Critical Exchange

Democracy, Critique and the Ontological Turn[1]

Hardt and Negri (2001, p. 354) once remarked that 'political philosophy forces us to enter the terrain of ontology'. At a time when democracy's very future seems to be at stake, this statement assumes a renewed urgency. For, if the democratic project is once more under existential threat, rethinking the foundations of political thought and action is perhaps no longer the exclusive preoccupation of radical political thinkers but becomes the central task of contemporary democratic theory more broadly. Political ontologists have persuasively argued that our fundamental assumptions about the meaning and nature of our being in the world, about politics as a collective activity, and about the purpose of political philosophy are deeply interwoven; thinking and acting politically, as Arendt taught us, are inseparable. Philosophy is not simply an external discourse of knowledge that produces a scientific or 'objective' account of political life, separate from the actual practices, habits and affective commitments of individual or collective agents; nor can political life simply be reduced to procedures of validation based on intersubjective rules of communication. Yet, even if the so-called 'ontological turn' in political theory has rendered the liberal search for ontological neutrality or the Habermasian call for communicative

proceduralism questionable, it is still not clear what the concrete implications of the various ontologies on offer are; nor is it obvious what kind of relationship between knowledge, being and practice the various 'ontological turns' authorise. For ontological approaches to the political are both varied in their theoretical orientations and contested with regards to their salience and utility for an engaged socio-political analysis. To give a measure of this variety, ontological perspectives have been variously inspired by Badiou's mathematical ontology, Laclau's 'rhetorical' ontology of social antagonism, Hardt and Negri's ontology of bio-power, Agamben's ontology of bare life, Lacan's anti-philosophical ontology of the real or Derrida's hauntological approach to the political.

In dialogue with these approaches, recent works by the five contributors to this critical exchange - Oliver Marchart (2007) Sergei Prozorov (2013) Lois McNay (2014) Aletta Norval (2008) and Vassilios Paipais (2016) - explore the relationship between ontological meta-theoretical claims about the nature of the political and the phenomenological analysis of concrete political action. This body of work critically engages with a long line of post-Marxist thinkers (Laclau, Mouffe, Badiou, Rancière, Agamben, Nancy, Žižek) who have reconstructed and, in many ways, rehabilitated the nature of ontological analysis in political theory, away from traditional philosophical ideas about what ontology stands for. Drawing on Heidegger's distinction between the ontological (*Being*) and the ontic (*beings*) levels, this form of philosophical critique of politics interrogates the role and function of foundations in political thought and action, and the possibilities of progressive social change from an engaged agonistic perspective. What these models of ontological analysis then have

in common is the critique of strong foundationalism and the turn to ontology as a way of reactivating dormant political possibilities for social criticism and progressive transformation. Critics of this approach, on the other hand, tend to stress the abstractness inherent in this type of theorising, always in danger of resurrecting the phantom of a disengaged philosophical discourse.

The five contributions included in this exchange draw on a variety of ontological approaches to the political, reflecting a broad range of concerns, both friendly and critical, to the much-analysed 'ontological turn' in political theory. In what follows, we shall draw out two themes that all contributions speak to, and suggest areas where a common ground is emerging, as well as domains where instructive divergences remain.

The first theme concerns the translatability of fundamental ontology to the realm of politics. How straightforward or uninterrupted, in other words, is the transition from ontology to the political? The strong case for an ontology of the political is put forward in Oliver Marchart's contribution as part of his wider claim about the political nature of (social) being. Building on the Heideggerian distinction between the ontological and the ontic, Marchart argues that the added value of political ontology rests on the recognition that social order (or the social) is traversed by antagonism and that the different ontic ontologies of conflict, power, exclusion, subordination as well as their opposite ontologies of peace, harmony, association and pluralisation, are all expressions of the political, i.e. antagonistic, nature of social being. Marchart seems here to be radicalising Heidegger by assuming all being as fundamentally social or historical, thus putting forward a version of political ontology that thinks the being of

beings as pervasively political. Sergei Prozorov, in his contribution, has difficulty

accepting the validity of this conflation of the ontological and the political. His starting

point is Badiou's set theoretical ontology that places the void at the heart of being and

reads ontology (pure multiplicity) and politics (always situational) as different orders

of discourse. Prozorov would then read void ontology as a discourse about being *qua*

being, while the different *domains* of being (politics, economic, ethics, aesthetics etc.)

would constitute various *regional* ontologies that usually underpin ideological or

anthropological assumptions. Political ontology then, for Prozorov, would be another

regional ontology. This, in turn, implies that politics may be ontological but ontology

can never be political. Vassilios Paipais' contribution also relies on Heidegger's

ontological difference but reworks it as a heuristic of formalisation that might allow

us to talk about ontology as political, as Marchart advocates, without turning political

ontology into another anthropology or ideology, as Prozorov cautions. Norval and

McNay appreciate the critical potential of ontological discourses, but they are more

interested in emphasising the ontic side of the equation. Norval argues that a

phenomenology of the political pertains to the ways the political *qua* revolution,

novelty, antagonism, resistance or even reformist augmentation is always mediated

by ontic forms of political activation and engagement. Her insistence that there is no

absolute separation between the ontic and the ontological is a refreshing prophylactic

against the temptation of abstractness lurking behind much ontological talk. This

temptation is the central target of Lois McNay's contribution. Although not entirely

denying the disruptive purchase of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, McNay

cautions against relying too heavily on the 'ontological machine' to do the crucial job

of painstaking social analysis. For McNay, because of their apriori valorisation of contingency ontological theories suffer from naive assumptions about the possibilities of social change, and the subject of resistance.

The second theme is the relationship between philosophical critique and political praxis. Does political ontology bridge the gap between thought and practice, philosophy and politics? The growing realisation that political action relies on implicit ontological commitments testifies to the indispensable role a certain kind of political thinking plays in political life. And yet, the relation between theory and practice, ontological critique and action is not as seamless as is often assumed. Actual political subjects may often feel constrained or become disenchanted by philosophical treatments of politics that assume too facile a transition from political philosophy to democratic practice. Such an anti-philosophical sensibility does not, though, necessarily consign thought or critique to the role of the handmaid (*ancilla*) of democratic practice. Indeed, for Prozorov, philosophical critique should guard against becoming a content-filler for politics. It should then resist the temptation to instruct political agents who always know better how best to engage in the field of progressive politics. Marchart shares some of this reticence, yet he is quick to add that the task of the critical ontologist in exposing the strong foundationalism of ideological projects is an *ethical* one, as opposed to hegemony-building, which is the stuff of politics. This strict division of labour between critique and politics would be viewed with suspicion by both McNay and Norval. Paipais, on the other hand, is not necessarily concerned with the alleged asymmetry or incongruity between philosophy and politics, or ethics and politics. Instead, he argues for the necessity of an appropriate *formal* meta-

language that makes critique possible, without necessarily assuming a position of externality outside politics. The task of post-foundational critique, for Paipais, would then be to describe the formal conditions that render feasible what Marchart calls a 'critical ideology', i.e. a stance of internal/external engagement with democratic practice, which does not collapse into a defence of a particularistic programme. In contrast, Norval and McNay are motivated by the urgency of engaged, self-reflexive forms of democratic critique that does not privilege the theorist's insights over other *lived* socio-political standpoints. Yet, all contributions in this exchange recognise that the intertwinement of thought and practice within the horizon of ontological critique transforms what we understand political thinking and action to be, giving rise to a concrete, committed political subjectivity, perhaps best described by Badiou as thought-praxis (*pensée-pratique*).

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Ontopolitics and the Future of Democracy

'The people have spoken' Theresa May

'If "the people" ever comes into existence it can only be in the form of claims about them, on their behalf or in their name.'

Keenan (2003: 7)

'What we say cannot be specified independently of why we say it'.

Avner Baz (2003: 484)

The claim that 'the people have spoken', common to US politics, but rarer in the UK context – that is, until Brexit – captures an important aspect both of our contemporary political world, and of politics per se. If, as Cavell suggests, language is an activity of world-making, May's claim is just such an attempt: to forge a world, and with that a political community, where no such world and community pre-exists the claim that is made. The community and political world of Brexit, relations between those who voted to stay and those who voted to leave, our relations with our European neighbours, our friends and enemies, quite literally, have to be forged anew. The political work that needs to be done in this context also reveals something about the essence of politics to us: the fact that it consists of making claims that seek to bring community, mutual relations and obligations into existence. In democratic politics, such claim-making is structurally anticipatory in nature. It posits the agreement of others, and invites a response. There is no expectation that the invited response should be one of agreement and consent to the view of community posited. In fact, in a

democratic polity, the structural expectation, more often than not, is one of rebuff that opens up dialogue and continuing contestation, until a provisional agreement is reached. Thus, the claims that we make both suggests forms of commonality and community, and in that suggestion, open up the possibilities of disagreement, of others claiming that 'you do not speak for me'. This is why statements to the effect that no one may question Brexit, is such an affront to democracy. As Albert Weale (2017) puts it, 'if one thing is clear in democratic theory, it is that there is no obligation to refrain from campaigning against or opposing a piece of legislation that has been validly adopted. There is no democratic obligation simply to accept the result of a referendum established by statute, since there is no obligation to give up campaigning against and opposing an outcome with which you disagree.'

What does all this have to do with 'the ontological turn' in politics? To address this question, we need to be clear from the outset that there is no singular 'turn' to ontology, just as there is no singular conception of ontology that can underwrite such a turn. Some political theorists and philosophers suggest that ontology per se should form our starting-point, and that we can and should derive political principles from such an ontology. By contrast, I start from the position captured sharply by William Connolly (1995: 1, emphasis added), that '*every* interpretation of political events, no matter how deeply it is sunk in a specific historical context … contains an ontopolitical dimension.' That is, every political situation is always already imbued with an ontology from which we may seek to elicit – but not derive – an ethos (White 2004). It is also important that we are not continuously aware of these ontopolitical dimensions of our existence; they only become visible in moments of crisis when the ordering of

our world is challenged and we are called upon to defend and outline the criteria by which we order our lives.

It is, therefore, appropriate that in posing the question of ontology today, we reflect upon the fact that we are indeed in a moment of crisis. This acknowledgement is important for it makes visible that the fundaments of our current political order is at stake: in the UK, both for those who clearly signalled the need for change in an exit-vote and for those who were defeated in the referendum vote. The democratic question that arises here concerns the quality of the processes through which we seek to re-establish our sense of community and belonging, as much as the fact that this political work – if it is to be democratic – requires a processual approach, and not the assertion of purported 'facts' such as 'the people have spoken' and 'Brexit is Brexit'. It should thus be clear that, in posing the question of ontology, we are not seeking extra-political principles or a strong ontology that can save us from the difficult work of politics in deciding how to act.

What view of ontology is imbricated in this approach to democracy? As suggested by using the term 'ontopolitics', there is no absolute separation between ontology and the ontic - that which is factually existing - and no determination of the latter by the former. They are, rather, interdependent and interweaved. Fundamental ontology, on this view, is not 'an inquiry into a domain that is essentially distinct from (say, foundational in relation to) regional ontological inquiry' (Mulhall, n.d.). Rather, 'fundamental ontology is regional ontology radicalized', as Mulhall puts it, and every region of ontic knowledge presupposes a regional ontology. In subjecting the presuppositions of an area of ontic knowledge (e.g. British liberal democracy) to

questioning, we engage in (regional) ontological questioning (making visible deeper and questioning deeper assumptions about liberal democracy) and so on. Both questioning and interrelation are fundamental and unavoidable here. Mulhall calls this Heidegger's 'context principle'. There are two implications of the context principle that are particularly relevant to us today. The first 'registers the fact that there is something inherently questionable about the ways in which we make sense of every particular kind of thing.' That is, open to discussion and indeed contestation. The second is that ontic forms of knowledge, as well as their 'pretheoretical antecedents' are genuine modes of knowledge, as Mulhall argues. They disclose how things are and are 'discursive articulations that are also articulations of reality.' Thinking about the kinds of questioning our current political order is subjected to – or not, as the case may be – suggests, on this approach, that while this order discloses something about our world, it also is an order that is *an* articulation; that is, as the late Laclau (2000: 71) argued, we have here both 'an order' and the principle of ordering as such. The point is that they cannot and ought not to be severed from one another. As radical democrats who acknowledge the ultimate contingency and ungroundedness of our claims, as Laclau suggests, we are called upon to engage actively both with those who question the specific incarnations of our democratic orders and with those who question the idea and value of democracy tout court. In so engaging, we need to subject emerging visions to two crucial tests: do they open up space for response, for argument and counter-argument? Are the forms of political community proposed themselves democratic in character? That is, do they acknowledge that for claim-making that brings into being new forms of political

community to be democratic, they need to invite contestation and welcome plurality, and do so explicitly.

How does this help us to approach the question of what is to be done, today? I have already suggested that it is when our worlds are put into question that we are challenged to reflect on the conditions of our existence. Under such conditions, we can re-affirm our existing commitments, or find resources on which we can draw to imagine the world differently; and, imagining the world differently will also, more than likely, draw on existing resources. These resources are not purely 'ontic' in character: once the sharp distinction between what is ontic and what is ontological is put into question we also need to think differently about situatedness. The worlds in which we always already find ourselves contain both resources of conservation and of challenge; our work on and against, with and within these resources is the *only* route to answering the question 'What is to be done?' No ontology or indeed 'theory' per se can provide answers to our contemporary dilemmas and crises. Similarly, no invocation of an unmediated recourse to 'experiences of suffering', as McNay (2014: 208) would have it, is possible either. Even and especially experiences of suffering are permeated by ontopolitical concerns. To put it differently, there is no escape from ontopolitics. Answers cannot be found in withdrawing from the world, nor in a simplistic immersion in it. Rather, the only way ahead is through a continuous plunging into the depths of the traditions thinking, theory and action that shape us, and simultaneously pulling away from those very traditions to reveal their presuppositions and to subject them to scrutiny even if and as we wish to affirm them. It is herein that we'll find the resources for critique.

It is from these resources that we need to forge new political imaginaries. Such imaginaries are being forged today. If they are forged in the style of May and indeed, in the style of Corbin who have capitulated to the simplistic view that 'the people have spoken' and that they speak once and then in one voice, then we are indeed heading for an order that will be less democratic, more exclusive, and closed to alternative voices. There are other imaginaries in the process of being forged: extolling the limits of liberal democracy and its collusion with capitalism in the style of a Žižek, calling for an emancipatory politics that is not bound 'a priori by formal-democratic procedures of legitimization' unexpectedly conjoining that of a May. The old is dying and the new is not yet born. There is no doubt that liberal democracy is in a profound crisis. What the new will look like will depend, in large measure, on our ability and willingness to stand up, fight, and work relentlessly for a more radical democratic order in which the shape of the order itself is open to questioning, just as the particular claims put forward in our names are contested and contestable.

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'What's going on with Being?': Ontology as Critique

The recent 'ontological turn' in political and social thought (White, 2000; Strathausen, 2009; Paipais, 2016) has taken several different directions. Today we are confronted with a multifaceted set of reflections on the nature of social being that includes ontologies of 'rhetoricity' (Laclau, 2014) and of 'antagonism' (Marchart, 2017), of 'lack' (Žižek 1999, Stavrakakis, 2007), of 'the void' (Badiou, 2007; Prozorov, 2014), or, alternatively, of 'becoming' (Connolly, 2011), of 'abundance' (Thomassen and Tonder, 2005), of 'the multitude' (Negri, 2002), of 'com-pearance' (Nancy, 2000), of 'potentiality' (Agamben, 1999) or of historical 'actuality' (Vattimo, 2011). The key to many of these approaches lies in the differentiation, introduced by numerous authors, between 'ordinary' ontic politics and an ontological notion of *the political* (as appertaining to the entire field of the social rather than a particular practice) (Marchart 2007). Evidently, the ontological turn has also been met with reservations and heavy criticism. As was alleged by Susan Buck-Morss (2013, p. 5-7), 'the move from *la politique* (everyday politics) to *le politique* (the very meaning of the political) is a one-way street' never leading back to political practice. While this verdict was delivered *ex cathedra* and with little argumentation, others have engaged in a more thorough examination of political ontologies, criticizing their 'social weightlessness' (i.e., an insensitivity towards social suffering) (McNay 2014) or the 'negative aura' conferred upon political processes labelled, in political ontology, as 'merely positivist, sociologist, empiricist, or ontic' (Bosteels, 2011 p. 68). In most cases, ontologists are confronted with allegations of excessive abstraction at the cost of sociological concretion and political engagement.

I do not believe, however, that most political ontologies proceed by devaluing ordinary politics or by ignoring forms of social subordination. On the contrary, their aim, in the majority of cases, is to rejuvenate political practice in order to open up spaces for, precisely, challenging patterns of subordination. In this spirit, their attack is not directed against 'ordinary politics' *per se*, but against post-conflictual politics presumably emptied of any dimension of the political. If the charge is that, due to a high degree of philosophical abstraction, there is not much added-value to an ontological approach to politics, then my reply would be that the value of an ontological approach consists in a double shift within the field of political theorizing:

(1) By re-directing attention to the, ultimately, political nature of social being-*qua*-being – that is, of *all* things social – political ontologies compel us to develop a comprehensive political perspective on the social. Not in the sense of assuming that everything is political in terms of politics, but in the sense that all social affairs are political in terms of being grounded, to greater or lesser degree, by *the political*, that is to say: through instances of conflict, power, subordination, oppression, exclusion and decision as much as, of course, resistance, opposition, confrontation, association, pluralization, exodus or consensus-building. These are all *modes* of the political that structure our social world; and political ontologies, in their variety, tend to highlight one mode or another. The perspectival shift towards political ontology will thus allow us to generalize what feminists, in the 1970s, have diagnosed with regard to the personal and the private: that what appears un-political on the surface may, in fact, have deeply political roots. Sensitized by a political ontology, social analysis will be prompted to search for these modes of the political in the most unexpected places.

(2) One of these unexpected places is our own place as social theorists. Like any other social position, it remains implicated in the domain of the political. For this reason, contemporary post-foundational ontologies do not succumb to Habermasian-style blackmailing and the infamous charge of 'performative self-contradiction': How can you *know*, we are asked, that the nature of all being is political? And by asserting the political nature of all things social, are you not implicating yourself in your claim? Are you not making a political rather than a scientific claim? The only way to answer questions like these is in the affirmative: Of course, ontology cannot claim exemption from the political (provided that, according to a consistent ontology of the political, the latter overlaps with the realm of social being in general), which implies that there will always be a political dimension to claims of political ontology. The reason why this is not much of a problem is that political ontologists have abandoned the epistemological territory. For whatever the intellectual sources of the ontological turn – Spinoza, Marx, Deleuze, Foucault, Hegel or Lacan –, what most political ontologies share is a particularly Heideggerian aversion to the dominant paradigm of epistemology. More than any other thinker, Heidegger, by reaching beyond the modern horizon of epistemology, initiated a shift from questions regarding being-qua-*understanding* to questions regarding being-qua-*being*. Such a move, certainly prefigured by Nietzsche, is only possible if the disembodied position of an outer-worldly calculating mind, entirely detached from the affairs under analysis, is abandoned. As soon as we start implicating ourselves into the process of interrogation – by asserting the locatedness of our own vantage point – we will be referred back to a question that is as fundamental as it is mundane; a question framed by Gianni

Vattimo (2011, p. 28) as follows: '"just how do matters stand with Being?" or "what's going on with Being?"'

The wager in political ontology is that, evidently, something political is going on with Being. Our interrogation, therefore, must be conducted in a political mode. Implicating ourselves in the questions we ask, more than being an 'existential' act, is a political one. Therein lies what I see as the true significance of Foucault's notion of an 'ontology of ourselves'. To ask, in a critical tradition, 'What is present reality? What is the present field of our experiences? What is the present field of possible experiences?' (Foucault, 2011 p. 20) will not simply refer us back to an 'ontology of the present', but also, as Foucault adds, to 'an ontology of ourselves' (p. 21). *Sein* and *Dasein*, to speak Heideggerese, stand in a relation of reversibility. 'What's going on with Being?' is just another way of asking: 'What's going on with us?' And, *vice versa*, any ontology of ourselves, given the reversibility of *Sein* and *Dasein*, will refer us back to an ontology of the political. What we need to envisage is a self-implicated form of critique – a critique, as it were, *in the ontological register*.

Regrettably, to make an unsurprising point, critique tends to be practiced in the epistemological register. For instance, Marxist ideology critique, in its vulgar versions at least, assumes a privileged vantage point from where it is possible to determine the laws of history, a method to understand these laws (science), and a privileged subject located in the position of this vantage point (the party). Ideology critique comes into play when the party is confronted with a populace not able or unwilling to perceive its own position from the party's vantage point. A theory of ideology is needed to explain why people stubbornly refuse to recognize their own 'objective interests' and

their world-historical role as it was determined, with scientific precision, by the party. A similar pattern can be found in most conceptions of ideology critique: As a rule, they imply a subject-supposed-to-know (thanks to an epistemological privilege) vis-à-vis not only a subject-not-to-know, but vis-à-vis a subject-supposed-to-err (because of her structurally blocked access to knowledge). There is no need to once more excoriate this model, which has been done many times. What I want to point out is that ideology critique, conventionally understood, presents itself as a particular form of foundationalism: as epistemological foundationalism. The model does not only imply someone knowing less (or more) than someone else, as in the case of a patient seeking advice from a doctor. A more fundamental asymmetry emerges because access to correct knowledge is granted by a grounding order entirely different from the particular content or form of knowledge implied. In the case of the Enlightenment, the name of this order was Reason, in the case of Marxism it was History, in the case of economic liberalism it is the Market, and in the case of the life sciences it's the human Genome. It is, strictly speaking, an outer-worldly or outer-social order that allows to perceive all worldly affairs from a standpoint external to them.

Post-foundational ontologies assume that such an epistemological ground is not attainable. However, rather than giving up on the whole enterprise of grounding the social, as both postmodern *anti*-foundationalist *and* empiricists or social positivists of all camps would do, critique conceived of in a *post*-foundational manner retains some notion of ground in the ontological register, even while it is admitted that every ground will always be partial, contingent and conflictual. I shall propose that such post-foundational form of critique becomes politically viable only through a triple

displacement of the epistemological register to which conventional ideology critique is so firmly attached. I propose that the ontological turn in critique has to be accompanied by a phenomenological, a quasi-transcendental and an ethical displacement.

Firstly, a narrow notion of 'knowledge' must be replaced by a much wider one of *experience*. We, of course, do not 'know', with scientific certainty, that there is no ultimate ground of the social, but we do experience the absence of such ground whenever we are confronted with the very contingency of social affairs in moments of crisis, danger, dislocation, disorder etc. Whenever this occurs, we encounter, in Derrida's terms, a hauntological lack of 'beingness' – of a firm ontological foundation – that makes itself felt within the field of social objectivity and may, in turn, instigate the need to engage in projects of re-grounding. So, while it is impossible to 'know' the ontological status of the social, we may draw conclusions from our experience of incompletion, negativity and finitude, or, from a different perspective, of abundance, joy, ecstasy or enthusiasm.

Secondly, it is indisputable that ontological arguments have to be historicized, yet there is nothing historically new in the experience of contingency, i.e., of the absence of a firm ontological ground. This experience has always been available in exceptional moments of crisis, in mystical experience, and in form of philosophical and theological paradoxes. A firm ontological ground has never been available in human history. However, only with modernity – and in the course of processes of social differentiation, industrialization, and so on – this experience has become universal. No longer does the absence of an ultimate ground make itself felt in exceptional

moments only, but we now conclude from the expansion of these moments that there is no ultimate ground available *in principle* and that accordingly *every* penultimate ground is premised upon contingent acts of power and conflict. Granting such quasi-transcendental status to contingency and conflict is only possible from the vantage point of our present condition. In this sense, political ontologies, even when pushing a seemingly trans-historical point, are always ontologies of actuality. In their 'weak' or 'post-foundational' form they could not have been formulated before the advent of modernity. Yet in no way are we compelled to assume that in earlier times there *was* a firm ontological social ground. While pre-modern societies are as contingent and conflictual as modern ones, only the latter allow for thinking contingency and conflict as *necessary*, thus granting ontological status to the political.

And thirdly, what is needed to supplement the ontological, phenomenological and quasi-transcendental displacements, is an *ethical* displacement of the epistemological paradigm. If every society is, and always has been, ungroundable in the final instance, most post-foundational ontologists take their distance from foundationalists by *accepting* this fact as something to be embraced. The term ethics is used here for lack of a better word, and in order to make clear that we are *not* speaking about politics. All politics – the conflictual process of laying penultimate foundations in the face of the absence of ultimate ones – necessitates ideological closure; thereby political action does not, in itself, involve any acceptance of the ultimate impossibility of its aims. On the contrary, to some degree it will always need to conceal the abyss on which it is built. As it goes without saying, a fully ethical stance is equally impossible from a political point of view. Someone who deliberately abstains from any attempt at

instituting the social is not involved in something political anymore. Only a saint or Zen master, in abstaining from acting altogether, can float above the ideological. Everyone else remains immersed, to whatever minimal degree, in the process of re-founding the social and of concealing its abyssal character. Everyone, hence, is walking knee-deep in ideology. When speaking of ethics, I therefore refer to an unpolitical tendency *within* politics: a particular – yet in the last instance impossible – mode of doing politics in a potentially un-concealed way. A political project is ethical to the extent that it is prepared to openly accept the ungroundable nature of social grounds and to allow for their re-foundation through competing projects.

Seen from this perspective, ideology functions by negating the necessary character of contingency. All politics is ideological to the extent that it asserts the simulacrum of an indisputable ground (in politics, as we have said, it is impossible *not* to assert – to some degree – such simulacrum). In this regard, our notion of ideology shifts from the epistemological register – where it is negotiated in terms of, for instance, 'false consciousness' or, more recently, 'post-truth', *versus* 'objective interests' and 'true knowledge' – to the ontological register. Ideology becomes a technical term of political ontology – a point congruent with post-foundational theories of ideology as elaborated by Claude Lefort (1986), Ernesto Laclau (1990) and the early Slavoj Zizek (1989). Where does this leave us with our conception of critique? Again, we have to differentiate between an ontological and an ethical conception. An ontological form of critique will in itself be political. The first task of critique, from this perspective, consists in referring ideologies back to their own ultimate groundlessness, i.e. to the necessarily contingent nature of the political project they seek to secure. The critical

practice of laying bare the shaky foundations of such project is a political intervention in its own right. If critique, in fact, is what Nikolas Kompridis calls a 'possibility-disclosing practice' (Kompridis 2011), then possibilities will only be disclosed as long as the fortifications of ideology – as, say, a 'possibility-foreclosing practice' – are weakened, challenged and undermined. Such form of critique remains immersed in social and political struggles. By leading us back to the moment of political institution, when some possibilities were foreclosed and others actualized, it blows a breach into unquestioned actuality. This is what strikes me as the critical-political aspect of an ontology of actuality: Critique makes new possibilities emerge by throwing *the actual against the actual*, thus demonstrating both the contingency and potentiality of what is actual.

Yet, blowing a breach into the actual is a purely *political* activity. It is one of the ways of implicating oneself into the realm of the actual: through politics. It does not, per se, imply an ethical stance. Only when the critical movement starts turning towards itself, only when critics, rather than challenging the ideological fortifications of their adversaries, begin to undermine their own political base, will we be leaving the realm of the ontopolitical and approach the ethical. Critique, through *ethical* self-implication, reveals the contingent nature of *its own* grounds. Such self-implication, or 'self-criticism', comes at a price: the loss of political efficacy. An ethical stance in politics might be less ideological, but it will also be less tenable in the face of competing political projects. Politics and ethics are antinomic terms.

And yet, 'democracy' appears to be the name for a political regime in which the ultimately ungroundable nature of every political claim is ethically accepted and

socially instituted. One may therefore call *democratic* the ethico-political project of establishing a precarious balance between the ideological and the ethical, that is, between denial and acceptance of the ultimate groundlessness of the social. Democratic claims aim at achieving this sort of balance. Neither are they fully political, nor are they fully ethical. They assert, on the one hand, the necessity of contingency; yet, on the other hand, they claim to be based on indisputable ideological grounds (such as freedom and equality, or human rights) and institutions (such as the rule of law, periodic elections etc.). If these democratic foundations are in any way different from other foundations, then because they remind us of the absence of an ultimate ground: the rule of law reminds us that nobody can place her claims in grounds of inherited privilege or social or political dominance; periodic elections remind us that the place of power is empty and the will of the 'sovereign' has to be counted out (as Claude Lefort famously analyzed); the division of powers reminds us that these powers do not have a common ground and must not be fused within a single point in society (like, for instance, in the hands of the totalitarian leader). All these institutions of the democratic regime place on us the ethical injunction not to ground the social in a unitary will, a political substance or communal identity. And yet, even these institutions have to be instituted, defended, kept alive, expanded and radicalized against competing, anti-democratic or fundamentalist attacks and against post-democratic deterioration. For this reason, a radical democratic critique, while being democratic in the sense of acknowledging, to some degree, its own groundless nature, will also have to be ideological to some degree. Democratic critique cannot afford the

luxury of a purely ethical stance. Perhaps we are touching here at the paradoxical possibility, not of the critique of ideology, but of a critical ideology.

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Ontology, Politics and Critique

What is political ontology? I have never been comfortable with this concept, just as I am uncomfortable with the notion of 'political philosophy' more generally. It is difficult for me to understand how ontology as such, the theory or doctrine of being *qua* being, can actually be political (or economic, aesthetic, etc.). Just as the philosophy of music does not express itself in song and the philosophy of science makes precious few scientific discoveries, it is difficult to expect a philosophy or ontology of politics to itself have some political content, function or purchase. There are evident risks here of smuggling in such content from the outside, imposing ontic content on an ostensibly ontological discourse.

The second problem is more specific to ontology. While we are accustomed to the idea of regional ontologies dealing with particular realms of beings, how ontological *are* they really? In the Heideggerian approach such 'ontologies' are clearly ontic, dealing with beings defined through their *attributes* and not the facticity of their being. From this perspective, to speak of ontology of film, dance, economy or politics is not to isolate a *particular* ontology for those domains, but to take them up solely in the dimension of their being, thus reducing or bracketing off their attributes. Political ontology or, better, ontology of politics would then be exactly the *same* ontology as the ontology of dance or economy: it would address the being of these beings or realms of beings without being in any way defined by them. This is where I differ from Oliver Marchart and Vassilios Paipais, for whom, in different ways, to speak of political ontology is to posit the entirety of (social) being as somehow political. For me, in

contrast, there is nothing political about ontology as such, but it is rather politics that establishes a certain singular relation with the ontological.

In the first volume of *Void Universalism* (Prozorov 2013a) I attempted to outline precisely such a notion of politics. There is no specifically political ontology in that book, only an inquiry on the relation *between* ontology and politics. And this relation is, in my argument, different from the relation between ontology and other procedures (art, science, religion, economy, etc). Ontology may not be political, but politics is certainly ontological, or, better, ontico-ontological. Let me unpack this clumsy formulation. I define politics as a *procedure of affirmation of universal axioms in any particular world*. Following Badiou, I start out from the existence of an infinite number of infinite worlds defined by a particular positive order, whose condition of possibility is the void as 'the proper name of being', that in which and out of which all positive worlds emerge. The orders defining these worlds are *contingent, relative* and *particular*. However, if these worlds are reduced to their sheer being-in-the-void, we may derive axioms from this condition that would be necessary, absolute and universal. They define the very worldhood of any world whatsoever and for this reason are valid in any world whatsoever, since they do not depend on a single worldly trait. Thus, politics is an *ontic* practice (because it arises within a particular world) that traverses the *ontological* dimension (by means of the reduction of the world to its being, which Heidegger analyzed through such moods as anxiety and boredom) and then returns to the ontic realm to transform it in accordance with the axioms derived from the ontological one. *From the world to the void and back again* – this is the formula of politics,

which is *ontic in form but ontological in content*, since its axioms (freedom, equality, community) are merely aspects of the being of all beings in all worlds.

This ontological character also makes any genuine politics *universalist* – a point that goes against the grain of the contemporary historical-nominalist consensus, in which the only possible universalism may be a hegemonic one, which conceals its own particularity by necessarily false claims to universality (see e.g. Laclau 2005). While it is true that no *positive* order of the world can attain universality, universally valid claims may nonetheless be grounded, not in the ontic attributes of the world but in its ontological conditions of possibility, i.e. the void. The three axioms of freedom, equality and community, which in my reading exhaust the content of politics, describe the being of *any* being of *any* world, when the specific attributes of this world are suspended. In the absence of any identitarian predicates defining what they are, we are left with the sheer fact *that* these beings are: *equal* (devoid of any hierarchy), *free* (from any determination) and *in common* (in the absence of any boundaries).

Thus, ontology (in the general and not 'regional' sense) provides politics with content that is irreducible to any particular world but can be affirmed in any world whatsoever. Evidently, this is a reconstitution of political praxis from a philosophical perspective: no political subject actually checks his or her actions against an ontological checklist. In the phenomenology of politics, addressed in the second volume of *Void Universalism* (Prozorov, 2013b), the traversal of the ontological dimension takes the form of *dis-identification* from one's place in the world, the separation from one's prescribed identity that permits one to experience the world's order as *wrong* and venture to set it right. Disidentification is the *ontic mode in which*

the subject encounters the ontological – again, similarly to Heidegger's encounter with being only in the situations when one's involvement with the world and its object is ruptured. This demonstrates, as both Marchart and Norval also argue in their contributions to this symposium, that the ontological approach to politics is furthest away from any withdrawal from the ontic realities of concrete political practices. If anything, it is more attentive to them than the theories that render politics epiphenomenal to something more fundamental, be it economy, culture or psychology. The ontological approach grasps politics as a real mode of existence, in which the subject confronts the order of its world, including its own place within it.

To reiterate, my ontological theory of politics does not ascribe to politics any particular or distinct ontology, nor does it endow ontology with any particular political status. It is the *same* ontology as in physics, music or economy. What is distinct is rather the notion of politics that its linkage with ontology enables. In my view, the greatest danger for contemporary politics and the study of politics is the *renunciation of the universal* in a historico-cultural nominalism that proclaims that there are only particular worlds, with their own particularistic politics, and nothing beside them. This is true nihilism in the Heideggerian sense – not the affirmation of the nothing at the heart of all things but its nullification, the reduction of 'there is nothing' to 'there isn't anything', whereby *what there is is all there is* and there is no standpoint from which these particular, relative and contingent worlds may be problematized, found wanting, judged and possibly transformed. This nihilistic disposition is suicidal for both politics, which remains riveted by the particular order of the world it finds itself in, and especially for political science, which ends up devoid of any instrument

for a meaningful discourse on politics. Politics becomes merely a name for whatever a given world order wants to mean by politics and no 'cross-worldly' translation is even possible.

The current resurgence of interest in the relation between ontology and politics may in my view be understood precisely as a response to this weakening of the universal dimension of politics: the reduction of politics to the strictly ontic (culture, discourse, language game). By insisting on that universal dimension, the ontological turn also engages critically with the hegemony of capitalism, which in recent decades has attempted to establish itself as the only universal there is (general equivalent of money as the only thing different worlds have in common). Ontology of politics supplements this claim: *besides money, there is also freedom, equality and community, however much disavowed they might be in any given world.*

In their own ways feminist, post-colonial and Marxist approaches share this claim about freedom, equality and community as universals and in this sense participate in an 'ontology of politics', broadly defined. However, all three are also tempted by the historical-nominalist tendency to disavow the universal. This is particularly understandable for feminist and post-colonial scholarship, for which the problematization of the false universality claims of the hegemonic white-Western-male-etc subjectivity was historically constitutive. But this is also true for Marxisms of various stripes, which all shared the fundamental logic of the passage to true universality via the demolition of the falsity of the claims to universality of the liberal-democratic capitalist order.

Of course, the exposure of false universalism is important, as long as we understand that what is actually criticized in it is *not* universalism (which is missing), but particularism, which conceals its own hegemonic particularity by pretending to be universal. There thus arises the question: is a proper, non-hegemonic universalism possible? If not, this critique actually makes little sense: if particularism with more or less hegemonic aspirations is all we can get, then why criticize hegemonic particularism other than to urge it to abandon the name of universalism? The risk is that critical discourse thereby begins to resemble the most hackneyed formulae of 'political realism' in international relations: 'all there is' is struggle for power or hegemony between particularistic entities with no universal principles to adjudicate them; might makes right, and so on. The only difference is that while many political realists affirm this state of affairs, the representatives of critical approaches would *decry* it, but still come to terms with it as the 'tragic' character of the human condition. However, the pathos of tragedy seems a bit premature, since there is nothing necessary about the renunciation of the universal. Things do not have to be so tragic unless we want them to be.

If, on the other hand, proper universalism is possible, then the critique gains in force, but only insofar the universalist affirmation is explicated. It is here that the ontological turn becomes so important, not as an *alternative* approach to replace feminism, post-colonialism or post-Marxism but as an injunction to greater sensitivity and reflection about the ontological status of the central concepts of our critical theories. It is therefore the very opposite of the retreat from the concrete reality of politics into the abstract discourse on being: what is at stake is rather precisely the intervention into

discourses on politics that has no other foundation than the universality and the singularity of being itself, which, we recall, is only ever the *being of beings*, these beings, here and now (see also Marchart and other contributions to this symposium). Paradoxically at first glance, the re-engagement with the universal through ontology will actually help us reconnect with the singular, which we lose sight of when we are focused too much on the categories of social identity (class, gender, race). Understanding the constitution of the political subject in terms of the traversal of the ontological dimension actually attunes us to the fact that politics is less about identity (be it privileged or subaltern) than it is about dis-identification, the subtraction from whatever predicates are used to identify us in any given world. The subject of politics is a singular being subtracted from its particular identity and precisely for this reason is open to the encounter with the universal (see Badiou, 2003). In this approach to politics we are no longer dealing with individuals as representatives of particular social identities but as singular beings participating (or not) in the subjective process of political affirmation.

This brings us to our own identity as philosophers and its implications for political subjectivation. Is our activity of theorizing *about* politics a mode of political praxis in its own right? Here I happen to differ from other contributors to this symposium, particularly Marchart, for whom political ontology appears to produce effects that are immediately political. In my view, there is nothing inherently political in the philosophical discourse on politics. Philosophy of politics can meaningfully take politics as an object only on the condition that it does not introduce its own content into it, otherwise it will end up studying its own message. Philosophy cannot ground

politics because politics has its own autonomous consistency as a transformative praxis within a particular world. It has its own *modus operandi*, its own rationality, its own imagination etc., that may well be inaccessible to the philosopher of politics. Thus, while I share the progressive politics espoused by all the participants of this symposium, I do not see this politics as derived from any particular philosophical standpoint, which in turn makes it impossible to rely on any such standpoint to prescribe or adjudicate what form political praxis should take. Since Marx's Thesis Eleven, philosophers have been so busy arguing about changing the world that they forgot to explain by what right they assigned themselves this daunting task. While we are certainly free to practice politics, our philosophical or scientific credentials grant us no privilege in this practice, which, we must recall, is conditioned by subtracting ourselves from our identities, including professional ones.

Yet, just as politics cannot be grounded by philosophy, it cannot become its ground, reducing philosophy to something like the continuation of class struggle in theory. As the fate of philosophy in nominally Marxist political regimes demonstrates, such politicization can only reduce philosophy to worthless drivel without really helping class or any other struggle. Again, the contrast between the two procedures permits us to see why this is the case. Politics operates with three axioms, which remain fairly indeterminate, and it is the task of the political subject to determine their meaning in the concrete world in which they are to be applied and to produce their effects in this world. Political knowledge thus comprises very basic axiomatic content and a myriad of practical skills and orientations that are opportunistic in a neutral sense of the word, cultivating concrete opportunities for political affirmation: gaining adherents,

building coalitions, designing institutions, etc. If this knowledge becomes the foundation for philosophy, it directs the latter either to the trivial reiteration of the well-known or to the ceaseless justification of *ad hoc* opportunistic actions. Putting philosophy in the service of politics, progressive or otherwise, will only yield bad philosophy while adding nothing to the political cause in question.

In short, neither philosophy nor politics can found one another without losing the essential features of one or both procedures. It is therefore not really up to philosophy to reinvigorate political practice. There are properly political instruments for doing that and a politics that really needs re-animation from philosophy is well and truly dead. What is to be done is not for philosophers to animate or reinvigorate politics but simply to practice it whenever we experience our worlds as wrong.

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Towards a Formal Political Ontology[2]

With the demise of both humanist – liberal and socialist – eschatologies of progress in the aftermath of two World Wars, the Jewish genocide, the Soviet Gulags, the disaster of the Maoist cultural revolution and, finally, the inglorious collapse of 'really existing socialism', postmodern relativism seemed to enter a strange symbiosis with the global monoculture of liberal capitalist modernity. Two options appeared to be on offer, either embracing the hegemonic universalism of aggressive liberalism and market capitalism or resorting to a particularistic critique of liberal, i.e. Western, dominance from the margins in the form of the various feminist, post-colonial and intersectional approaches to identity politics. Universalism was apriori condemned as a cultural product of the liberal, androcentric 'West' -whatever the latter term may mean- while the critical task of subversive resistance to Western, liberal, secular, patriarchal 'repressive tolerance' overlapped with the denunciation of politics as an active pursuit of universality. Grand claims about politics or radical visions of social transformation were met with suspicion and a frenetic preoccupation with 'difference' became the hallmark of progressive politics.

In our cynical postmodern, post-ideological, and lately 'post-truth' societies, strong political convictions tend to be almost automatically equated with the politics of extremity, best exemplified today in the rising tide of populist xenophobic Right or the equally exclusivist and militaristic politics of Islamic radicalism. The antidote

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[2] The argument in this piece draws heavily on Paipais (2016).

offered by the postmodern Left to these politics of cultural *ressentiment* and racist ultra-violence is the recognition that the prerequisite for entering a dialogic or agonistic conversation with diverse others is the ability to relativise one's own commitments. Dialogic or agonistic faith, the argument implies, is not the unshakable ground for resolute action, but a form of self-censoring, a capacity to acknowledge the contestability of one's visceral, deep-seated beliefs and adopt an attitude of self-distancing. Yet, this latest incarnation of the Enlightenment's call for maturity (*Mündigkeit*) itself relies on an act of exclusion: 'we the enlightened or (Rorty's) ironic (left-)liberals who can cultivate inner doubt and reservation' as opposed to the murderous fundamentalists, utopian revolutionists or conservative doomsters that are still plagued by their fantasies of radical transformation, nostalgic parochialism or apocalyptic nihilism.

Amidst this asphyxiating predicament, ontological claims about politics have made a comeback in international political thought, primarily among left-radical circles, while the question of the role of faith and militancy in politics is being revisited with renewed enthusiasm. In agreement with the significance of such an 'ontological turn' in international political thought, I have recently argued (Paipais, 2016) for a version of *political ontology* that would be sufficiently *reflexive* to avoid a relapse into ideological forms of universalism that rely on sanitised social ontologies (often bracketing inequalities, domination and asymmetries of power) (see McNay, 2014 for a critique) and sufficiently *formal* (yet not abstract) (see Livingston, 2012; Hennig, 2008) to deflect the latest incarnations of expressive historicism that tend to valorise openness, radical contingency, flux, becoming and complexity as the new ontological

orthodoxies (see examples of these tendencies in Mouffe, 2013; Connolly, 2011; Honig, 1993).

Such an ontology of the political transposes Heidegger's ontological difference from the existential terrain to the register of the political -repackaged as the difference between politics, i.e. the symbolic, ontic, institutional dimension of political life, and the political, i.e. the radically contingent, 'evental', ontological moment of both disruption and constitution of political order. While this *difference* has often been conceptualised narrowly and one-sidedly, namely by merely envisaging the political *qua* moment of antagonism operating as the constitutive exception of politics (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005; Marchart, 2007; Laclau, 2014), the formal political ontology I propose insists on the necessity to envision both registers as lacking, penetrated by impotence, punctuated by the void that makes their operation possible but never complete. Political difference, then, is shown to rest on this *double kenosis* of both politics and the political offering a doubly intensified formalisation of political life that includes both the political as the constitutive exception to politics (the moment of antagonism) *and* the necessary incompleteness upon which even the political *qua* the *process of grounding/de-grounding* of every objective order rests (see also Benjamin, 1999; Agamben, 2005).

Let me briefly explain why engaging with this idea of double kenosis is important for socio-political critique. I have no trouble accepting that the concept of the void (see Badiou, 2007; Prozorov, 2013) is an interesting and necessary critical resource that reveals the impermanence of all social arrangements and the necessity of contingency in politics. Yet, my concern is that it can equally be reified and turned into a new idol,

a convenient shibboleth of critical thinking. Let me take an example from the art of cinema to illustrate this point. In Nani Moretti's wonderfully irreverent film, *Habemus Papam*, the director is obsessed -one could even say haunted- by the idea of the papal empty seat. Crucially, the film is not simply a story about a man who did not wish to be Pope but a meditation on the idea of the empty seat of power. There are several sequences in the film in which the viewer is faced with the papal balcony overlooking St Peter's square devoid of the Pope's presence. What we, the viewers, are confronted with as the camera offers a perfectly measured square screen-shot is the dark, undifferentiated, uncanny, meaningless spectre of the void surrounded left and right by the purple curtains of imperial/ecclesiastic power. Moretti wishes to leave no doubt that what we are witnessing is the empty seat of sovereignty, the absolute void that lies behind the sacredness of power and constitutes the moment of openness, uncertainty and total meaninglessness that accompanies the withdrawal of the embodiment of power. The Pope has abdicated and his seat is not only empty, but it appears as if the void revealed by the papal abdication or, as Nietzsche would remark, the abyss is looking back at us.

This is an immensely provocative idea reminiscent of Claude Lefort's (1988) concept of power in democracy as an 'empty place'. However, here I am interested in the potentially debilitating effects of such an image. It does not only relate to the objection that the void cannot be represented, and so any temptation to represent it ends up being a reification that defeats its own purpose. It also impels the idea that the representation of the void often operates as a constant reminder of the inexorable distance between an idealised structural impediment and our less than perfect actual

political engagements, a temptation that often Laclau's (2005) populism seems to yield to or one that Žižek used to fall into in his early *Ethics of the Real* (Zupančič, 2000) period (Žižek, 2002, pp. xvii-xxv). The implicit depoliticisation here is produced by the temptation to see the void as a hyperreality that condemns all subjective enactments of collective life as doomed *ab initio*. In other words, such a perspective is not nihilistic enough, it does not radically embrace the worldly condition, that of temporality and vulnerability, nor the place of the subject in it as essentially contentless, yet for the same reason immensely creative. It is rather still animated by a necrophiliac anxiety that sets up another impossible transcendence that may condemn all sovereign politics as murderous but does not challenge the paradigm of sovereignty as coercion, domination and security-seeking from within.

Depoliticisation then can work both ways: as disavowal of the necessarily contingent ground upon which every positivity rests (the forgetting of the exception upon which every particular order is constituted) *and* as the denial of the formal structure of political difference (the necessity of its constitutive role in the production of social order). Thus, if every particular social and political order is condemned to exist only if it conceals the void out of which it emanates, the disavowal of this logic (or else the illusion of stepping out of ideology)[3] is also a form of depoliticisation (marking the ontologisation of politics as self-destructive or impossible passion for the void). Paradoxically, then, the displacement of the political may also occur through

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[3] Here, I follow Žižek's (1994, p. 6) argument that 'the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it'. Ideology, on this reading, is not a dream-like illusion that we build to escape reality. It is, rather, an illusion which pre-reflectively structures our social relations by masking a traumatic social division -the Real in Lacanian terms- which cannot be symbolised, not because fullness is perpetually elusive, but because it is *inherently* incomplete or non-totalised.

discourses that place the notions of contingency and historicity at the centre of their argumentation, yet nevertheless treat difference, multiplicity, plurality and contingency as primordial ontic realities grounding a conception of politics as incessant 'becoming' -and thus collapsing political ontology onto ontic politics- by setting it up as another ontic strategy for the defence of 'difference'.

Granted, an ontology of the political as it is theorised here implies that every practical activity (including philosophy) is fundamentally political and, therefore, such an argument might be taken as another species of the same ontic strategy of hyper-politicisation (see Prozorov in this exchange). Yet, the claim that everything is political (i.e. the transgressive moment of constitution/de-constitution of every order is always a dormant possibility to be activated or an erupted exceptionality to be normalised) does not entail that the politics/political double gap is eliminated. A world, bereft of this doubly intensified difference between politics and the political, would either be a world in which a totally administered politics would have colonised all corners of the social (a nightmarish Orwellian prospect) or a world in which the political (the ontological moment of antagonism) is fully active on the entire scale of the social, a peculiar possibility that could never be ontically enacted. It is exactly the *implacability* of this double negativity that makes political difference the name for a paradoxical enterprise which is both impossible and inevitable -which is also why none has ever witnessed 'pure politics' (i.e. a totally administered world) either.

The distinction, however, between politics (any particular constituted order) and the political (the exception(s), contingency or pure difference that constitute it by transgressing it) is not simply another posited, arbitrary structural necessity. As Oliver

Marchart (2007) has persuasively shown, it rather constitutes a necessary quasi-transcendental condition of possibility for any meaningful order of historicity to arise. Quasi-transcendentality, here, stands for the paradoxical operation of the political as both belonging to the social order by authorising the principle(s) of its constitution *and* being in a relation of constitutive exception to it. And yet, this is only half of the picture of the formal logic of double negation that governs political difference, that is, it is only the part that corresponds to the operation of the political as constitutive exception of every particular order. The other crucially important dimension is the radical impotence penetrating the political itself that corresponds to the idea of the Lacanian Real as inexistent, incomplete, 'non-all'. The logic described here is not captured by the foundational prejudices of regional ontologies, but constitutes a *formal ontology* or, else, a type of political ontology that undermines the logic of foundationalism from within without falling back to the abstract exteriority of a 'false' transcendence.

What makes the Lacanian concept of the Real suitable for 'representing' this unrepresentable quality of quasi-transcendentality, is precisely its undecidable status as an 'impossible' utterance that keeps the signifying process open and thus prevents the crystallisation of a meta-linguistic position. That is, the reference to the Lacanian Real permits us to think of that impossible meta-linguistic position, not as something contingent, accidental or imaginary, but as something 'real' in the Lacanian sense, that is, as something elusive but negatively *necessary*: 'one cannot attain it, but one also cannot escape it' (Žižek, 1987, p. 34). In the apposite words of Yannis Stavrakakis (1999, p. 162, n. 8): 'in order to avoid a fantasmatic meta-linguistic position (a meta-

linguistic affirmation of meta-language) it is *necessary* [emphasis added] to produce an utterance which shows the impossibility of occupying a pure meta-linguistic position through the failure of meta-language itself (a meta-linguistic negation of meta-language)'. Echoing Stavrakakis, Žižek (2000, p. 106) affirms that we need 'a kind of meta-narrative that explains [the] very passage from essentialism to the awareness of contingency'. This meta-narrative, however, cannot be another ground, but it must represent the formalisation of the *possibility of grounding* that is at the same time undermined by the *impossibility* of it serving as the ultimate ground.

Absolute exteriority or transcendence in that sense is neither exalted nor domesticated. It is rather reconstrued to signify the void within immanence as the condition of possibility for *historicity itself*. Critique then rests on this irreducible double gap (or, as Benjamin and Agamben would have it, the 'cut of the cut') within historical forms of social identification that both enables social reproduction and prevents its ossification by producing a remnant that deactivates and denaturalises social and political order without discarding it. Such a critical formalism is also genuinely materialist[4] in the sense that radical negativity or pure difference understood as the 'internal-external' excess/gap of signification –that is, as emerging in the intersection of the Real and the Symbolic- explains empirical differentiation and multiplicity, not as emanating from the infinity of positive historical actualities (which would make the contingency of positive worlds not necessary but contingent), but

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[4] In a counterintuitive critique of traditional notions of dialectical materialism, Žižek proposes an alternative understanding of the term based on the idea that we conceive the 'material' not as an all-encompassing fundament, a totalising ground of reality or history, but rather as 'not-all', as the marker of the incompleteness of being (see Žižek, 2011).

rather from an originary antagonism (a generalised civil war or *stasis* as an ontological condition and a zone of indistinction between order and disorder) (see Agamben, 2015) that makes these actualities possible in the first place. Finally, this is a political ontology that formalises both revolution/dissent *and* order or hegemony-building without reifying either. It, therefore, resists inclusion in a discourse of mastery, security or finality without re-inscribing this resistance into an economy of nihilistic *ressentiment*.

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Ontology and Critique

It is commonplace to observe that political theorising of all kinds necessarily rests on ontological presuppositions in so far as to say anything of normative significance about the world, the theorist cannot avoid making certain simplifying assumptions about its basic nature and the constitutive features of social being. For the most part, these animating assumptions form the unarticulated backdrop to any given political paradigm but, in moments of theoretical challenge, they may become objects of intense scrutiny. In the hands of radical democrats, for instance, ontological thinking has been an especially effective tool for challenging dominant views of the world in so far as it exposes the partially theorised or latent foundational assumptions that naturalise a given mode of social being. Feminist and critical race theorists for example have repeatedly used an intellectual counter-strategy akin to what Sandra Bartky (1977) calls 'ontological shock', to contest the complacencies of liberal thought that flow from its uncritical reliance on a disembodied, disembedded conception of the subject. Likewise, the interest of contemporary radical democrats in ontology pursues a similar counterhegemonic agenda. Here the aim is to reinvigorate the democratic imagination by thinking about the political realm in isolation from other areas of social life in order to identify its quintessential logic. These political ontologies differ from experientially grounded forms of critique in that, rather than expanding accounts of embodied social being, they speculate instead on suppressed, primordial dynamics of indeterminacy (lack or abundance) that form the condition of possibility of social existence itself. The postulation of a foundational 'undecidability' exposes the constructed, incomplete character of entrenched social objectivity. Through this

subversive denaturalisation – things could be otherwise – a space is cleared for alternative visions of emancipatory political practice (e. g., Mouffe 2013; Glynos and Howarth 2007). Ontologies of radical contingency are felt, in short, to be an especially effective way of opening up accounts of democracy to the ever-present possibility of progressive social transformation beyond the confines of the neo- liberal imaginary.

In this light, then, it is clear that the contemporary preoccupation with political ontology is not an idiosyncratic feature of our current epoch but stands in an established tradition of radical democratic reasoning. This endeavor to define a generative ontological logic has obvious intellectual precedents in the work of thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, who in different ways sought to rescue political action from what they regarded as a defunct liberalism that had reduced politics to a depoliticized administration of social affairs. The ontological perspective is used by them to reaffirm the status of political action as the paramount site of human freedom and creativity. Today's ontological thinking picks up many of these concerns but develops them, this time around, in relation to resisting the pathologies of neoliberal governance. If anything, however, these contemporary formulations are potentially more radical in their entailments for democratic praxis because unlike, say, Arendt, they don't insist on a rigid separation of properly political concerns from private or social ones. All social relations are, in principle, open to becoming sites of radical contestation and change.

But despite its radical inheritance, there is a sense in which the political promise of current thought on ontology has been somewhat thwarted and, in my view, this is to do with its tendency to lapse into a socially weightless mode of theorising that

forecloses a developed account of social power (see McNay 2014). This social weightlessness manifests itself in a variety of ways – for example, the widespread tendency to model politics on 'thin' notions of discourse for example - but is most apparent in the insufficient attention paid by ontological theorists to the patterns and particularities of the lived reality of oppression. In the 'ontology-first' approach, the space of experience is invariably interpreted as a symptom of a prior radical contingency and, in being reduced to a secondary phenomenon, is implicitly denied existential depth, complexity and independent significance. The characteristic trope of this ontological reduction upwards is an exaggerated emphasis on the mutable, fluid, agonist elements of embodied social experience and a corresponding underestimation of its entrenched, routinized, negative aspects. This is not to deny that, in some of its dimensions, social being is certainly characterised by a degree of openness but a one-sided emphasis on contingency as a political good in itself is fast becoming what Paipais (2016) terms an 'ontological orthodoxy'. Put differently, it is important to grasp oppression not simply as a matter of external, material constraint but also as internal psychological constraint; objective structures of inequality are taken into the bodies of individuals and lived as seemingly natural, subjective dispositions. As Bourdieu famously puts it 'the most personal is the most impersonal .. many of the most intimate dramas, the deepest malaises, the most singular suffering that men and women can experience find their roots in the objective contradictions, constraints and double binds inscribed in the structures of the labour and housing markets (Bourdieu 1992: 201) What the Bourdieusian formulation makes clear is that attentiveness to the lived reality of oppression does not mean some simple-minded

immersion in a supposed phenomenal immediacy, what Norval terms an 'unmediated recourse to 'experiences of suffering'. Rather, experience is always mediated through power and this requires careful analysis of the generative dynamic between embodied reality and the material and symbolic relations that constitute it; what Bourdieu calls a phenomenology of social space. Moreover, it is precisely the dismissal of thought about the embodied experience of oppression as 'essentialist' or 'miserabilist' that is problematic in so far as it engenders an unwarranted presumption of agency, that is, that individuals are somehow ready-made, fully willing political actors. What is left out in abstract invocations of agency, qua ontological indeterminacy, is systematic reflection on the social conditions that need to be in place for individuals to become effective political actors in the first place. Unaccompanied by attentiveness to these incarnate, social dynamics, the assertion of radical contingency is ultimately too thin to be politically enlightening. As Ian Shapiro puts it: 'although everything might in some ultimate sense be contingent… this may be a quite trivial truth. That no building will endure for ever tells us nothing about the relative merits of different kinds of construction…questions about this latter order, in the realm of the relatively enduring, should occupy us' (Shapiro 1992: 14).

The bracketing of sociality does not just mean that political ontologies rely on tendentious accounts of agency, but also that they tend to embody a peculiarly self-enclosed and irreflexive mode of theorising. Reflexivity, or the capacity for on-going critical self –scrutiny, is widely held to be an indispensable feature of radical democratic critique if it is to maintain its emancipatory relevance to those oppressed groups who are the principal object of its inquiry. A theory's ability to scrutinise its

own limitations and blind-spots is essential in guarding against the intellectual reification that produces doxastic and potentially exclusionary ways of viewing the world. It necessarily entails therefore building into theory some kind of practical responsiveness to the particularities and changing dynamics of social life. After all, reflexivity involves not merely formal recognition of the 'other' but the concerted effort to respond as fully as possible to the destabilising implications that this 'cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material' may have for inquirer's previously settled view of the world (Adorno, 1974. See also Bohman 2008). The problem in ontologically grounded theory is that this important capacity for critical self-reflection is curtailed by its neglect of the dynamics of embodied being. Its suspension of sociality serves to insulate it from precisely the kind of external standpoint that potentially delivers an epistemic 'shock' to its frictionless theoretical world-view. Consequently, its arguments are propelled more by the internal, purportedly 'necessary' logic of speculative ontology rather than by receptivity to social context. As Sergei Prozorov puts it here, political ontology ends up 'studying its own message'. This epistemological closure blocks crucial questions about the politics of their own mode of inquiry. How do certain theoretical and conceptual schema blunt sensitivity to the lived aspects of oppression? In what ways does a particular scholastic withdrawal from the practical world influence the kind of thinking that is made possible? What kind of methodological self-scrutiny would help to guard against theoretical reification? In short, political ontologies often fail to enact in their own theoretical practice the historicising entailments that flow from their galvanising premise of radical contingency. The premise seems to necessarily imply the adoption of a

practical, open-ended and dialogical approach to theoretical reasoning, what might be called praxeological inquiry. Instead, however, ontologically grounded theories too often remain closed, self-perpetuating paradigms or what Sheldon Wolin (2000) terms 'theoretic theory' whose relation to the practical logic and concerns of social life is questionable.

For radical democrats then what are the alternatives to political ontology? It seems to me that a power first rather than ontology first approach to political theorising continues to be of importance in a world of increasing precariousness, where entrenched structural inequalities are deepening and new vulnerabilities are emerging on a hitherto unthinkable scale. Another way of putting this is that the intellectual agendas of experientially grounded and other types of disclosing critique - feminism, post-colonialism, critical race theory - are still as important as they ever have been. There is no denying, however, that the current political moment appears to be alarmingly bleak and regressive; but it is important for the democratic theorist not to give up hope and to succumb to slightly petulant denunciations of the current era as one of anti-politics or post-democracy, as one without progressive political alternatives. Here Foucault's words are salutary because, confounding a common view of him as a political nihilist, he did not entertain fatalism as a viable theoretical stance. As he put it 'the task of [political] philosophy is to describe the nature of the present … with the proviso that we do not allow ourselves the facile, rather theatrical declaration that this moment in which we exist is one of total perdition, in the abyss of darkness … it is a time like any other, or rather, a time which is never quite like any other' (Foucault 1988: 36). It is important not to give up on the present moment as one

of political potentiality because, in Foucault's view, this is one of the enduring lessons of Enlightenment thought for our own era, namely that critique should endeavour to preserve a 'disposition' or commitment to uncovering possibilities for progressive change that cannot be forgotten (Foucault 1988: 94).

Foucault describes this disposition as 'practical critique', one that takes the form of a 'possible crossing-over'. In places, as we know, he also called it an ontology, a 'historical ontology', an 'ontology of the actual' ' that poses the questions 'what is our present? What is the present field of possible experiences' (1984: 49-50). But, it is an ontology that seeks to answer such questions not by identifying the constitutive dynamics of political being but by scrutinizing settled forms of social existence so as to dislodge their appearance as natural, given and inevitable and reveal their contingency by uncovering the submerged traces of power that accompanied their historical emergence. Put schematically, Foucault ends up in the same place as radical democrats in that he reveals a radical contingency underlying social existence, but he achieves this insight through a directly contrary method, that is through an interrogation of the logic of sociality rather than its suspension. Foucault's power-first approach inspires a view of critique as problem- rather than paradigm- driven, attentive to the complex dynamics of social experience and rooted in social theoretical, rather than ontological or philosophical, abstractions. Critique on this view is 'theorising with practical intent', praxeological inquiry that operates across different perspectives and has the aim of expanding interpretative and epistemic horizons and thereby opening up new possibilities for thought and action (see Young 1997: 5). This account of critique problematizes the rather grandiose idea that seems to prevail in

academia at the moment that the goal of theory should be the formulation of definitive, all- encompassing models of the political whether they be ontologically, normatively or procedurally framed. It rests instead on an idea of the theorist as participant observer, as engaged social critic whose work, in tandem with activist concerns, chips away at certain problems to produce an account of society that has the practical aim of unmasking domination and contributing to the gradual actualisation of other ways of being. As Foucault puts it, 'we must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces' (Foucault 1989: 206).

The actualisation of other ways of being, of other types of democratic practice, requires, amongst many other things, the development of new forms of political imagination. At the moment, the imaginative rationale that governs much mainstream democratic theory is constricted in so far as it is dominated by debates on justification and the public use of reason. In the justification paradigm, it seems that most political issues are dealt with as potential claims to justice whose validity is confirmed through rational reconstruction according to criteria that supposedly engender universal acceptable outcomes. The exchange of reasons is an undeniably important part of democratic practice but the reduction of the political imagination to justification alone is a deadening way of treating the vast diversity of political concerns. There is an urgent need for theorists to think seriously about different types of democratic interaction and other sources of political normativity that operate not through the force of the better argument but through the galvanisation of emotion, inspiration and political hope. Indeed, recently, there has been a discernible 'aesthetic turn' amongst theorists some of whom have drawn on the logic of the exemplary work of art to think

about politics in a more creative way, as the disclosure of the new, of as-yet unrealised ways of being (Ferrara 2008; Kompridis 2016). There is an associated, growing body of work that uses Arendt's thought on reflective judgement to revivify accounts of democratic reasoning and practice (e.g. Pia Lara 2007, Zerilli 2016). But the sources for reimagining the political are not to be found in scholarly texts alone but in activism too, in particular, in those popular movements whose interventions embody a pre-figurative dynamic that oscillates between imagination and actualisation, continually testing and retesting the limits of possibility. Extrapolating from these concrete exemplars, some theorists have sought to reimagine politics around ideas of visibility, embodiment, performativity, precarity and vulnerability. Judith Butler's (2015) recent work on the dynamics of popular assembly, for example, where she identifies a performatively enacted right to appear as the catalyst for innovative modes of democratic mobilisation. But despite these influential new strands of theorising, there is continued need to break the strangle-hold that ideas of public reason, justification and other uni-foundational political paradigms have on the mainstream democratic imagination. Not least because these speculative models often seem to be out of touch with the actuality of popular political behaviour in both its counter-hegemonic (e.g., the Occupy movement or Black Lives Matter) and authoritarian (e.g. Brexit, Trump) manifestations.

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