenes in the original miscount (2). Following this logic, I will assert democracy as a radical equalizer, positioning equality as the most active agent of Rancière's theory of democracy (3). Finally, I will address the anarchic character of Rancière's logic, for its void of qualifications for rule and standards for the distribution of political power and what this says of the practicality of Rancière's theory (4). While Rancière's writing is characteristically antagonistic, both in its method and theory, my systematic presentation of his work will reveal how his work finds ease in the challenge of democracy.

### 2.1 The Miscount: Understanding the Arithmetic of Plato and Aristotle

Within contemporary political theory it is widely accepted that while democracy offers great potential in dealing with difference, there is much discussion of which models can achieve this

potential.<sup>159</sup> How these issues are diagnosed and how they should be treated are often where thinkers differ in their approach. Rancière is no exception to this rule. As a critical democratic theorist, he identifies these issues as well as how his contemporaries fail to do likewise. In “Ten Theses on Politics”, Rancière asserts that a common theoretical understanding of political conflict is that it emerges when different interests come to head.<sup>160</sup> According to this logic, political conflict is nothing but a competition of desires that must be smoothed out by good policy and deliberation. Habermasian deliberative democracy relies on this kind of narrative, promising that rational deliberation and externally imposed sanctions can ultimately solve the conflictual nature of the difference.<sup>161</sup> Rancière identifies the influence of Habermas’ approach in the formation of the “state consensus” tradition, which since the 1990s has promised a return to the true nature of politics.<sup>162</sup> However, in his view, there is a more inherent characteristic of the political – which rears its head in democratic politics – that is the root cause of conflict. This characteristic is the political itself. Any focus on state consensus only dispels with this political dimension. Rancière defines the political as having its own separate action and logic.<sup>163</sup> It is not founded in the meeting of opposing political interests and it is not a fight for power. For Rancière, it is an original dimension and relationship that sets the conditions for the politics that follows.

According to Rancière’s definition, the political is that which creates an opposition of logics by way of a “miscount” of community parts.<sup>164</sup> According to Rancière, there is an originary count of community parts, that counts those who have part in rule and those with no part. While

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<sup>159</sup> David Held, “Democratic Autonomy”, from *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 260.

<sup>160</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 35

<sup>161</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 328

<sup>162</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 27-28.

<sup>163</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 27.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

this count may be justified by qualifications or claims to nature, this count is always “a false count, a double count, or a miscount.”<sup>165</sup> This description can appear vague. Rancière’s approach to political conflict relies on this aesthetic arithmetic that can seem very detached from our common understandings of the political. The distance of this definition is due, in part, to the fact that Rancière traces the miscount to a time before any modern debates on difference. Following the phenomenon of French critical theory in the 1960s, Rancière reaches back to the classics to create a foundation for his politics.<sup>166</sup> He ventures to “begin at the beginning” of politics and he sees Aristotle and Plato as the original source of the political and democracy.<sup>167</sup> In this grounding, Rancière provides an interpretation of Aristotle and Plato which places the origins of political conflict – of the miscount – at the very genesis of democracy. Therefore, it is only by returning to these roots that we can understand the nature of this miscount that is at the core of democratic division and conflict.

Rancière accuses Aristotle and Plato of being the originators of the miscount. To defend this accusation, I will analyze two important elements Rancière’s unique interpretation of their work: Aristotle’s theory of language, which defines man as political animal and justifies the division of those with and without the right to govern; and Plato’s theory of justice, which separates community members by profits and losses rather than looking to what is held in common, allowing for a division of the community by class.<sup>168</sup> Amongst a larger discussion of ancient philosophy, these two theories are imperative in understanding Rancière’s project, as each creates an essentialized reasoning for drawing lines in the community.

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<sup>165</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 6.

<sup>166</sup> Guiseppina Mecchia, “The Classics and Critical Theory in Postmodern France,” (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 67.

<sup>167</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 1.

<sup>168</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 1 and 5.

*Aristotle and the Political Man.*

It was Aristotle, in *Politics*, who designated man as a political animal. By his indication, it is man's distinct power of speech, or *logos*, that grants him this identification.<sup>169</sup> Aristotle's *logos* is defined as a particular method of speech, that which expresses rather than simply indicates. And in this separation between expression and indication, a line is drawn between two type of animals – between man and beast. First, the animal that can indicate simple messages of unpleasantness, and, second, the animal that can express injury.<sup>170</sup> The animal that indicates unpleasantness provides useful information; they indicate the consequence of action that occurs either by accident or by human action. But the animal that can express injury, the political animal – man – connects himself to his community by relating his pain to others. His expression of injury becomes relational as it expresses what is harmful and unjust.<sup>171</sup> The political animal is said to transcend the capabilities of the beast. He can go beyond mere noise signaling of pleasure and pain or consent and revolt, to a moral account of the just and unjust.<sup>172</sup> As a result of this distinction, we can perceive revelations on the function of language and the structures that are formed because of it.

As Joseph J. Tanke describes, “Rancière reminds us that the *logos* is at once speech and distribution of speech positions; it is through the partitioning of speech that capacities are allocated.”<sup>173</sup> It is Rancière's interpretation of Aristotle that illuminates the harm of these allocations, as we can understand the fallibility of such a theory of language and the power structures informed by these partitions. Rancière claims that because Aristotle's method of

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>170</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>173</sup> Joseph J. Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination,” from *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Publishing Group, 2011), 5.

distinction relies on the fallibility of communication, there is ample room for misunderstanding, deception, and manipulation in distinguishing political beings. He asks, “[how] can you be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually articulating a discourse, rather than merely expressing a state of being?”<sup>174</sup> Beyond mere misunderstanding, there is the ever-present risk of deception: both by false claims of misunderstanding and by the strategic use of distinction for purposeful exclusion and the cementing of hierarchy.<sup>175</sup> Tanke continues, “domination... follows from the refusal to acknowledge someone’s full possession of speech, the basic requirement for political participation.”<sup>176</sup>

Rancière argues the distinction between man and beast which originates in Aristotle’s theory of language creates a structure of exclusion that can be utilized for upholding inequality. ‘But they can’t express themselves! And they can’t understand *logos!*’: by consequence of the Aristotelian method, these kinds of protests, coming from a self-proclaimed political animal, are all that is needed to deny the political status of a community part. In that moment of protest, the community is miscounted – there are those with right to the political and those who have no part in it. In an interview published in *Dissensus*, Rancière claims that his purpose of returning to the Aristotelian definition of political man was to “question the anthropological foundation of politics” and show that “this foundation contained a vicious cycle: the ‘test of humanity’, or the power of community of beings endowed with the logos, far from founding politicity, is in fact the permanent stake of the dispute separating politics from the police.”<sup>177</sup> These partitions are only further solidified in both Aristotle and Plato’s theories of political participation, which create an organized structure for those with and without claim to political rule.

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<sup>174</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 38.

<sup>175</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 38

<sup>176</sup> Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination”, 5.

<sup>177</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 92.

*Aristotle, Plato, and the Demos.*

As stated, the concept of *logos*, in its distinguishing of man from other animals, determines eligibility for political life.<sup>178</sup> By Rancière's reading, this *should* be the basis for Aristotle's theory of political participation; Aristotle should use *logos* to organize the community into who has or has no part in participating in political life. It is a way of ordering the community by "he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled."<sup>179</sup> However, Rancière identifies a particularity of Aristotle's ordering that does not align with this logic. In Aristotle's division of the polis into the *oligoi* (wealthy), the *aristoi* (best), and the *demos* (free people), there is a dividing of community parts that is of pure invention.<sup>180</sup> The community is divided into groups by characteristics like wealth and virtue, but the *demos* are unidentifiable by any real characteristic. Their name claims that they are free – meaning that they are not under slavery – but this kind of freedom is undistinguishable by any positive property;<sup>181</sup> "the people are nothing more than the undifferentiated mass of those who have no positive qualification – no wealth, no virtue – but who are nonetheless acknowledged to enjoy the same freedom as those who do."<sup>182</sup>

Plato offers a similar distinguishing of community parts. Rancière justifies this in two ways. First, he calls Plato the originator of an "anthropological conception of the political" in which qualification for political participation is connected to a kind of man or way of being.<sup>183</sup> In Plato's political – from which Aristotle founded his own divisions – there is a supposed guiding principle of unity which should determine how the community is organized, in favour of the common. Rancière argues that the way which Plato divvies up occupations and roles in society –

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<sup>178</sup> Tanke, "Politics by a Process of Elimination", 6.

<sup>179</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 27

<sup>180</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 6-7.

<sup>181</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 7-8.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>183</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 41.

the way he does politics – creates a strictly hierarchical order that is founded in separations based on kinds of men, which surpasses any ideal of unity or common good.<sup>184</sup> In addition, Plato's *Laws* outlines systematic qualifications for ruling and being ruled that enable further division of the community.<sup>185</sup> Six of these qualifications fall into two groups, natural superiority and the rule of science, but of particular interest to Rancière is Plato's seventh qualification for rule, which is described as "the choice of God" or "the drawing of lots."<sup>186</sup> This is a divine organization of community in which lines are drawn between parts by no significant natural distinctions; there is no guiding principle for division.

Rancière reasoning reveals an opposition between the politics of Plato and Aristotle and the true political dimension. The order of Plato and Aristotle is referred by Rancière as *arkhê*: the conventional ordering of community parts wherein justifications for rule are founded upon determinate qualifications for being that manifest in relationships of those seen and those unseen.<sup>187</sup> To exercise *arkhê* is to exercise these entitlements to rule.<sup>188</sup> Rancière's notion of the political comes into opposition with *arkhê* as it is a break from its logic. In fact, "it does not simply presuppose a break with the 'normal' distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions 'specific' to these positions."<sup>189</sup> Aristotle's described 'political man' and Plato's outlined qualifications for rule are interrupted when the political dimension is enacted. Rancière's true political "tears bodies from their assigned places" and recounts the community parts.<sup>190</sup> The political removes any assumptive ways of being or "dispositions that make them appropriate for

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<sup>184</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 41.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>186</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 31.

<sup>187</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 30.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

the role”<sup>191</sup> that would traditionally qualify community members for participation in governance.<sup>192</sup> Plato and Aristotle’s politics begins by creating division between those with natural excellence for rule, but as Plato’s seventh qualification for rule forecasts, there is the possibility of an absence of any title to rule: that is where Rancière’s political begins, in the absence of titles.<sup>193</sup>

Tracing Rancière’s political to these ideas of the political man and the demos – which were developed first by Plato and Aristotle – reveals that the true political, for Rancière, is a way of rethinking the logic of *arkhê* that was founded by Plato and Aristotle, to interrupt this arithmetic, and to reinterpret the way that it is expressed. The realization of this political dimension is further expressed in Rancière’s description of democracy, which he identifies as the manifestation of the political. This description of democracy reveals the precarity and paradox of the political and accentuates its emancipatory power.

## 2.2 The Scandal of Democracy: Setting the Ground for Intervention

Rancière describes democracy as the institution of political logic; democracy is where the true political begins.<sup>194</sup> Democracy implements the recount of the political in a substantive way by seeing those who have no part and calling the community equal. As stated, “democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhê*. It is the commencement without commencement, a form of rule...that does not command.”<sup>195</sup> It does not command order but removes it altogether. It continues to oppose the order of *arkhê*, ignoring the assigned qualifications for rule outlined by Plato and Aristotle. This interruption of

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>192</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 39.

<sup>193</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 41.

<sup>194</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 32.

<sup>195</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 31.

the *arkhê* is the scandal of democracy. Contrary to the consensus-based claims of a peaceful and cooperative democracy, Rancière presents democracy as a “disruptive, destabilizing, and generative force” as it interrupts what has been set as qualifications for exercising *arkhê* – for rule – and intervenes with the order that has been perpetuated since Aristotle and Plato.<sup>196</sup> Democracy is positioned as that which destabilizes what was meant to divide and hides these structures of power. Where *arkhê* provides a miscount, democracy asserts a political recount.

It is imperative to view these concepts by the theoretical groundings that Rancière has provided from Plato and Aristotle, as it is in Plato and Aristotle’s original formulation of politics that democracy emerges. Recall that both thinkers identified the demos by a critique. By their account, the free citizenship of democracy is a degradation or misguided turn from the principles that ought to legitimate rule, such as noble birth, virtue, or wealth. These social divisions are made by Aristotle and Plato to be representative of political worth.<sup>197</sup> Comparatively, the demos are the “undifferentiated mass” that when given lot by the seventh qualification, rule by pleasure, mood, and whims.<sup>198</sup>

In reality, these masses are not beasts or animals, ruling by their senseless whims and desires. Rancière calls democracy “the whim of a god, that of chance, which is of such a nature that it is ruined as a principle of legitimacy.”<sup>199</sup> Democracy, then, provides a different way of looking at the community and of relating politics.<sup>200</sup> It ruptures the usual legitimation of rule and ignores the power of birth or wealth, asserting the power of the people: not a power of community or majority, but a power of those “who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit.”<sup>201</sup> It is

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<sup>196</sup> Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination,” 2.

<sup>197</sup> Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination,” 8.

<sup>198</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 35-36.

<sup>199</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 41.

<sup>200</sup> Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination,” 8.

<sup>201</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 47.

only by analyzing Plato and Aristotle's hatred of democracy, that we can see its true character: wherein those of no position, those lost in the miscount of the community parts, are seen and considered.<sup>202</sup>

From this approach, it is reasoned that democracy is an inherent "wrong."<sup>203</sup> Recall, "for Plato, the mob of anonymous speaking beings who call themselves the people does wrong to any organized distribution of bodies in community."<sup>204</sup> It consists of an assertion of those who are labeled neither speaking being (political man) or animal, but are the wrong 'in between' or non-existent in this dual identification.<sup>205</sup> It makes an "outrageous claim" against the natural order of politics. It embraces the reign of individuals who rule based on whim and pleasure.<sup>206</sup> Democracy is not wrong because it struggles with the conflict of plurality. Democracy is wrong because it *is* conflict. For Rancière, democracy does not fail to deal with its scandal. It *is* scandal. The justified orders that should deal with the organization of society are lost in democracy. In democracy, chance, accident, and pure possibility have just as much say in who may govern than someone's virtue or breeding.

What Rancière wants to emphasize here is that Plato and Aristotle's presentation of democracy has enabled a timeless perpetuation of the 'hatred of democracy'. For him, this phenomenon has been apparent from the ancients to contemporary consensus models. There has been a perpetual promise to solve democracy, if only we could return to 'pure politics'.<sup>207</sup> Much like Chantal Mouffe aims to embrace the identified 'radical negativities' of democracy, Rancière thinks that it is in understanding democracy as wrong, in knowing the scandalized character of

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<sup>202</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 10.

<sup>203</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 13.

<sup>204</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>207</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 27-28.

democracy, that the political can actually occur. Without this conception of democracy, he does not believe that the political can take place.

At this point, Rancière's critique becomes a positive justification for democracy. Democracy is positioned as "a repeatedly renewed opportunity to introduce politics to the "political" scene."<sup>208</sup> Not only is it the sole place for the political, but by Rancière's description we see its emancipatory character. Where democracy occurs, hierarchy of positions and hierarchy of natural disposition are delegitimized.<sup>209</sup> As democracy solidifies a leveling of all community parts, it makes the demos "free like the rest,"<sup>210</sup> unable to classify subjects by a predisposition to govern.<sup>211</sup> It is also by this same logic that I identify the 'radical equality' of Rancière's democracy.

### 2.3 Radical Equality: Anyone, at Any Time, for Any Reason

Thus far, I have outlined the basic logic of Rancière's arithmetic. His reasoning follows that the true form of politics manifests in democracy as the expression of the political dimension, interrupting the logic proper to Plato and Aristotle's *arkhê*. As iterated by Steven Cocoran in the introduction to *Dissensus*, the proper logic, or the logic of *arkhê*, which rests upon hierarchical structures for the legitimation of governance, is opposed by the logic of democracy, which rests instead upon a "logic of equality that reveals the arbitrariness of that distribution for political participation."<sup>212</sup> This logic is at different times referred to by Rancière as "dissensus", the political, or "disagreement", but it appears the same: it is an alternative rationale for seeing the community that expresses itself in a force of conflict. This antagonistic rationale offers a

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<sup>208</sup> Bartłomiej Blesznowski, "In Defence of the Political: The Crisis of Democracy and the Return of the People from the Perspective of Foucault and Rancière," *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 179 (2012): 343.

<sup>209</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 40.

<sup>210</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>211</sup> Blesznowski, "In Defence of the Political," 343.

<sup>212</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 5.

perspective on the community that is radically egalitarian, as forms of hierarchy and qualifications that once ordered the community lose all legitimacy.<sup>213</sup> It is clear in his writing that Rancière wants to emphasize both the way in which equality functions with the political and the significance of this logic of radical equality.

Imagine there is a group of school kids on the playground. They are in association but are diverse by nature. Now, two of these kids – let’s call them P.J. and A.J. – feel as though the relationships occurring are not making for a very fun time on the playground; they want to put on games and sports activities that they think require a certain level of organization. So, P.J. and A.J. decide to change the way that relationships function on the playground by defining who a real “playgrounder” is. They make rules for who can and cannot lead and participate in games and activities which are rooted in the children’s characteristics. Maybe you must be tall, maybe you must own certain equipment, but most of all, you must be deemed able to communicate in a certain way so that everyone is on the same page. This is sensible! This is logical! This makes sense!

I can agree with P.J. and A.J., to a certain degree. But when these qualifications are introduced, they change the way that the kids see each other on the playground. This system of qualifications has created a standard by which they can participate in their community – who is an actual member of the playground. Those who aren’t as tall, who don’t own the equipment, and cannot communicate the “right” way are still *on* the playground, but not considered *of* the playground. They have no claim to participation and are not visible in any associations. P.J. and A.J.’s qualifications have haphazardly created a system of inequality that not only excludes but disqualifies certain kids from group membership.

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<sup>213</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 2.

Now, it may be easy to call these ‘schoolyard politics’ or blame it on the children’s character. One could also look at the utilitarian benefits of such an organized system. On the contrary, some may try to solve the inequality that has emerged by P.J. and A.J.’s initial rules, introducing new forms of organization to offset the hierarchies. They may allow the kids to deliberate, vote, and consent to new rules. But Rancière would disagree with these approaches.

By Rancière’s logic, this phenomenon is not true politics and its issues cannot be solved by new forms of order. For Rancière, what *is* politics is the total removal of policed systems of qualification that dictate participation. The interruption of these systems by a political dimension that rests upon radical equality is the only thing that can dissolve inequality. This is a total shift in perspective that causes a new image of the community to emerge. What emerges is a truly political community in which all who are *in* it are also *of* it; all are equally seen. And further, anyone, at any time, and for any reason, may participate in governance (*see games and activities*). The political acts as a great equalizer for the community.

While the playground analogy illustrates how Rancière’s political functions by equality, there remain two additional emphases to be made. First, that while equality has been recently marketed as a guiding principle of humanity, this kind of equality is not self-evident. Second, that in viewing equality as self-evident, it becomes further removed from any real manifestation. By tracing the political to Plato and Aristotle, Rancière argues that the subjectivation of order, or *arkhê*, is the initial assumption. Likewise, it is by a dissension of this assumption that equality is achieved. As Tanke expresses, “politics unfolds by challenging the counts and divisions deemed to be self-evident.”<sup>214</sup> For example, Aristotle’s description of the political man, defined by his *logos* or speech expression, is taken as an assumption of what makes humans human. It is meant

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<sup>214</sup> Tanke, “Politics by a Process of Elimination”, 5.

to equalize the character of man by this qualification. But, as Rancière explains, the communication of language is not as solid a category as Aristotle assumes.

The messiness of communication, the manipulation and misunderstanding of communication, does not provide for any guaranteed kind of *logos* between actors. Mecchia adds that what has been identified by Rancière, in the ‘archives’ of Plato and Aristotle, is that common claims to equality, defined by speech expression is nothing other than a claim to reason.<sup>215</sup> It is this originary claim to rationality that has perpetually divided human societies since its conception. Therefore, in its claim to reason and its inherent error, the standard of *logos* – what is said to make man political – creates structures of inequality.

In addition, and looking to more contemporary examples, Rancière argues that the consensus approach likes to equate equality with a kind of utopia, and, conversely, inequality as just the normal way of things.<sup>216</sup> This aligns with the consensus model’s tendency to position ‘true politics’ as an objective that is far off from anything we can now accomplish; equality exists as guiding principle that will bring social nirvana, but is always out of reach due to the technical difficulties of democracy. From this ideation, both politics and equality become a promise of what is to come. This is supposed to act as a motivator; but Rancière claims that some of the biggest proponents of equality make such empty claims.<sup>217</sup>

However, for Rancière, inequality is not the ‘normal’ way of things, but the ‘proper’ way of things. Equality is both the exception to the proper and the only way that democracy can be manifest. Equality cannot be the motivation for democracy because democracy and equality *are one and the same*. Any other claim by supposed democrats is actually apolitical, as it does not

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<sup>215</sup> Mecchia, “The Classics and Critical Theory in Postmodern France,” 74.

<sup>216</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 33-34.

<sup>217</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 34.

properly consider equality from the demos' perspective: that the demos is the 'wrong' that interrupts the inequality of the *arkhê*.<sup>218</sup> Equality is not necessarily utopic. Equality is "the wrong that institutes the community as a community based on conflict."<sup>219</sup> True equality is not a principle that must be endeavoured towards in a democratic society. Democracy is the endeavour of equality itself, interrupting both inequality and any empty claims to equality.

This analysis of Rancière's conception of equality reveals how particular his definitions of the political and democracy are. Oppositional to both the ancient and contemporary definitions of both concepts, he provides descriptions of each concepts' essence, but his theory leaves unanswered how democracy should actually function. Does democracy function only in spontaneous moments of opposition? Or do the qualities of the political and its grounding in equality imply a regime? Recall that Rancière's political opposes order and determined configuration. The distinctive, egalitarian quality of the political lends an anarchic characteristic to democratic reality that complicates any attempt at organizing a democratic regime.

#### 2.4 Anarchy: Welcome to the Void

In his book on Rancière, Todd May makes an assertion that is helpful for locating the anarchic quality of Rancière's democratic politics: "instead of asking what is owed to the demos, it asks what the demos is capable of."<sup>220</sup> What is important here is that while consensus models of democracy are grounded in Aristotelian and Platonic understandings of political power that look to a negotiation of interests, Rancière's democratic politics relies on the demos as the driving force of constituting political power. For Rancière, the demos are not a culmination of individual interests that need be considered in a larger political effort towards consensus but the

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<sup>218</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 34-35.

<sup>219</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 35.

<sup>220</sup> Rancière, "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière," 78.

defining agent of politics. Recall that by Rancière's description, the demos does not hold any substantive claim to power; but rather they are devoid of any title to power. With the demos as the agent of democratic politics, asserting their presence as subjects, politics becomes distinguished by a total void power.<sup>221</sup> By consequence, democracy is not purposed towards finding any proper distribution of power, but can be best described as "power without power."<sup>222</sup> In centring the demos and asserting a radical equality, introducing "the sheer contingency of any social order", Rancière has threatened the very foundations of authority.<sup>223</sup>

The traditional hatred of democracy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle and continuing to consensus models, identifies a different kind of anarchism in democracy. For Plato, anarchy was considered the danger of democracy – emerging as "the world where everything is upside down because of the reign of equality."<sup>224</sup> Remember that Plato's idea of democracy is founded in its locating of "the expression of the liberty of individuals whose sole law is that of varying mood and pleasure, without any regard for collective order."<sup>225</sup> This perception logically flows into an aversion to democracy, stemming from its lack of consideration of the hierarchies of natural dispositions, of the naming of peoples and ordering them accordingly, and of the compulsion to put people in their place. In democracy, there is only the disorder of equality, the messiness of *anyone at any time*.<sup>226</sup> According to Rancière's interpretation, Plato thinks that while equality may appear as a theoretical good, we must look beyond the value of the subject as demos to the individual underneath and the whims by which he would rule.<sup>227</sup> For Plato, there the anarchic void of loss of titles is surely not compatible to structuring a regime.

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<sup>221</sup> Tanke, "Politics by a Process of Elimination," 17-18.

<sup>222</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 119.

<sup>223</sup> Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 17.

<sup>224</sup> Rancière, "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière," 119.

<sup>225</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 36.

<sup>226</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 38.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

In contemporary examples, Rancière pays particular attention to what he considers as a perpetual cycle throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century spread of democracy, wherein democracy is forcefully introduced to foreign states and is then criticized by the imperialists who put it there. The idea is that democracy will function *despite* its anarchism, but only by the implementation by a superpower that is deemed able to master it, or only by the expert politicians who understand how to manage it. Yet, in the wake of what they see as a failure to maintain democratic ideals in the state – lack of authority, messiness, lack of cohesion – blame is attributed to a ‘crisis of democracy’, lamenting the difficulty of considering plural interests, especially when they come from the unlearned and unworthy masses.

These ‘democrats’ seem to regret implementing the reality of democracy because of its anarchism. They fear legitimizing some kind of “power of the people”, as they hate the demos and the power they think the demos holds.<sup>228</sup> Rancière explains:

As a result, ‘good democracy’ refers to a form of government able to tame the double excess of political commitment and egotistical behaviour inherent to the essence of democratic life. The contemporary way of stating the ‘democratic paradox’ is thus: democracy as a form of government is threatened by democracy as a form of social and political life and so the former must repress the latter.<sup>229</sup>

Democracy of the democrats becomes a task of managing the masses and ensuring that their power is tamed. In reality, and as Rancière clarifies in a discussion of his method, this image of democracy as an individualistic anarchy is but the “ground-fiction” that hides the “ground-paradox” of politics.<sup>230</sup> It is not the power of the demos that defines the anarchic character of democracy, it is their lack of power. The ground-paradox of politics, the hidden truth, is that the demos has no power. The anarchic quality of democracy comes from their emergence, which

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<sup>228</sup> Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 6-7.

<sup>229</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 47.

<sup>230</sup> Rancière, “A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière,” 119-120.

disqualifies any ‘proper’ way implement power. By this conception, democracy is an “impossible regime” as it is nothing more than a configuration which asserts its subjects and that makes seen that which is unseen.<sup>231</sup>

As is so well illustrated by Peter Hallward in his contribution to 2009’s *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, the configuration of Rancière’s democratic politics is better described as a theatre than a regime. True politics, for Rancière, looks more like an interplay of many discourses and experiences which are performed on a stage of equality. It is more concerned with setting up artificial spaces in which the messiness of equality can emerge, expressing itself by a show of the democratic voice. As he states, “before it is a matter of representative institutions, legal procedures, or militant organizations, politics is a matter of building a stage and sustaining a spectacle or show.”<sup>232</sup> Hallward describes Rancière’s democracy as spectacular, artificial, multiplicitous, disruptive, contingent, tending towards improvisation, and operating within a liminal configuration.<sup>233</sup> These do not look like the ways in which we would describe any modern or ancient form of democracy.

More commonly accepted is a democracy ventured to find efficient and sustainable ways to distribute power so that all interests may be met. In political philosophy, we ponder how power should be distributed and legitimated and ask what kind of regime is best deployed and what truths should be verified by the deployment of said regime. However, Rancière criticizes such efforts; as he argues, “political philosophy, by its desire to give the community a single foundation, is fated to have to re-identify politics and police, to cancel out politics through the

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<sup>231</sup> Rancière, “A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière,” 119. And Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 37.

<sup>232</sup> Peter Hallward, “Staging Equality: Rancière’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality”, in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*. ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 142.

<sup>233</sup> Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 146-150.

gesture of founding it.”<sup>234</sup> Instead of a solidified plan, what he proposes appears more like indeterminate and transformative voices manifesting themselves where they were normally unseen, unheard, and miscounted, disrupting the unity and solidity of the communities that they challenge.<sup>235</sup> This kind of political looks much more like a spectacular performance of conflict that functions under an assumption of plurality.

Now, while this presentation of Rancière’s agonism does not give any direct answer of how democracy should function, his challenging proposition of the “impossible regime” does offer is a certain comfort by understanding the political dimension that shapes human relations and the apparatus of democracy. As he identifies the ‘event’ of democracy beginning at Plato and Aristotle, Rancière addresses an elephant in the room of democratic discourse: that democracy *is* conflict. In the pursuit of democracy, Rancière tells us that venturing towards fixing conflict is counter-intuitive to democracy itself. The open possibility of what this means for practical policy implementation still remains, but it is comforting to know that the contentions faced in democracy are not due to failure but are a product of the radical equality of the impossible regime.

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<sup>234</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, 41.

<sup>235</sup> Hallward, “Staging Equality”, 148-150.

### 3. Grounding in the Groundlessness: Claude Lefort's Symbolic Agonism

#### 3.0 Introduction

It was Oliver Marchart, in his 2007 work on Lefort, who suggested Machiavelli was the first 'antagonism theorist'. This title is earned by "placing emphasis on an irresolvable conflict at the core of every possible society" and by being "the first one to develop a theory of 'agonism' as the symbolically regulated form of antagonism."<sup>236</sup> While common readings of Machiavelli emphasize politics and strategy in his writings – and depict Machiavelli as the founder of modern political science – what French philosopher Claude Lefort identifies in Machiavelli's work are truths of the very 'being' of individuals which inform both 'the political' and 'politics'.<sup>237</sup> A significant fundament in Lefort's interpretation of Machiavelli is the claim that the Italian thinker's vision of society is grounded on an originary, relational, and conflictual division that informs the very ordering of society, acting as both a destabilizer and stabilizer of this order. It is this character of being that Lefort finds in Machiavelli which generates the core ideas in his own work and aligns his democratic theory with that of fellow agonists Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. This connection reveals his theory of democratic society as being deeply antagonistic *and* agonistic.<sup>238</sup>

Much like Mouffe and Rancière, Lefort's idea of democracy is enigmatic: he affirms a radically negative internal division that is at the origins of all forms of society, instituting conflict at the core of political community, but at the same time, he upholds this originary division as that which makes democracy sustainable and great. Recognizing these similarities, Lefort can be said

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<sup>236</sup> Oliver Marchart, "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort" from *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007), 99.

<sup>237</sup> Bernard Flynn, "The Prince" from *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>238</sup> Flynn, "The Prince", 5.

to be an ‘agonist’. Still, I argue that by examining Lefort’s conception of political society, one can provide an important addition to the two previous agonistic conceptions. This is because Lefort’s theory of the symbolic dimension of democratic societies upholds a detachment from any of the ‘real’ community calculations that Mouffe and Rancière tend towards. Both Mouffe and Rancière’s reliance on the ‘real’ organization of the community is quite flexible. Yet, their dependence on interest-based collective identities and the dividing of community parts still maintains focus on competing interests, even if these interests are theorized as existentially oppositional. Conversely, Lefort’s definition of the political transcends interests, relying on a more originary and relational division.

The ‘image’ of the political is of greater importance, here. This creates a more radically oppositional and irreducible political as it does not rely on the specifics of individual identity. This is what Lefort calls the ‘symbolic dimension’. The symbolic dimension points to aspects of social life that are based solely on image. Lefort argues that these images of society are just as necessary in conceptualizing the political than any human activity. He uses Machiavelli’s realism, which looks at what is *seen* not what *ought to be*, to accomplish this. This insistence on the way in which conflict is both masked and represented in democratic societies will be the focus of this chapter.

Thus, this chapter analyzes *Machiavelli in the Making*, a book originally published in 1972 as Lefort’s thesis under French sociologist Raymond Aron. In this text, Lefort discloses his interpretation of Machiavelli’s *oeuvre* – his seminal texts in their entirety – and sets the ground for his own democratic theory. Writing before the emergence of deliberative democracy, Lefort takes aim at different intellectual adversaries than that of Mouffe and Rancière – most notably, totalitarianism. He uses his interpretation of *The Prince* and *The Discourses* to ground and

unground ideas of society to avoid threats of ultimate power. At the core of Lefort's society is a conflictual and image-based political that ties it to the human action that causes totalitarianism, but also transcends it, assuring democratic potential.

Following Lefort's original interpretation of Machiavelli and organizing his concepts into a somewhat progressive framework will bring to light his association with the agonistic tradition. Then, a comparative analysis of his idea of the political against that of Mouffe and Rancière will reveal his unique symbolic addition to this tradition. The structure of this discussion will unfold in two distinct sections. First, I analyze Lefort's *Machiavelli in the Making* to clarify key terms and concepts, such as: the 'Grandeess' and the 'people', self-identification, 'the fruit of the turmoil', the role of the prince, and both 'the empty place of power' and the 'markers of uncertainty' (1). Then, I use these concepts as the groundwork for Lefort's definition of the political dimension, which is defined as a symbolic emptying of the place of power that was once embodied by traditional authority. This definition will be further illuminated by comparative analysis with that of Rancière and Mouffe. (2). By demonstrating the theoretical origins of Lefort's theory, this chapter emphasizes how Lefort's seemingly ungrounded symbolic dimension actually grounds democracy in its conflictual character.

### 3.1 Instituting Division: Machiavelli in the Making of Democracy

#### *The 'Grandeess' vs. The 'People'.*

In both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, Machiavelli speaks to human conduct, relationships, and the power struggles that emerge from these rather than state legitimacy or regime typology.<sup>239</sup> This kind of analysis positions Machiavelli's work far from political science

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<sup>239</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Logic of Force" from *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 108 and 116.

as Lefort defines it.<sup>240</sup> Instead, what Lefort credits to Machiavelli is a discovery of the irreducible conflict of society.<sup>241</sup> What Marchart refers to as the re-theorized “Machiavellian Moment”<sup>242</sup> is the exposure of internal division, which, according to Machiavelli, exists in all cities throughout time and is fundamental to understanding of the form of all societies.<sup>243</sup> Lefort bases this interpretation on Machiavelli’s discussion of the conflictual relationship between the ‘Grandeas’ and ‘the people’.<sup>244</sup> This relationship is based on a difference of “humours,”<sup>245</sup> desires, or *umori*, in which “the people do not want to be commanded or oppressed by the grandeas” and the grandeas desire to oppress the people.<sup>246</sup>

This is manifest as a class conflict – not in the way described by Marx, which is of economic and historical concern – but as a separate and more originary domain of society that is not bound by any historical actors.<sup>247</sup> In fact, Bignotto claims that the conflictual relationship that defines this domain is a-historic: that “all the forms of politics that we find in history result from the division of the [humours].”<sup>248</sup> Additionally, Marchart argues that this conflict precedes any “reason”, but is better described as “conflict as ground.”<sup>249</sup> It is prior to ontic circumstances or conditions. This perspective dispels the myth of a natural unity that can, or even should, be achieved. Both the Marxist and liberal traditions, which Lefort has been associated with throughout his career, tend towards the deliverance from division for the purpose of peace or

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<sup>240</sup> Lefort describes political science as the suppression of the true question of the political: “what is the nature of the difference between forms of society?”, Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy” (1988), 11.

<sup>241</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 97.

<sup>242</sup> This phrase was coined by J.G.A. Pocock’s 1975 landmark work on Machiavelli. See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment : Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* With a New afterword by the author. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>243</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 96.

<sup>244</sup> Newton Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli” from *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martín Plot (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 43.

<sup>245</sup> Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli”, p. 43.

<sup>246</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 97.

<sup>247</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 97.

<sup>248</sup> Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli”, p. 43.

<sup>249</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 98.

human flourishing.<sup>250</sup> Comparatively, Lefort argues here that it is the radical negativity of disunion that defines human society. As Lefort writes: “the notion of a homogenous society is linked to that of its closure, of the enigma of its institution and of the indetermination of its history.”<sup>251</sup>

*Self-Identification/Alienation.*

It is important to understand, here, that while the relationship between the Grandees and the people is what divides society, it is also what unifies it. Lefort does not mean this in as an active unification or bringing people together, but that division institutes society itself. This is a theory of identity, but not in the way that Mouffe and Rancière conceptualize identity. Lefort borrows from thinkers like Merleau-Ponty to conceptualize identity formation as a process of self-identification by the recognition of an ‘other’. Therefore, society’s self-identification is founded on a self-alienation between the classes that Machiavelli first points out. Lefort sees this as an “enigma” of all societies, wherein we realize that it is a radically oppositional and irresolvable conflict – which was first instituted by the opposing humours – that upholds society’s very definition. Society is both itself and its ‘other’: it is both sides of an opposition.<sup>252</sup>

This is referred to in the literature as self-externalization or self-alienation. This is reinforced by Lefort’s description of power. Recall his argument that that the value of analyzing the phenomena of power struggles is found in the relation of oppositional forces: “power is to be assessed within the matrix of its relation to other powers.”<sup>253</sup> Lefort, like Machiavelli, wants to

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<sup>250</sup> Bernard Flynn. “Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political” from *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martín Plot (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 24.

<sup>251</sup> Claude Lefort, “Le concept de totalitarisme” 1945-2005, 891 as cited in Newton Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli”, p. 43.

<sup>252</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 92.

<sup>253</sup> Lefort, “The Logic of Force”, 120.

assess what *is* and what can be *seen* in the conflictual relations to an ‘other’.<sup>254</sup> This is what dictates his idea of society.

In interpreting Machiavelli as a thinker who looks at cities for what they are, Lefort sees a field of forces in constant play and in the middle of that arena is one originary conflict that defines the field as a whole. Lefort never identifies group interests beyond that of the desire to oppress and the desire to not to be oppressed. There is no choice in what group you belong to and there is no essential characteristics that tell of which group one belongs to. This is strictly how Lefort looks at the community and identifies a timeless negative relation that underscores all relations that follows and that defines the community *as* a community. On that point, Marchart rightly notes that “in establishing its self-identity, society divides itself and erects an outside vis-à-vis itself which will be incarnated by the instance of power. An antagonism emerges between society and its outside.”<sup>255</sup> This conflict – this power struggle between humours – is what institutes society “by signifying social identity.”<sup>256</sup> It is that which affirms antagonists as members of the same community, being in a “common world” of conflict.<sup>257</sup>

*The Fruit of the Turmoil.*

Lefort’s analysis of Machiavelli’s *Discourses* reveals how political communities are not just instituted by division, but thrive and are sustained by it. Machiavelli uses the greatness of republican Rome as an example of this flourish. The Florentine thinker presents a scandalous thesis, describing “the fruit of the turmoil” that was created by Rome’s disunity and perpetual conflict between the Senate and the people.<sup>258</sup> Lefort argues that Machiavelli’s *Prince* credits the

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<sup>254</sup> Lefort, “The Logic of Force”, 120.

<sup>255</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 96.

<sup>256</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 93.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>258</sup> Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli”, 44; Claude Lefort, “Rome and the “Historical” Society” from *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 227.

*virtù* of citizens, institutions, and legislators of Rome for its exceptional history. The first chapter of *The Discourses* gives credit to the *fortuna* or chance of Rome's origins, it is later in *The*

*Discourses* in which we see:

the virtù of the Roman Republic...is the result of the disunion of the senate and the plebs; the accidents serving Rome are therefore not deprived of intelligibility, but are determined by the struggle between the people and the nobility. Hence there emerges a totally new thesis: there is in disorder itself what is necessary to produce new order; class appetites are not necessarily bad, since from their clashes the city may be strengthened; history is not the deterioration of a good primitive form, since it bears, in the modality of potentiality, the Roman creation.<sup>259</sup>

Here, we get closer to a key element of Lefort's theory: that it is by this staged<sup>260</sup> representation of the originary conflict between the Grandees and the people that the core domain of society is upheld and freedom is given space to flourish. Therefore, conflict is reframed as a necessity, rather than evidence of a state of deterioration from some ideal of unity.

Following Machiavelli, Lefort thus demystifies the idea that Roman greatness, and perhaps the greatness of any city, is achieved by "virtue of order and discipline."<sup>261</sup> And even more so, conflict is not of any moral concern and should be treated as such: there is not necessarily a 'goodness' or 'badness' to the conflict of society, as it is an irresolvable and indispensable dimension of human beings. Even still, this conflict can achieve 'greatness'. In the case of Rome and its accidental structure which upheld an opposition between the Senate and the plebs, we see an image closer to that originary conflict and the subsequent flourish that it caused.

Lefort upholds the idea of Roman greatness, opposing this with the totalitarian experience of the Nazi regime. He aims to dispel with the myth that the fascist variant of

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<sup>259</sup> Lefort, "Rome and the "Historical" Society", 223.

<sup>260</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, "staged" or "staging" refers to Lefort's "mis-en-scène", which means to create a quasi-representation of itself. See Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 11-12.

<sup>261</sup> Lefort, "Rome and the "Historical" Society", 239.

totalitarianism arose from a transformation of economic structures.<sup>262</sup> Instead, he insists that totalitarianism is but a mutation of the symbolic order of society, in which society is consumed into a whole.<sup>263</sup> The Nazi party claimed to represent society as a People-as-One, while destroying all opposition and chance for debate.<sup>264</sup> Further, there was no distinction between society and the state. In its form, totalitarianism unifies all areas of society.

There is a significant challenge to democratic theory that emerges from this discussion of the Roman and Nazi regimes. Lefort argues that in Machiavelli the reality of society is found: the classical notion which says that conflict and disunion bring disorder and destruction is untrue. Lefort's thesis reverses this notion, arguing that "*desunione*" or disunion can and/or will lead to perfection and is the foundation of freedom.<sup>265</sup> Further, it is unity that brings destruction. Here, freedom does not flourish *despite* conflict, but *by* conflict; it is conflict that preserves, not destroys. This thesis also has the potential to further oppose the modern notion that dissent must be tamed or channeled by various liberal structures. Lefort's roots in Machiavelli gift him a sort of realism. By looking at conflict for what it is and what it is seen to be, Lefort does not fall into the liberal tendency of proposing utopic ideals like consensus as a kind of saviour for conflict. For Lefort, conflict cannot be saved, and it does not need saving. Finally, this interpretation of Machiavelli presents the theoretical groundwork for a Lefortian idea that reconstitutes the role of power and authority in society, as it is no longer necessary for authority to control or police order for the purpose of holding power over dissent and conflict.

*The Prince.*

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<sup>262</sup> Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 12-13.

<sup>263</sup> Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 13.

<sup>264</sup> Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 13.

<sup>265</sup> Lefort, "Rome and the "Historical" Society", 227.

As seen, Lefort's use of Machiavelli offers a complete restructuring of the ideas of power and society, which establishes a novel foundation for the concept of the political and democracy. This is elaborated further by Lefort's interpretation of the role of 'the prince'. In this case, the prince is not just seen as a holder of authority in governance. Much of part four of *Machiavelli in the Making* is dedicated to a close reading – and reading between the lines – of the *Prince*, in order to divulge deeper insights in this infamous work. As Accetti points out, Lefort's interpretation of the *Prince*, "succeeds in putting the reader in contact with the experience of the "institution" of the social itself."<sup>266</sup>

Some discussion of this 'institution' is necessary in understanding Lefort's interpretation of the *Prince*. Lefort follows a particular French understanding in which society must always have an image of itself to exist. The identification of society must come into being by creating a symbolic quasi-representation. In fact, Samuel Moyn calls this "symbolic constitution" the "central plank of [Lefort's] political theory."<sup>267</sup> Lefort borrows from thinkers such as Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, and Clastres to formulate the idea that all forms of society use their inherent division to create a symbolic representation of an other. He argues that in identifying itself by its other, by externalizing itself, there is a recognition of the community's identity and form.<sup>268</sup> Following this logic, Lefort has positioned the originary division as "a necessary condition for society to acquire some shape and self-understanding."<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Accetti, "Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power", 124.

<sup>267</sup> Samuel Moyn, "Claude Lefort, Political Anthropology, and Symbolic Division" from *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martín Plot (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 60.

<sup>268</sup> Moyn, "Claude Lefort, Political Anthropology, and Symbolic Division", 62.

<sup>269</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 93.

Still, the division is not merely a transcendent idea, but must be felt in the very flesh of society.<sup>270</sup> For Lefort, it is power that can achieve this feeling. Marchart clarifies the role of power:

The role of power is precisely to institute society by signifying social identity – and only by relating to this representation/signification of identity can people relate to the space in which they live as a coherent ensemble...Power works within the symbolic order. And if the institution/foundation of society occurs at the symbolic level alone, then it necessarily has to be staged: this is what Lefort calls *mise-en-scène*.<sup>271</sup>

The *mise-en-scène*, along with the *mise-en-forme* and *mise-en-sens*, will not be elaborated here,<sup>272</sup> but what is important to this discussion of the *Prince* is the following: power achieves the necessary task of giving the community a representation of that originary division which defines them. It stages that which already exists, turning the imaginary into the real. Power has the ability of signaling a society's identity back to itself and, at the same time, signaling the very fact of its sense of community.

This symbolic dimension is the true novelty of Lefort's agonistic theory. Ambiguous as it is, the symbolic allows for his understanding of society to transcend human action without venturing too far into the exterior of the human experience. Warren Breckman understands this about Lefort's symbolic and he untangles its ambiguities well. This chapter has discussed how Lefort views society's shaping as being reliant on the existence of a symbolic order that itself is dictated by the originary division. Breckman credits the symbolic as a both a dynamic of representation and interpretation.<sup>273</sup> Because society is emerging and interacting with the symbolic, it must be both rooted in those which it represents and detached from the 'real' of what

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<sup>270</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 93.

<sup>271</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 93.

<sup>272</sup> For an elaboration on these terms, see James D. Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 87 (2006): 35-36.

<sup>273</sup> Warren Breckman, "Lefort and the Symbolic Dimension," *Constellations* 19, no. 1 (2012): 31.

may be. As Breckman asserts, “the symbolic thus remains exterior or non-identical to the social, even though the social world be unimaginable without this symbolic institution.”<sup>274</sup>

It should be noted that although Lefort often uses these examples for his purpose, and he does argue that “both the political and the religious brings philosophical thought face to face with the symbolic,”<sup>275</sup> Lefort does not rely on divine explanations for this theory. By founding this image of the prince in the originary division, his explanation spans all forms of society. To accomplish this theoretical task, he turns to Machiavelli for his realism and centring of the political. Using the divisive foundations that have been discussed in the *Discourses* and the discussion of authority in the *Prince*, Lefort wants to interrogate the place that the prince occupies to tell us of the place of political power.<sup>276</sup>

As is argued in *Democracy and Political Theory*, “under the monarchy, power was embodied in the person of the prince.”<sup>277</sup> Lefort means that power was both symbolized in the image of the prince and truly felt and experienced in his personhood. The way in which this power was represented has changed over time. For example, monarchical power has often existed as a connection between two worlds; the image of the prince embodied a division between the divine and the earthly that was held in one man. But in all cases, the prince is seen as both a man and a “representative of the unity of the kingdom”, mirroring the identity of the community back at themselves by embodying them as a whole and as an other.<sup>278</sup>

For Lefort, it is not assumed that the prince holds power. Instead, the prince must see the originary division for what it is and utilize it for his ends, catering to the desires of each group to

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<sup>274</sup> Breckman, “Lefort and the Symbolic Dimension,” 32.

<sup>275</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” from *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 222.

<sup>276</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Logic of Force”, 109; Claude Lefort, “The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power” from *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 139.

<sup>277</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 17.

<sup>278</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 17.

channel their force into instituted power.<sup>279</sup> Recall Lefort's description of these desires: "Machiavelli clearly says, that one group desires to command and oppress, and the other not to be. Their existence is only determined by that essential relation."<sup>280</sup> Recognizing this, Lefort insists that the prince must emerge as a "third party" in the civil strife and deliver each of their insatiable desires.<sup>281</sup> To the Grandees, the prince appears as kin; they relate to him as an equal and by associating with his position of authority, he fulfils their desire to command. Conversely, the people see the prince as a friend; he is their ally in ensuring that they are not oppressed by the Grandees.<sup>282</sup> By these simultaneous relations with the people and the Grandees, the image of the prince "is elevated above the natural conflict generated by the social divisions."<sup>283</sup> He holds the place of the 'outside' which is necessitated in the originary division. Yet, his existence as man among them allows for a grounding in the real. His image represents both sides of the social division that Lefort has argued is irreconcilable and necessary for the formation of the political.

It should be noted that, as a third-party figure, the prince appears to enable social co-existence between the Grandees and the people, though "this conflict may be adjudged modifiable by the intervention of the prince."<sup>284</sup> But Lefort insists that this is not a solution, as such. Lefort argues, again, that in the silences of his writing, Machiavelli tells of the reality of the prince that enables our understanding of society. He writes: "in envisaging society as an object, [the prince] will miss the fact that the antagonistic classes are of a different nature, and that...classes only exist in their confrontation surrounding those stakes which are for one group oppression, for the other the refusal of oppression."<sup>285</sup> What the prince misses is that the

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<sup>279</sup> Flynn, "Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political", 27.

<sup>280</sup> Lefort, "The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power", 140.

<sup>281</sup> Lefort, "The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power", 140-141.

<sup>282</sup> Lefort, "The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power", 141.

<sup>283</sup> Flynn, "Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political", 27.

<sup>284</sup> Lefort, "The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power", 142.

<sup>285</sup> Lefort, "The Social Abyss and Attachment to Power", 143.

confrontation between the Grandees and the people is not natural, per se, but is relational. The conflict is not an issue of human nature that can be manipulated by mastering that nature, it is simply a negative relation that cannot be resolved – it is a lack of association.<sup>286</sup> Lefort maintains that because the image is born of the conflict, the prince cannot abolish this antagonism, he can only hide it.<sup>287</sup>

The consequence of Lefort's interpretation of the *Prince* is that it uniquely challenges long-held ideas of authority and social unity.<sup>288</sup> His Straussian way of bringing unthought ideas to the forefront uncovers a theory of governance that is unlike the theories that are commonly associated with agonism and democratic theory more broadly. Lefort aims to discourage a reliance on consent theories, which imagine the political community as coming together as one to give power to authority – whether this power is between man and man, man and nature, or man and God.<sup>289</sup> Unlike consent theorists, Lefort sees division as irreconcilable. Any kind of idea of the community as one determines a social neutrality and ignores the opposition that is constitutive to the community's very identity; it ignores the symbolic.<sup>290</sup> Therefore, a reliance on Machiavelli – perhaps the first antagonist – makes much more sense. For Lefort and Machiavelli alike, authority is not granted by unity, but exists as but one actor within the field of forces.<sup>291</sup> All authorities in history, no matter the details of their personhood or acquisition of power, are answering to the same problem of government or radical negativity.<sup>292</sup>

*Emptiness and Uncertainty.*

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<sup>286</sup> Marchart, "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 99.

<sup>287</sup> Flynn, "Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political", 28.

<sup>288</sup> Claude Lefort, "First Signs" 2012, 91.

<sup>289</sup> Claude Lefort, as quoted by Bernard Flynn in "Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political", 25.

<sup>290</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 87.

<sup>291</sup> Lefort, "The Logic of Force", 113.

<sup>292</sup> Lefort, "The Logic of Force", 117.

As was purposed in *Machiavelli in the Making*, Lefort expounds his interpretation of the *Discourses* and the *Prince* to formulate a theory of the social, arriving at the conclusion that division is the origin of all societies.<sup>293</sup> Further, this division – while negative – is not meant to be overcome. In fact, the division is constitutive. He reiterates later, in *Democracy and Political Theory*, that there are various forms of society that emerge from different embodiments of power, but all originate through this same condition which answers to the same ‘problem’ of division.<sup>294</sup> He uses Machiavelli – a thinker who has been historically read as promoting ‘heinous politics’ by its focus on conflict – to arrive at an understanding of democracy that is unlike fellow agonists like Mouffe and Rancière. For Lefort, democracy is not a medium with which you can best channel the friend-enemy antagonism discovered by Carl Schmitt nor is it an interruption in the normalized political order of Aristotle and Plato.

For Lefort, democracy is a mutation, or an incision into, the very flesh of the social.<sup>295</sup> Starting at Machiavelli and following between the lines of his text, Lefort reimagines democracy as a theatrical event in which the social order that at once was stabilized by the prince, or the monarchical King, is disrupted by the violence of the democratic revolution.<sup>296</sup> The King is beheaded! While this occurs in the real, it is also reflected by the symbolic, bringing with it and preserving in it a new indeterminacy that was unlike what had been.<sup>297</sup>

What is it specifically about democracy that tells Lefort that democracy is so mutated, incisive, destabilizing, and indeterminant? Let us look to Lefort’s description for the answer: “the birth of democracy signals a mutation of the symbolic order, as is most clearly attested to by

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<sup>293</sup> Oliver Marchart, “Division and Democracy: On Claude Lefort’s Post-foundational Political Philosophy.” *Filozofski vestnik* 21, no. 2 (2000): 51.

<sup>294</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 14.

<sup>295</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 14.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

the new position of power.”<sup>298</sup> Recall that, at once, the position of power was held by the prince. He leveled and unified the community by his embodiment of power.<sup>299</sup> But the democratic revolution toppled the head of the social body and emptied out the power he once held in his person. Marchart describes the process as follows:

Within the democratic revolution, this moment – a moment of the political, if there ever was one – is symbolically condensed in the decapitation of Louis XVI. What is staged by that spectacle is not only the decapitation of his earthly body, but also the disincorporation of the mystical, transcendent body of the king, which leaves the place of power empty and cuts the link between society and its transcendent legitimacy foundation.<sup>300</sup>

The real destruction of the king was significant, of course, but what Lefort newly points out is that this event also symbolizes the constitution and construction of an empty place of power. This is something that had never occurred up to this point. This was even felt in society’s very ‘flesh’.<sup>301</sup> As Marchart points out, the advent of democracy marked a momentous amendment to this structure that had been defined by the figure of the ‘prince’. In its real decapitation of the figure of power, democracy staged in the symbolic the delegitimization of both his earthly and divine body and in that moment, frees power from that which embodied it in the old social order. When you hear Lefort’s now famous term “empty place of power”, associations of void and lack appear in the mind’s eye. But this is not a bad thing. With this void and lack, pure possibility is assured.<sup>302</sup>

To bring this closer to the human experience, Lefort asserts that the apparatus of democracy,

...prevents governments from appropriating power for their own ends, from incorporating it into themselves. The exercise of power is subject to the procedures of periodical

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>300</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 95.

<sup>301</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 54.

<sup>302</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 95.

redistributions. It represents the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent rules. This phenomenon implies an institutionalization of conflict. The locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied – it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it – and it cannot be represented.<sup>303</sup>

In practical terms, democracy prevents the seizure of ultimate power and authority because it is precarious and ever-changing. Suffrage ensures that conflict is institutionalized as legitimacy is always debateable and the place of power is periodically evacuated between terms.<sup>304</sup> Likewise, in the symbolic, there is no figurehead that signifies the community as whole. This tells us that society's need for representation by self-externalized identification remains unfulfilled. While this, as stated, is that which prevents authoritative power and allows for the consistent and healthy challenging of power, it can bring great discomfort and unrest if this uncertainty and groundlessness is not conceptualized as that which sustains the political community.

For Lefort, this should not dissuade us from democracy. This is the enigma of democracy, wherein the place of power still exists, but without the figure of power. There is no understanding of society as a body or a whole. By his logic, this should bring about new identifications of society.<sup>305</sup> As Accetti clarifies, by the consequence of democracy, society no longer images itself as a body, but as a *lack* of a body – it will attempt to fill this lack by whatever means, but all representations of the community are temporary and malleable.<sup>306</sup> All the old ways of order are expelled: “democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the marker certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy.”<sup>307</sup> Therefore, Lefort argues, and Accetti emphasizes, that “democratic society must understand itself as an infinitely malleable entity, open to assuming all specific forms, on

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<sup>303</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 17.

<sup>304</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 76-78.

<sup>305</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 128.

<sup>306</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 128-129.

<sup>307</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 19.

condition that none will be definite.”<sup>308</sup> Observers must view conflict as the most and the only constitutive character of democracy. Further, the community must endorse democracy as the institutionalization of conflict. If not, Lefort warns that it is more likely that the conditions of democracy, in all its uncertainty and groundlessness, will slide into that of totalitarianism.

This is where Lefort’s discussion of totalitarianism becomes necessary to understand his fundamental motives. Lefort takes space in much of his writings, early and later texts alike, to expose his interpretation of totalitarianism. From his early days where he adopted a Marxian critique, to his later works where he broke away from this tradition, he consistently saw totalitarianism as a threat to the democratic moment. Lefort was insistent that totalitarianism and democracy existed in a sort of adjoined placement, with the overthrow of democracy leading to the advent of totalitarianism.<sup>309</sup> Lefort argued that totalitarianism is a product of a failure in both the real and the symbolic, as it applies great stress to both dimensions. His argument follows that it is not uncommon for social unrest and insecurity – this could be economic, warfare, or group conflict – to go unchecked. When these issues are not dealt with in the public sphere, and power is felt to fail in society, the community will desire “the fantasy of the People-as-One” that the prince once provided.<sup>310</sup> It is felt that this illusion or temptation of wholeness, a “state free from division”, that the prince once embodied will relieve the fractures of the community. In like manner, the symbolic occurrence represents a search for certainty amid uncertainty.<sup>311</sup> When society is pushed by the various fractures in society, without any symbolic resolve, an old resolve will be desired.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 129.

<sup>309</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 14.

<sup>310</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 19-20.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid, 19.

The details of the ‘mutation’ that is totalitarianism will not be further elaborated here,<sup>313</sup> but the description of the conditions for its emergence reveals the threat of forgetting the origins of society and its determination of the democratic moment, and that consubstantial to the mutation of totalitarianism is the removal of opposition and difference. This only enlightens Lefort’s theory of society: conflict is constitutive of society. This revelation is meant to give insight to a revival of political philosophy – to be motivated to “escape the servitude of collective beliefs and to win the freedom to think about freedom in society.”<sup>314</sup> Lefort’s intentions align with the purpose of this project: to rethink the struggles of difference in democracy by centring conflict, rather than expelling it. Lefort, like Rancière and Mouffe, warns that forgetting or ignoring of the truth of constitutive antagonism, or ‘originary division,’ denies the conflict that is already there. Where Lefort comes even closer to these agonists is that this idea of conflict is referred to as an ontological political dimension. The conflictual political dimension is not merely an origin of eras past. It is a disposition of society in all its forms that underlies any order of politics that may follow. As I have argued throughout this project, the novelty of these three thinkers is the *mise-en-scène* of a political definition that accounts for a conflictual dimension, and while varying in definition, each thinker’s interpretation speaks to a truth that has been forgotten or neglected in democratic theory.

### 3.2 Particularizing the Political: Lefort, Rancière, and Mouffe

Marchart has called Lefort’s work “one of the most powerful theorizations of the political, democracy, and totalitarianism” – and he is right.<sup>315</sup> As the previous paragraphs show,

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<sup>313</sup> Lefort’s 1999 work *Complications* describes in depth the danger of totalitarianism and its relation to both democracy and Marxism. See Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>314</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 11.

<sup>315</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 51.

Lefort's unique interpretation of society uses both human action and the transcendent to conceptualize a theory of democracy that accounts for the conflict of human relations. However, little has been discussed in this chapter thus far about the political, as such.

Based on the terms outlined in the first section, the definition of the political becomes self-evident. It is right to say that Lefort's 'political' is the entire structure of his theory. The political is the way in which all societies are organized: by the originary division. Again, it is understood that it is the originary division that goes on to determine meaning<sup>316</sup> in society. The self-externalized identification that gives form to society is incited by the originary division, enabling society to see itself for what it is. This structure, while a precarious structure, is the political. Further, because Lefort's political is that origin of division, it can be said that the political founds all difference, determinations, and domains, by embedding meaning in their origin.<sup>317</sup> The political looks at "the very origin of differentiation between social spheres in modernity", meaning that it gives explanation for difference itself.<sup>318</sup> When we look at the conflict of desires between the Grandees and the people, the self-externalized identification of society by a division of itself, and the institutionalization of conflict by democracy, are given form and meaning by the political.

This definition of the political can appear very abstract. A comparison of the political with its counterpart – 'politics' – can aid with this confusion. Lefort puts these two terms into a bordering relationship, using the masculine "*le politique*" to refer to the political and the feminine "*la politique*" to refer to politics. *Le politique* is considered the organizational structure

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<sup>316</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, "meaning" refers to Lefort's "mise-en-sens", which means to distinguish between oppositions. See Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 11-12.

<sup>317</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 90.

<sup>318</sup> Marchart. "The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort", 89.

of society. It is that which gives meaning to society and distinguishes its varying forms.<sup>319</sup> Conversely, *la politique* is contingent on an already established political (*le politique*) context. Within society, and of the political context that has been determined, politics appears as institutions, techniques of government, actions by political actors, *et cetera*.<sup>320</sup> *La politique* is contingent on its context and, therefore, is particular to a historical moment. However, as Accetti asserts, “*le politique* is assumed to be a universal and constitutive feature of all human societies.”<sup>321</sup> Therefore, Lefort is understood when he argues that “the political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured.”<sup>322</sup> The political is found in thinking about what gives meaning to society, both in which division is apparent and division is hidden.

Now, it is imperative for our discussion to put this definition into a comparison with that of Rancière and Mouffe. It is Lefort’s use of the symbolic that really differentiates his conception of the political from the other two agonistic thinkers. The kind of conflict that occurs by the symbolic is more nuanced than that of the others, as it is not restricted by any ‘real’ community calculations of individual identities or interests. The symbolic dimension is more concerned with how the community represents itself. It does not rely on a “‘real’ process that unfolds at the level of production and class struggle.”<sup>323</sup> However, there are still many places where their theories converge with Lefort and they, too, reveal important characteristics of Lefort’s view of the political.

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<sup>319</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 125.

<sup>320</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 125.

<sup>321</sup> Accetti, “Claude Lefort: Democracy as the Empty Place of Power”, 125.

<sup>322</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 11.

<sup>323</sup> John B. Thompson, introduction to *The Political Forms of Modern Society* by Claude Lefort (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 16.

For instance, each thinker characterizes the conflictual political definition as *ontological*, often accentuating this characterization by putting the political in opposition with an *ontic* ‘politics’. For Lefort, the political is “society’s ontological condition.”<sup>324</sup> As demonstrated in this chapter, Lefort sees the political as a broad horizon of the social condition. It expresses the very organization of social order, in a timeless, universal, and a-historic way.<sup>325</sup> The political does not concern itself with specifics of individual or group conflict but reduces *social* conflict to its most irreducible. Then, the form of each society as it is quasi-represented in the symbolic becomes the ontic expression in the real. For example, Marchart explains that Lefort’s democracy should be understood as the “ontic recognition of society’s ontological condition”; democracy is that which ontically institutionalizes the conflict that is characteristic of the ontological social condition.<sup>326</sup>

Similarly, Mouffe argues that the political is not bound by any historic progression.<sup>327</sup> This is due to a strong guiding intention of her work, in which she avoids the idea that the political is pushing humans towards some peak condition, ‘post-politics’. So, Mouffe argues that the political underscores *all* aspects of the human condition: “it should rather be understood as a dimension inherent in all human society which stems from our very ontological condition.”<sup>328</sup> The political cannot be resolved to reach some utopic end, as it is irreducible to the human condition. Politics, on the other hand, is just concerned with ontic institutions and practices that create order in society.

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<sup>324</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 52.

<sup>325</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 52.

<sup>326</sup> Marchart, “Division and Democracy”, 52.

<sup>327</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, 8.

<sup>328</sup> Mouffe, “For a Politics of a Nomadic Identity (1994)”, 149.

Following a similar logic as Mouffe and Lefort, but expressed otherwise, Rancière put his political ontology in opposition to *philosophy*.<sup>329</sup> In his critique of political philosophy, as such, he puts these two concepts in opposition, creating a paradoxical relationship between the two. Rancière characterizes philosophy as an attempt to rationalize the *polis*, which supposes that there is an order (*arkhê*) that underlies the political community which can be understood by philosophy.<sup>330</sup> However, for Rancière, the ontological truth of the political is that of radically anarchic equality, not order.<sup>331</sup> By attempting to understand the ontic hierarchies of the polis, philosophy creates, re-creates, and orders, but only conceals the true political condition. Rancière intends to remember this political condition to re-assert pure ontological equality. In each case, we see a political definition that is reduced to what is considered its most pure or most true about the human condition. It is meant to describe human relations that are beyond human action; it describes an a-historic *being* of humankind. This being is conflictual *and* autonomous. Conflictual in that it is division that fundamentally defines community and autonomous in its separation from ontic politics and philosophy.

In Paul Ricoeur, one finds a good source of clarification for the ontological, conflictual, and autonomous political dimension found in Lefort, Mouffe, and Rancière. Ricoeur explains: “this autonomy of the political appears to me to draw on two contrasting traits. On the one hand, the political realizes a human relation that cannot be reduced to the conflicts between classes...On the other hand, the politics develops specific evils, which are not reducible to others.”<sup>332</sup> Ricoeur argues that this kind of political definition, which opposes a politics,

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<sup>329</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology”, *Theory & Event* 6, no. 4 (2003): para. 1.

<sup>330</sup> Deranty, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology”, para. 3.

<sup>331</sup> Deranty, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology”, para. 4.

<sup>332</sup> Paul Ricoeur, as quoted by Marchart. See Marchart, “Politics and the Political: Genealogy of a Conceptual Difference”, 37.

considers the political ‘ideal’ and politics ‘real’, the political is concerned with the community and politics with policy. The political speaks to human condition and politics with power.

This kind of political evokes images of a heaven versus earth.<sup>333</sup> The fear is that on earth, the conflictual political will be forgotten, perverted, or neutralized, and each agonists’ theories aim to reinvigorate a depoliticized society.<sup>334</sup> Each of the thinkers discussed here, identifies what they see as the ‘oblivion of the political’ and insert themselves into the theoretical discussion as a means of remembering that the political, as an ontological condition, is still present if only it can be re-approached. Following the critical tradition, Lefort, Rancière, and Mouffe wish to use the political to interrogate political philosophy.<sup>335</sup>

Even with these similarities, this chapter argues that Lefort’s insistence on the symbolic dimension of politics signals a particular divergence from agonistic theorists like Rancière and Mouffe. Lefort further radicalizes the oppositional and irreducible character of the political. It is not in such a tethered relationship to individual identities and real group conflict. Instead, the symbolic constitution of the political dimension transcends the political beyond and prior to what may manifest in the fractures of society. In fact, Lefort calls this a “disentangling of the political and the non-political within the social order.”<sup>336</sup> When Lefort speaks of the political, he is distinguishing between the *institution* of the social and *thinking* the social.<sup>337</sup> The ‘institution of the social’ is the social as it is formed in its reality, in what is felt in the ontic and historic.<sup>338</sup> ‘Thinking the social’ is the horizon on which reality comes to be as it is represented; thinking the

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<sup>333</sup> Lefort gives great significance to religious imagery. This is why Lefort discusses the “theologico-political.” For him, “both the political and the religious bring philosophical thought face to face with the symbolic.” Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” from *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

<sup>334</sup> Marchart, “Politics and the Political: Genealogy of a Conceptual Difference”, 44-45.

<sup>335</sup> Marchart, “The Machiavellian Moment Re-Theorized: Claude Lefort”, 89.

<sup>336</sup> Brian C.J. Singer, “Thinking the ‘Social’ with Claude Lefort” *Thesis Eleven*, no. 87 (2006): 86.

<sup>337</sup> Singer, “Thinking the ‘Social’ with Claude Lefort”, 89.

<sup>338</sup> Singer, “Thinking the ‘Social’ with Claude Lefort”, 90.

social is observed using the imaginary. The two, while being in a reflective relationship, are not reconcilable.<sup>339</sup> While the reality of the social is informed by the political, the political is not informed by the social. The political is a constant. The political is a symbolic and staged dimension.

For each thinker, the political manifests in a different way. For Lefort, it is symbolic. Comparatively, Mouffe's political is practical and Rancière's is aesthetic. For Mouffe, this appears in her idea of collective identities. Mouffe argues that there is an affective dimension to antagonistic relations that binds individuals together by their 'passions'. This does not position Mouffe that far from the common democratic idea of conflict wherein conflicts emerge from opposing interests. While she does partially solve this connection in her reliance on Schmitt, by defining the political antagonisms as both ontological and existential, there appears to be a close relationship between what occurs in human action and the political dimension. That said, this allows for a more conceptualized practical design for democracy than that of agonists like Rancière and Lefort, as the political is more manageable by real systems and channels if they can mirror these collective identities. Mouffe is able to institutionalize the political in a practical way that is not seen in Rancière and Lefort.

Rancière's definition of the political is closer to Lefort's, but it is better described as aesthetic than symbolic. The arithmetic of Rancière's conception of the political favours this 'politics of aesthetics' prevalent in his work. For him, democracy is a performance or staging of that originary event of the political that he identifies in Aristotle and Plato. While this is similar to Lefort's idea of the (re)representation of the symbolic, Rancière's aesthetic staging is based upon

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid, 90.

very real calculations of the community designed by Aristotle and Plato. While he does not wish to affirm these calculations, he uses them as the negative basis for his political recount.

This chapter has shown that it is the symbolic characteristic of Lefort's theory that allows for the freeing of the democratic model and proves to open vast possibilities for the modes in which democracy can manifest. Lefort identifies an irreconcilable human need to have the community represented and has the symbolic dimension fulfill this by reflecting the internal conflict of the community back at itself. Considering the empty place of power of democracy, which brings a challenge to the democratic experience, this contribution is significant. Lefort, Mouffe, and Rancière each see this conflict as that which sustains and makes democracy great, especially in dealing with plurality. It follows that conflict is found at the core of each their theories of democracy. However, unlike other agonists, who use theories of practicality and aesthetics to address the radical negativity of the human experience, Lefort conceptualizes a political definition that untethers his theory from the usual fastens of agonism. By aligning his work with the agonist tradition, it is revealed that his democratic theory contributes a significant addition to the literature that helps avoid the slide into totalitarian power that Lefort so feared.

## Conclusion

The initial spark of this thesis was to pose an alternative way of approaching conflict in democracy. To face the elephant-in-the-room that is democracy's struggle with conflict and, rather than hiding that elephant behind promises of rational deliberation, this thesis proposed to investigate conflict as constitutive of democracy's apparatus. Further, by borrowing from Wenman, I discovered that agonism has failed to embrace many thinkers outside of the Anglo tradition as perceptions of agonistic models have misunderstood the engagement with post-structuralism and post-modernism.<sup>340</sup>

Still, I asked, what does the diverse agonistic tradition have to offer this debate, especially considering democracy's continued struggle with the conflicts of plurality? My answer is found in a discussion of three thinkers, presented as 'alternative agonist models'. This thesis contributes to the discourse on democratic conflict by engaging with Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Claude Lefort who each offer a definition of the political that rests in conflict. I focused primarily on the philosophical foundations and underpinnings of their democratic theory rather than its practical institution. Each argues that conflict is consubstantial to human relations, and therefore, irreducible to the experience of democracy. I conclude that this conflictual political dimension is necessary to theorizing a complete vision of democracy. Rather than hypothesizing a unified, post-conflict political community, attention should be put on the *value* of conflict in maintaining democratic flourishing.

Over the course of three chapters, I have presented a systematic organization of the agonistic theories of each thinker. While Mouffe is widely discussed in the field, I revisited her work in the first chapter and untangle certain limits in her theory. By tracing her conception of the

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<sup>340</sup> Wenman, "Introduction: Agonism and the Constituent Power", 3.

political to Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, I found that the political consists of existential we/they relationships that are rooted in the hegemonic struggle between collective identities. This means that democracy, for Mouffe, should aim to channel these extreme antagonisms into agonistic or adversarial relations, in order to maintain and manage the ever-present conflictual political. She puts this in opposition to Habermas' rationalist moral framework that favours reconciliation over antagonism, reason over emotion, and individualism over collectivism. By complexifying her understanding of the passion that drives group identification, this chapter proves that Mouffe's political dimension continues to offer an optimistic justification for agonism, as the negativities of human relations can be channeled into practical democratic outlets.

Further, Rancière and Lefort, who are not often read as 'agonists', are treated as such. The second chapter examines Rancière's democratic theory, acknowledging its complicated presentation, but understanding that it is his conflictual method that affirms the value of an agonistic democratic theory. I organize his writings into an unfolding of concepts, beginning at the initial miscount by Plato and Aristotle, which affirmed inequality in the political community. I concluded that this initial mistake leads to the interruption of the radical equality and anarchy of democracy. Here, the political dimension is found. Rancière's work shows that in the internal complications of democracy are its most valuable asset. Rancière reveals that the conflictual political is actually that which sustains democratic equality. Further, that the meaning of democracy is equality – the two are inseparable and, therefore, equality can only be achieved by the democratic experience.

The final chapter puts Lefort's democratic theory into a comparative analysis with Mouffe and Rancière. These thinkers converge in their definition of the political as conflictual, ontological, and autonomous. However, by insisting on the 'symbolic' dimension of all political power, Lefort

manages to dispel with any reliance on group identities and community parts. He grounds his theory in Machiavelli allowing him a realist view of society – seeing the community for what it *is* not what it ought to be. Yet, by hypothesizing a transcendent idea of social order, one just outside of the particulars of human action, Lefort’s democracy speaks closest to the being of humankind.

This conclusion outlines some of the thesis’s contributions to democratic theory. It also provides reference to areas of this research that could be elaborated.

#### 4.1 Democratic Theory

Putting into dialogue democratic projects that are not usually put together, this thesis offers an original contribution to ongoing debates in democratic theory. Looking particularly at agonism, Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort do not shy away from the conflictual element of the agonistic tradition. They further radicalize the negativity of agonistic democracy and complexify our understanding of pluralism, each pulling from different theoretical origins to do so.

##### *Agonism Against Consensus.*

Each alternative agonist takes aim at the emphasis on consensus that is affirmed by deliberative models and totalitarianism, alike. By varying modes of confrontation, it is concluded that rational consensus ignores an essential dimension of human behaviour. Pulling from Schmitt, Mouffe argues that it is the passion of group identification that drives plural communities into friend/enemy distinctions. These collective identifications between us and them do not rely on secondary references to economic or moral opponents and are not concerned with competing interests. These internal identifications of the other are the most irreducible quality of any human relation and some of the most base and emotive expressions of humankind. Mouffe shows us that Habermas’ reliance on rational deliberation is ill-founded as it assumes that discourse occurs by ideal speech situations which are driven by rational individual interests.

Rancière agrees with Mouffe. But to discredit the deliberative model he founds his theory in those who first theorized democracy. Rancière argues that the problem of the ideal speech situation originated in Aristotle and Plato. By his interpretation, Aristotle's distinction of political man as he who possesses *logos* – the distinct power of speech – was the first instance of exclusion by deliberative means. By setting a standard for political membership by language, hierarchies were formed that said who has and has no part in the political. Habermas' idea of communicative action relies on these same ideas. It does not account for the misrepresentation or deception of speech acts. Even if respect of plural viewpoints and recognition of plurality is implemented into the deliberative model, Rancière's theory of democracy tells us that the very experience of democracy is that which interrupts these speech-based, or otherwise 'natural', hierarchies that have been upheld since their Aristotelian inception.

It should be noted that advocates of deliberative democracy have addressed this issue.<sup>341</sup> Bachtiger et al. argue that such criticisms from agonists are misplaced. The authors claim that there has been in a recent emergence of consensus models that have reformulated in order to account for conflict,<sup>342</sup> including recent shifts in Habermas' theory. Still, he cites shallow arguments from popular agonist thinkers as to easily pushback agonist critiques.<sup>343</sup> None of these reformulations consider conflict to be the basis of the political, let alone that which sustains it and allows it to flourish. It is considered more of a problem of democracy. Reformulations add value to conflict after the fact, but do not position it at the origin of the political or democracy.

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<sup>341</sup> See Bachtiger, et al. "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction", from *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. André Bachtiger, John S. Dryzek, Jane Mansbridge, Mark E. Warren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>342</sup> Bachtiger, et al. "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction", 19.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

Mouffe and Rancière identify the logical failures in deliberative theorization. Contributing significantly to their criticisms, Lefort warns of the consequence of consensus at its most extreme. He uses the experience of totalitarian regimes to show of what occurs when disagreements are not given space in the social and the force of consensus is used to unite the community. Lefort sees totalitarianism as a mutation of democracy; of what happens to democracy when the conflictual political is not recognized. The danger of naming the ‘People-as-One’, of attempting to unite the political community, is that the originary division will be hidden or forgotten. Totalitarianism makes claim that a party can represent the aspirations of a whole people.<sup>344</sup> The denial of any and all opposition for the purpose of uniting the community as one is enacted to make ultimate claims to power. Claims to unanimity can be used as justification for the whims of those in power.

While Lefort does not directly accuse deliberative models of such tendencies, there is a logical connection to be made between these examples. If deliberative democracy says that consensus is to be reached by the idea of the ‘people’s’ will, it denies the symbolic dimension of the political and it conceals the divisive character of democracy. It is Lefort’s symbolic dimension that brings this to light best.

*The Alternatives Against Agonism.*

There is a fundamental characteristic of conflict that is known to be shared by many agonists of the Anglo-American tradition. Wenman calls this ‘constitutive pluralism’, but notes that it is closely related to Isaiah Berlin’s idea of value pluralism. This means that constitutive of the community is a “diversity of ‘ultimate ends’ which differ ‘not in all respects...but in some profound irreconcilable ways’ and which are not ‘combinable in any final synthesis’.”<sup>345</sup> Wenman

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<sup>344</sup> Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”, 13.

<sup>345</sup> Wenman, “Part 1”, 29.

traces value pluralism to political thinkers such as Machiavelli, pointing to interpretations of his work that claim Machiavelli saw in society ‘two competing conceptions of the good’.<sup>346</sup> However, this thesis has traced Machiavelli’s contribution to agonism as an identification of a more originary division of society; one that does not refer to ‘values’ or ideas of the good life. Lefort argues that the division between those who desire to command and those who desire not to be commanded does not reference any particular interest, but an *umori*. This desire is more of a temperament than a conception of ends.

While common understandings of agonistic value pluralism do recognize the complexity and multi-dimensional manner in which conceptions of the good are chosen, Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort represent alternative modes of understanding conflict. Their conceptions of the political are more fundamentally conflictual. By looking to continental sources, we see a different idea of pluralism. That it is conflict itself which denotes pluralism or difference. The collective identities, recount of the community, and the symbolic division of the social, are better described as conditions that invoke difference.

## 4.2 Agonistic Art

Thinking about these alternative agonists and their resistance to outline practical applications or manifestations of their democratic theory, I have found significant interest in the aesthetic character of their theories and how this relates to the political in art. It may be that democracy as an institutionalized regime is not cohesive with their theories. Could it be that their ideas of the conflictual political are best demonstrated in the material as art? What is the relationship between democracy and art? Could it be that art is the mode by which the political can remain most true to its agonistic conception? This thesis considers these sorts of questions to

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<sup>346</sup> Wenman, “Part 1”, 29-30.

be a logical progression for this research, as I have found significant convergence in the work of Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort in their use of aesthetics and discussion of art.

Most obvious is Rancière's work in *Dissensus*. Woven in its discussion of the political, politics, and democracy is an examination of the "intimate and attested interrelation" between politics and art.<sup>347</sup> By his understanding, art may prove to be a medium in which the normal rules of governance are suspended, allowing the democratic experience to be best manifest.<sup>348</sup> Steven Cocoran clarifies: "for Rancière, genuine political or artistic activities always involve forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places and free speech and expression from all reduction to functionality".<sup>349</sup> Following this logic, art may be a *potential* place for democratic designs.

Mouffe's later writing takes a similar turn. In *Agonistics* she questions whether art can still be a truly subservice place for the political.<sup>350</sup> She recognizes the fervour of depoliticization and is concerned that any attempt at political art would only be subsumed into the neutral terrain of post-politics – especially considering the hegemonic hold of capitalism.<sup>351</sup> However, like her larger theory, Mouffe takes an optimistic stance. Therefore, Mouffe argues that to counter this force and reassert critical art, there must be a larger hegemonic fight against the 'imagined communities'<sup>352</sup> that post-political capitalism relies upon to control the passions of humankind. She envisions a possibility of art used in the grand hegemonic schema.

While my research found no direct discussion of art in Lefort's work, there is a logical connection between his use of aesthetics and the potential of art as democracy. Rosalyn Deutsche

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<sup>347</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 1.

<sup>348</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 1.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>350</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 158.

<sup>351</sup> Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 158-159.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

uses Lefort in a discussion of art, democracy, and the public sphere.<sup>353</sup> Patrick F. McKinlay analyzes Lefort's democratic theory, noting the potential that Lefort's experimental and indeterminant conception of the political justifies the potential for alternative modes of democratic practice.<sup>354</sup> With further investigation, art could prove to be a practice for representing the conflict of the community, in this right.

#### 4.3 Final Remarks

The most significant revelation of this project has been that Mouffe, Rancière, and Lefort's conflictual political dimensions challenge common understandings of democracy. Still, I question whether the revelation of the irreconcilable conflict of democracy only accentuates the struggle of thinking, rethinking, and implementing democracy. Is democracy an impossible task? Will we ever be happy with the democratic model?

I have found that these alternative agonists and their ideas of the political tell us that democracy is found in movement. It is precarious and flexible. It appears in moments of interruption, events of intense conflict, and in the assertion of oppositional forces. It is the exception and contestation of the norm. It is of negative value; rejecting the regimes that rest. Because of these qualities, democracy is here for a moment and can just as easily disappear. It must be continually rethought and fervently asserted if it is to maintain this movement.

To examine these alternative thinkers is to begin to understand this fundamental truth of democracy. Still, with this knowledge, there remains a need for how to do democracy. How can the movement of the experience of democracy translate into a regime? This question deserves

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<sup>353</sup> See Rosalyn Deutsche, "Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy" *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 34-53.

<sup>354</sup> See Patrick F. McKinlay "Postmodernism and Democracy: Learning from Lyotard and Lefort." *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 2 (1998): 481-502.

further examination. A regime may not be necessary. The conflictual political dimension of these alternative agonists has shown that we cannot wait for the perfecting of democracy or the mastering of its movement. I think the potential of these three projects is that the idea of democracy is challenged at its most fundamental points. The potential for what it could be has only begun to be acknowledged.

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