PART 2

Rationalities of the Political
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As I understand it, “the political” is at once a field and a project. As a field, it designates the site where the multiple threads of the lives of men and women come together, what allows all of their activities and discourses to be understood in an overall framework. It exists in virtue of the fact that there exists a “society” acknowledged by its members as a whole that affords meaningfulness to its constituent parts. As a project, the political means the process whereby a human collectivity, which is never to be understood as a simple “population,” progressively takes on the face of an actual community. It is, rather, constituted by an always contentious process whereby the explicit or implicit rules of what they can share and accomplish in common—rules which give a form to the life of the polity—are elaborated.

—Pierre Rosanvallon

Discerning the Political

Over the next three chapters I critically engage with a set of intellectual traditions that present strongly ontological interpretations of the concept of the political. I argue that ontologies of the political often define democracy in a rather one-sided way, reserving authentic democratic action for the disruption of identities, hegemones, and settled formations. This one-sidedness derives from the splitting of politics into two aspects and then arranging the world into two layers with a clear order of priority. Obvious and routine understandings of politics are contrasted to a more difficult to discern but more fundamental layer—the site and source of the political as such. The resulting distinction between politics and the political serves as the basis for additional, second-order distinctions such as instituting and institutionalized power, constituent and constituting power, or constituent and destituent power.¹

One version or another of the distinction between politics and the political,
and its interpretation in a strongly ontological register, is central to the work of a number of radical thinkers, including Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière and Pierre Rosanvallon, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. Whether explicitly developed as an oppositional contrast or just elaborated as an account of the difference between layers of obviousness and constitutive depths, the ontological interpretation of the political is often deployed to castigate both contemporary politics and political thought for their timidity. From this perspective, all the stuff of ordinary politics—representative democracy, parties, elections, and opinion polls—covers over or obscures something more fundamental. So, too, does much of contemporary social-movement activism and nongovernmental action. And recognizing that this is so is meant to be the first step in unleashing the disruptive force of the political and the proliferation of new forms of politics.

In parsing some of the differences between ontological interpretations of the political, I seek to redeem what is of most value in this tradition of thought from the rather mechanical way in which it is applied as a tool of knockdown analysis of real-world events. In the terms discussed in chapter 1, the ontologization of the political exemplifies one of the two post-Marxist intellectual trajectories identified by Axel Honneth—the one in which the search for the source of social transformation is displaced into general accounts of the play between order and routine, on the one hand, and uncertainty and disruption, on the other. The turn to ontology is in part related to the historical disappearance of the social facts that once anchored political hope for the European Left in particular. It is also shaped by an intellectual milieu in which ideas about agency, intentionality, and interests are thought to have been proven to be incoherent grounds upon which to understand political action.

Among other things, the ontological turn is a manifestation of the ascendancy of a certain form of revivified philosophical reasoning in radical theory more generally. One dimension of the reaffirmation of philosophical authority is a calculated disdain for empirical social science. One effect of the constitutive distancing from the empirical and the everyday in ontologies of the political is that the world appears in this style of political theory only as a series of transparently iconographic events, immediately available for philosophical interpretation. The spatial and temporal conventions of newsworthiness are thereby inadvertently elevated into transcendental conditions of possibility for the manifestation of the political in all its purity: it is in the drama of events performed in public space that we are meant to find "proper" politics.

The ontological interpretation of the concept of the political is associated, then, with a recurring spatialization of the emergent dynamics of democratic politics, as discussed in the previous chapter. This leads to a view of politics that contrasts settled configurations of all-encompassing, systematic power with acts of pure
creativity, ruptural events, and the dynamics of ungovernable autonomy. This particular spatialization of the political is associated with the elision of questions of motivation and rational action, and in turn with a certain degree of disdain for both social science and ordinary politics. The justificatory dilemma outlined in chapter 1 is thereby revealed to be particularly acute for this style of theory. I suggest that the turn to ontology in political thought involves an unacknowledged arrogation of interpretative authority. It is with this thought in mind that I seek to redeem something of value from discussions of the concept of the political—what I will call a heuristic interpretation of what is at stake in splitting politics into two elements. The distinction between politics and its conditions is, after all, a theme that also resonates across the second of the two trajectories of radical thought identified by Honneth that were discussed in chapter 1. It is at work, for example, in the work of Jürgen Habermas and of Roberto Unger. It also has a distinctive form in the styles of argument associated with writers such as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and Sheldon Wolin, and more recently William Connolly and Bonnie Honig. In the next three chapters, then, I seek to rearrange the terms of evaluation through which the concept of the political appears to be important. In this chapter, I start this task by suggesting that there is a broadly phenomenological imagination at work in the interpretations provided by thinkers such as Claude Lefort, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Pierre Rosanvallon, among others. It is this imagination that can inform a further elaboration of the intellectual trajectory of critical theories of democracy that are concerned with understanding the plural rationalities of political action.

Ontologies of Ontology

The ontological interpretation of the concept of the political raises a stark contrast between two layers of political life. Taken-for-granted forms of politics, in the form of partisan competition, policy making, and administration, are held to express a consensus that reproduces established orders. The political, on the other hand, is taken to be the realm of real antagonisms covered over by mere politics, or else is presented as the energy of constitution that always underlies apparently stable and natural forms. The turn to ontology therefore also involves a turn away from conventional forms of knowing about politics. The deployment of the distinction between politics and the political is often associated with the more or less explicit claim that having the correct ontology can itself provide us with a guide to good politics.

Before going any further, and in order to specify the type of ontological account of political life with which I am primarily concerned in the following three chapters, it is helpful to distinguish three different ways that “ontology” is understood in contemporary social theory.
The first sense in which politics and ontology are connected is perhaps the most straightforward. For example, according to Philip Pettit, a political ontology is “an account of the relationships and structure in virtue of which individuals in a polity constitute a people, a nation, and a state.” This definition might actually be a little restrictive, so we can extend the idea to include assumptions and arguments about structure and agency, the nature of causality, relations between mind and body, the role of ideas, or the nature of power. This first sense of political ontology depends on the standard definition of ontology in social theory more generally. In this definition, ontology just refers to the idea that any field of inquiry will have implicit schemas that cannot finally be justified on empirical grounds alone. Elaborating the ontology of a way of thinking in this sense involves bringing explicitly into view the set of things that a theory or system presumes in advance to exist—assumptions about human capacities, for example, or about spatial units such as locations or territories. This understanding of ontology underwrites a form of critical analysis that is often used to dismantle the underlying assumptions of different theories and find them wanting in some way or other. This form of analysis assumes that ontology is a kind of implicit commitment. It is a form of analysis associated with arguments about the need to explicitly develop alternative, preferable, ontologies—ontologies of relational spatiality, for example, or transformational ontologies of social action, or ontologies of practice.

The first sense of political ontology, in which outlining the ontology of a tradition, practice, or theory can serve as a critical exercise, is prone to the problem that Willard Quine once called ontological relativity: “Ontology is indeed doubly relative. Specifying the universe of a theory makes sense only relative to some background theory, and only relative to some choice of a manual of translation of one theory into the other.” To put Quine’s point another way, exposing someone else’s ontological assumptions is not necessarily the knockdown procedure that is often presumed. It works as a critical procedure only if one thinks that one can do without ontological commitments of any sort or that one’s own are somehow beyond reproach. It is no doubt always useful to be able to spot other people’s ontological commitments as well as to be aware of one’s own. It is another thing entirely to suppose that the answer to the questions raised by this awareness will be found by refining a more perfect ontology.

The second sense of ontology evident in social theory is associated with a range of works in the humanities and social sciences that take as their object of analysis the ontologies upon which social life itself depends, as distinct from uncovering the ontologies implicit in theories or methodologies. Much of this work is reflected by a distinctive interpretation of Heidegger’s philosophy, and it includes the type of “historical ontology” alluded to by Michel Foucault and refined by Ian Hacking. One might also include here the range of political theory that Stephen White labels as “weak ontology.” In differentiating between weak and strong ontologies, White argues that the latter make assertive foundational claims about the
nature of existence, the structure of reality, human nature, and the status of God. Weak ontologies, by contrast, merely present “figurations” of human being in light of certain universal “existential realities,” such as language, birth, and death. In a sense, then, the difference is really one of tone, or perhaps ambition.

The difference between the second sense of ontology and the first is nicely captured by Noortje Marres. To think of ontology as the basic assumptions about fundamental entities that underwrite a social theory is, she suggests, to retain an epistemic notion of ontology. By contrast, she recommends a more empirical sense of ontology, a sense that directs attention to the contingent composition of the practices and relations that make up social life. This is, for example, the operative sense of ontology in work inflected by actor-network theory, science and technology studies, assemblage theory, and a broad field of new materialist thought. Work in these areas assumes that the world is held together through provisional but relatively settled arrangements of heterogeneous elements: people, animals, bricks and mortar, electricity, and energy. Illuminating these ontologies is meant to be one step in broadening the scope of the political beyond human agency.

The strong political claim made in work concerned with elucidating the ontologies of specific fields of practice and life is that because the orderings of these fields are contingent—which means they are settled but never quite fixed—they are always potentially open to change. This is the claim that lies behind the idea of “ontological politics.” The idea of ontology in discussions of ontological politics is not foundational in a classical philosophical sense. It refers to the idea that the constitutive material conditions of practices are never fixed or pregiven but are continually enacted. If one accepts that the task of social inquiry is to bring to light the way in which the social is assembled, then it is a short step to the proposition that the political significance of this form of social inquiry lies in reconfiguring the mundane practices through which the world hangs together. This tradition of social science therefore has a tendency to think of the political only in relation to the opening up of settled orders to contestation. Accordingly, a situation will be deemed postpolitical if the space of controversy is closed down, a judgment easily applied to a broad range of routine administrative, bureaucratic, technical, expert-led, undramatic forms of action. Democracy, from this perspective, is reserved as the name for any practice through which established orders are opened up to critical questioning.

The two versions of ontology discussed so far—political ontology in the most obvious sense and the empirical program of ontological politics—help to specify what is distinctive about a third style of ontological reasoning: assertively philosophical interpretations of the concept of the political. This style defines the meaning of the political through a conceptual two-step: first, political life is split into two; then, fundamental ontological priority is ascribed to a layer of being that in some way both forms and unsettles more routine orders of action. Ontological
interpretations of the political of this sort lay claim to some deep animating principle of human affairs, such as irreducible antagonism in Chantal Mouffe’s work or the magma of imaginary significations in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. Ontological accounts in this third sense always take the form of discovering an element of dehiscence immanent in the deep structures of desire, signification, or materiality itself. These accounts are meant, in turn, to provide reasons and resources for believing in the contingency of existing arrangements.

What is most notable about ontological interpretations of the political of this sort is the claim that the structure of ontology itself accounts for the distinction between the political and ordinary politics. Thus Oliver Marchart uses the decidedly Heideggerian formula “the political difference” to characterize the division between mere politics as it is ordinarily understood and practiced and the political in its authentic or proper sense. I will return to the significance of the reference to Heidegger’s thought in this formula in due course, but here I want to point to the way that this sort of ontological interpretation underwrites a specific conceptual spatialization of the political. In accounts of constitutive outsides, constitutive lacks, or virtual structures waiting to be actualized, the structure of the world is defined as divided between forces of order, on the one side, and energies of creativity, disruption, or insurrection, on the other. Such accounts present order as a function of closure, settlement, and mundane routine. In turn, political change appears as the irruption of excluded or marginalized terms, as sudden events of rupture, or as the unleashing of the energy of becoming. In a characteristic conceptual move, the agency for transformative change is not located in particular social actors or organizational forms but is deduced from philosophical explications of the ontological composition of the world itself. One effect of the ontological deduction of transformational possibility is that political change is always presented as a kind of tragic drama in which radically new and unexpected events occur but are always prone to be thwarted, incorporated, or finally disappointed.

I suggest that we can read ontological interpretations of the political, characterized by the bifurcation of politics into two layers, as a response to what Theodor Adorno once diagnosed as the “ontological need” that besets modern thought. For Adorno, the recourse to an ontological register of philosophical reasoning, exemplified for him by Heidegger’s work, is a flawed response to the genuine hazards that follow from modeling philosophy on a restrictive view of natural science and mathematics. Adorno suggests that the search for an order of thought set off and distinct from the everyday world and from fields of rational calculation can be seen as a desire to sustain “a remembrance of the will not to let thoughts be robbed of that for the sake of which men think them.” As a response to this desire, the ontological need is most often expressed in the explicit disavowal of science, of the empirical, of the methodological, and indeed, of the everyday itself.

I have distinguished three different ways of thinking about the relationship
between politics and ontology in order to help specify the types of investments required to take strongly ontological interpretations of the political as seriously as their proponents demand that we should. In the third genre of political ontology that I have identified, ontological claims are presented as a distanced, third-person perspective on underpinning conditions of possibility. But there is a more inter-subjective register of ontological elaboration available to us, one in which we can think of ontological accounts as a matter of describing the structure of our own commitments.19 In this more modest usage, ontological accounts help to disclose what we are committed to in what we do, what is obligatory for participants in a practice to believe and do—the set of “qualitative discriminations” within which agency unfolds.20 Peter Strawson’s distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics helps to clarify how such a modest approach to ontology can orient our engagement with concepts of the political. Descriptive metaphysics is “content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world.” Revisionary metaphysics is “concerned to produce a better structure.”21 Bearing in mind the degree to which ontology is just a smart word for metaphysics, I follow Strawson’s distinction and propose that ontological arguments may be most worthy of our attention when they are presented in a descriptive register but that we should look on more revisionary versions with much more suspicion.

The idea that ontological accounts can and should transform whole ways of approaching and apprehending phenomena in a revisionary way is widespread among strands of radical thought, stretching from ontologies of the political to spatial theories of topology to cultural theories of affect. It is an idea that effectively displaces the justificatory dilemmas discussed in chapter 1 into authoritative claims concerning the capacity of master thinkers to grasp the true shape of the world. I will now trace various ways in which the ontological bifurcation of political life is undertaken in different theoretical traditions, with an eye to recovering from this ontologizing genre traces of a descriptive understanding of the rationalities of action through which political life is sustained.

**Double Inscriptions of the Political**

Ontological interpretations of the concept of the political play an important role in the widely shared diagnosis of the present-day conjuncture as postdemocratic or even postpolitical.22 The proposition that we are living in a postpolitical age is just one example of a more general worry that the precious force of authentic political life is always in danger of being lost or forgotten. There are different versions of this theme. For Colin Crouch, the trend toward postdemocracy has to do with the decline of social classes and the modes of mass politics associated with them, under pressure from a general process of globalization.23 Politics has apparently been reduced to a game played between elites. Wendy Brown makes a similar
argument, finding that a neoliberal leviathan of market rule has undermined the very conditions of democratic agency. For Sheldon Wolin, the political has been erased by the rise of “totalitarian democracy,” manifested by the extension of the logics of mass consumerism to all areas of life, including the management of the political process.

Accounts of the postpolitical condition or postdemocracy tend to oscillate between two forms of diagnosis. On the one hand, they find evidence of the postpolitical in the observable decline of familiar patterns of political action, such as falling rates of voter participation, the decay of class-based party systems, or the decline of established modes of civic participation. On the other hand, they also point to the emergence of new forms of collective life to confirm the postpolitical condition, finding evidence, for example, in the institutionalization of multiculturalism, the expansion of philanthropy, the growth of policies of sustainability, the proliferation of so-called life politics, the institutionalization of human rights policies, and the problematization of climate change. None of these areas is considered able to generate new forms of contention or mobilization worthy of the name political. The politics associated with these types of fields does not quite conform to a rather constricting imagination of properly political action. It does not quite look right. As already suggested, evidence of the insurgent return of the properly political always alights on a single form of action, namely dramatic protest action in archetypal public spaces. It is therefore worthwhile reflecting on the understanding of the political at work in the background of these diagnoses of the postpolitical condition.

Perhaps the purest form of the genre of ontological argument in contemporary political thought is Alain Badiou’s account of the political as an event, derived from an ontology rooted in the mathematics of set theory. For Badiou, politics is a kind of truth procedure, a matter of personal fidelity to an interruption of the stable orders of what he calls the “errancy of the state,” by which he means the essentially repressive nature of modern state forms. Badiou draws a stark contrast between overweening state power and agentless events that nonetheless represent the truth of collective life. He opposes “convocations by the state,” that is, the agendas and sequences of ordinary politics, to “events” that interrupt but also expose and provoke this ordering. Badiou’s model of politics seeks to supplant a dialectical theory of negation with a notion of politics as “subtraction,” which involves identifying and somehow inhabiting an autonomous position that exceeds settled orderings. Badiou’s is, in the final analysis, a vision of politics shaped by an attitude of horror toward all forms of pluralistic heteronomy.

While Badiou provides the most assertively foundational account of the ontological bifurcation of political life, the clearest diagnosis of the postpolitical condition is provided by Slavoj Žižek. Žižek identifies four ways in which proper politics is stifled. Three of these he derives from Jacques Rancière’s discussion of the ways in which philosophers have tended to reduce what he calls “politics,”
which is meant to be a rare and ruptural phenomenon, to the routines of manage-
ment and administration, or what Rancière calls “police.” Rancière identifies three
such maneuvers: archipolitics, which refers to the communitarian containment
of the polemical aspects of politics, especially democracy (here the master figure
is Plato); parapolitics, which accepts the specificity and irreducibility of politics
but removes the antagonistic element through rules (typified as ever by Habermas
and Rawls, but referring all the way back to Aristotle); and metapolitics, typified
by Marxism and by socialist thought more broadly, in which politics is reduced to
an expression of a more fundamental economic or social logic, so that the social
is made to appear as the source of injustice and in turn as “the truth of politics.”
To these three postpolitical moves Žižek adds a fourth form of his own, which
he calls “ultra-politics.” This involves taking conflicts to the extremes of stark us-
versus-them categorical oppositions.

For Žižek, our age is postpolitical because of the general tendency to seek to
reduce the antagonistic element of politics and to replace it with technocratic
forms of management, justified in the name of economic growth or security.
For Rancière, we live in an age of “consensual postdemocracy,” marked by the
disappearance of any space for the emergence of disputes about the existing or-
der. He suggests that we are witnessing nothing less than “the disappearance of
democracy” and the ascendancy of an order marked by the dominance of “the
spread of law, the practice of generalized expertise, and practice of the eternal
opinion poll.”

Both Žižek and Rancière illustrate a style of theorizing shaped by what Žižek
himself once called “the double inscription of the political.” Like the idea of the
political difference, this formula refers to the distinction between politics under-
stood as acts of disruption, foundation, or institution, on the one hand, and poli-
tics as routines of instituted policy making, elections, lobbying, and campaigning,
on the other. The properly political is always reserved for activities that fall under
the former description.

The double inscription of the political, and in particular its strong ontological
inflection, has various sources and follows various trajectories, some of which
I will trace over the next three chapters. One common refrain across different
variants of this theme is the assertion of the excess of the political over instituted
forms of politics. Activities on the instituted politics side of the equation tend to be
treated as banal, inauthentic, restrictive, and improper in one way or another. Vot-
ing, elections, lobbying, policy making—the stuff of ordinary politics, one might
think—are presented as part of a fixed, instituted order, a status quo, all merely
aspects of a world of consensus. In this style of theorizing, properly political action
is rare, or on the retreat, or can be found only in unexpected places. Ontologi-
cal interpretations of the political therefore share in a broader understanding of
modern liberal democracy in which politics has closed down the possibility of
properly heroic action.
The concept of the political certainly has different resonances in different traditions of thought. It sometimes refers to a dimension of constant agonistic energy, sometimes to a constitutive process of ordering, and sometimes to the dimension of life that is shared in common. Each version more or less explicitly disparages ordinary politics, which is interpreted as the scene of the shrinking away or diminution of genuine democratic or revolutionary energy. Across the diverse uses of the distinction between politics and the political, the prevalent emphasis is on the idea that social order is reproduced through structures of obviousness to which the subjective dispositions of whole populations are in thrall. In turn, it is assumed that genuine political action involves breaking with these structures of obviousness. Proper politics is consequently restricted to those fugitive practices that call into question habitual understandings of politics, unleash the energy of the political, or seek to reorder the political, all of which are seen as fundamentally disrupting settled patterns of subject formation.

Inflections of Political Difference

The difference made visible by the double inscription of the political is often explained with reference to the distinction in French between le politique and la politique, the political and politics (although the usage of this gendered distinction is hardly consistent across different thinkers). The distinction is sometimes used in a register that is strongly ontological and sometimes in a more existentialist spirit. What such treatments share is the proposition that the political is constitutive of politics. Politics in turn often turns out to threaten to efface the political upon which it depends, so that the political appears as vulnerable, fragile, or difficult to discern. Perhaps the most influential version of the distinction is found in the political philosophy of Claude Lefort. Lefort transposes a distinction in the work of his mentor Maurice Merleau-Ponty between the invisible and the visible into an account in which politics is the manifestation of a constitutive symbolization that lies outside of and yet structures visible forms of politics. Lefort’s use of the distinction between le politique and la politique involves the claim that empirical fields of political inquiry cannot properly grasp the constitutive ordering of the political, because they themselves belong to the constituted order of politics, the very formation of which is in need of a deeper form of philosophical analysis.

Badiou, Žižek, Rancière, Lefort, and others are all associated with the ascendancy of the concept of the political in strands of so-called continental philosophy, in which refinements of the concept are indelibly associated with debates about the legacies of Marxism in political thought. The centrality of the distinction between le politique and la politique in postwar French thought has given an important impetus to the habit of using the word “political” as a substantive noun, with a strong emphasis on the definite article in references to “the political.”
inalization of the adjective expresses what Hannah Pitkin once suggested was the “systematic ambiguity in our ideas about the political.”33 For Pitkin, the ambiguity arises from the tension between idealist and realist dimensions of political life:

On the one side, there begins to emerge a picture of politics that is participatory and democratic, equalitarian rather than hierarchical; a politics that is public-spirited and treats others as persons, in terms of their concerns and commitments; a politics that centers on action, and does not hesitate to call traditional institutions into question. On the other side, there emerges a different picture: a stress on the role of hierarchy, organization, and elites in politics; a linkage between political rationality and the support of traditional institutions; a stress on power and the conflict of interests rather than on public-spiritedness; a politics in which men relate by bargaining, propaganda, and manipulation.34

The contrast Pitkin makes here is not quite the same as the one drawn in continental philosophers’ characteristic differentiation of politics and the political. But she points out an important feature of concept formation that does straddle different versions of theorizing the political. Pitkin argues that the rival definitions she identifies “are both very much bound to the grammar of the word, and both illuminate it.” She adds that “the noun ‘politics’ and particularly the adjective ‘politic’ lend themselves best to a social-scientific interpretation of the political in terms of interests and strategy.”35 Politics in this sense is all about who gets what and how. Pitkin proposes that both Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin preferred the adjective “political” and in turn often moved to make it into a substantive—“the political”—because they are concerned with the public and collective aspects of political life that the ordinary sense of politics, according to them, covers over.

Pitkin’s distinction between idealist and realist dimensions of politics does not necessarily only divide political theorists from social scientists. It might also be at work within the field concerned with conceptualizing the political as a distinct realm from politics. Both Arendt and Wolin might well operate with more “idealistic” notions of the political in the sense used by Pitkin, compared to the darker images presented by thinkers as different as Carl Schmitt and Jacques Rancière. It is a difference of interpretation to which we will return in due course.

Pitkin’s suggestion is that thinkers such as Arendt and Wolin make recourse to etymology and ancient Greek authorities in order “to recall us from the habitual forms to the substance of the political, of our own concept of the political.”36 The force of invoking the concept of the political certainly lies in challenging the obviousness of our usual ideas about politics. The motivation behind the conceptual splitting that Pitkin identifies echoes Adorno’s comments about the enticements of “the ontological need.” It is, in short, a response to an imperative that is not to be easily scorned. Nevertheless, we should also be alert to the ways in which invocations of the political difference invite us to think of the obviousness of existing understandings of politics in very particular ways, in ways that invite us to invest
in particular models of what politics can and should properly seek to do. After all, the idea that there is more to politics than the business of state and occasional popular involvement in elections is actually fairly widely held. It hardly begins to justify the habits of a tradition of thought that is shaped by a commitment to theorizing politics by developing strong oppositions between pairs of concepts. We might also notice that calling into question the obvious is a defining feature of the much broader field of theory in the social sciences and humanities.\(^{37}\) When translated to the analysis of political practices, the gesture of questioning the taken for granted leads to the supposition that suspending the obviousness of what is ordinarily thought of as politics reveals the political in all its authenticity.

Pitkin’s observations about the motivations behind the conceptual bifurcation of political life and the associated nominalization of the political remind us that although it is often associated with continental philosophy, the double inscription of the political is also a defining feature of a distinctive strand of post–World War II American political thought. Here, too, one finds a conceptual distinction between a more or less ordinary sense of politics and a more constitutive sense of politics, as well as the assertion of the authority of a certain sort of philosophical reasoning over the claims of social science. It is a strand of thought that shares features of the genre as a whole, but it also has certain distinctive inflections that are worthy of attention as an alternative to the strongly antagonistic investments that define post-Marxist ontologies of the political. By elaborating on these inflections, we may open up a different, less ontologically assertive line of interpretation of the concept of the political and its potential in helping us understand the dynamics of political action.

The key figure in the consolidation of a tradition of American political theory concerned with asserting the difference between routines of politics and the discernment of the core meaning of political life is Sheldon Wolin. In the 1960s Wolin framed his account of the vocation of political theory against an intradisciplinary opponent. For Wolin, theorizing is a creative act, an act of vision and envisioning, in contrast to a mere methodological concern.\(^{38}\) The development of political theory as a distinct field of discourse therefore arose in professional opposition to the positivist ambitions of post–World War II political science.\(^{39}\)

Wolin’s particular intellectual vision rests on the strong claim, found also in Arendt’s work, that political theory has an intimate relationship with philosophy without being identical with it.\(^{40}\) As already noted, for Wolin, asserting the importance of the political is in no small part a matter of carving out a space in an academic division of labor. It is an assertion that recenters thought about political life around the study of the canon of Western thought. The vocation of theory is expressed in a conviction that the autonomy of political life should not be reduced to sociological, psychological, or economic determinants. Identifying and safeguarding the autonomy of political life is a central concern for theories of the political, from Marxist and post-Marxist theorists to thinkers such
as Arendt, Pitkin, and Wolin. It is a shared concern that rests on the disavowal of any sustained consideration of the relations between political action and other dimensions of life, a consideration sullied by the contortions of concepts such as “relative autonomy” or the reductions of quantitative social science. The problematic of autonomy that underlies the elaboration of concepts of the political means that these relations can appear only as ones of mutual but asymmetrical dependence and vulnerability: being able to discern the significance of the political can throw light on more ordinary experiences, but these latter always threaten or cover over that true significance.

Definitions of the political as the name for a discrete realm of human life are anchored in efforts to delineate a field of scholarly endeavor. Such efforts connect the projects of Wolin or Pitkin, for example, to those of Lefort or Rancière. One reason to remember this shared effort is because, as Emily Hauptmann observes, “much of the relevant ‘outside’ for contemporary political theorists now lies outside the discipline of political science itself.”41 As a result, a particular model of the vocation of theory is made more widely available as this tradition of thought travels in new directions. In this model, ideas of authentic political action derived from a written canon of Western political thought come to serve as the interpretative-normative grid in which to place often rather stylized empirical observations. In short, a constitutive disavowal of social science continues to shape the forms of political theory that now increasingly find themselves newly embraced by decidedly empirical fields such as human geography and anthropology, sociology, and urban studies.

What defines the political, for Wolin, is not relations of rivalry or struggle, which are given so much importance by other theorists of radical democracy. In contrast to the view that the political is all about antagonism, conflict, or hostility, Wolin presents the imaginative element of political theory as part of ongoing reflection on the conditions of shared public life. This is what the political means in his thought. He argues that examination of the Western political tradition indicates that there is “a recurrent tendency to identify what is political with what is general to a society.”42 This “general quality of the political” leads Wolin to claim that political theory is concerned with what is “common” to the whole of a society. In this understanding, both modern politics and mainstream political science are complicit in the diminution of the relationship between the idea of what is political and the question of what is general, common, or public. So it is that Wolin argues, “The sense of the political has been lost.”43

For Wolin, the political refers to the “valued commonalities (peace, justice, security, culture, education)—the stuff of vision—to be shared, promoted, defended by those who are members.”44 Wolin certainly holds to the view that the political resists institutionalization. But his rendition of this theme is distinct from other variants of a similar-looking argument: “I shall take the political to be an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can
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nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity. Politics refers to the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity. Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. In contrast, the political is episodic, rare. We can see here how Wolin associates the political with shared and common experiences of collective power. He presents ordinary politics not as a world of routine management and administration but as a world of ongoing partisan contestation. The content Wolin gives to the difference between politics and the political is therefore quite distinctive. At the core of Wolin’s vision is the contrast he makes between moments of collective experience and the routines of partisan politics.

The distinctive sense of the political as a realm of collective life informs Wolin’s elaboration of the meaning of democracy. He defines democracy as “one among many versions of the political,” but above all it is for him a rare and fragile phenomenon. Wolin has recourse to the same temporal image that recurs across ontological interpretations of the political. Institutionalization of democratic politics, he claims, actually “marks the attenuation of democracy,” which leads him to assert that democracy is best thought of as “a moment rather than a form.” For him “democracy is a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is with their possibilities of becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them.” According to Wolin, this project is increasingly at risk of being incorporated into managed, commodified systems of administration and bureaucracy. Wolin holds that democracy is necessarily a delicate, vulnerable aspect of human relations properly thought of as a fugitive energy. But he also asserts that the contemporary moment is one in which this energy is somehow particularly vulnerable. Viewing contemporary capitalism and state power as inherently antidemocratic, Wolin affirms “the status of democracy as standing opposition.” Democracy for him is an occasional event whose agents are the relatively powerless: “those who have no means of redress other than to risk collectivizing their small bits of power.” As such, democracy is necessarily “an ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system.” In its dependence on a contrast between established order and rare events of oppositional dissent, Wolin’s image of democracy resonates with other strands of radical democratic theory.

Wolin provides only one version of how the double inscription of the political can be used to frame an evaluation of the health of democracy. That version is notable because it approaches the political primarily by reference to figures of commonality and collectivity, rather than antagonism and enmity. But it is also exemplary in positing a contrast between two types of time: the time of institutionalized routines and the disruptive time of the event. Wolin presents democracy as a disruptive process and as an interruption of “the ordinary tempos of
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The political process.” He therefore contrasts two ideal types of politics and their
associated rhythms: “One conception represents agitation as disruptive, energetic
intervention whose results include a large element of the unpredictable and per-
haps some element of the anarchic; the other is represented by an ideal of action
as orderly, stylized, shaped and limited by prescribed processes, procedures, even
time-tables, that are designed to produce predictable (i.e. consistent) decisions or
results.”50 This motif of two temporal orders—one settled and routine, the other
disruptive but fleeting—is shared across the genre of ontological interpretations
of the political as a whole.

The Difference That Ontology Makes

We have seen that the theme of the political is the product of a widely shared
theoretical habit of presuming that concepts are formed in opposing pairs. These
pairs offer themselves up for deconstructive reconfiguration, or they open a space
between them for the tragic affirmation of constitutive paradox, or they provide
the key to critical evaluation of the merely ontic manifestations of politics by refer-
ence to the more fundamental energies of the political.

The form of categorical division that defines this genre of theory has different
sources, sometimes traced back to Spinoza, sometimes to Carl Schmitt’s deeply
illiberal critique of liberal democracy. But as we have already seen, a key reference
point for the double inscription of the political is Heidegger’s analysis of ontolog-
ical difference—the distinction between what there is and the fundamental
being of what there is, between beings and Being, or between the “ontic” and the
“ontological.”51 The distinction has become the source for the idea that the onto-
logical is a kind of layer that in some sense has priority over the merely ontic. It is
this idea that underwrites the strongly ontological interpretation of the theme of
the political difference. The distinction between the ontological and the ontic is
often interpreted in terms of a contrast between an aspect of practice in which the
conditions of focused activities fade into the background and an aspect in which
these conditions become an object of reflection itself. My own concern here is not
with establishing the correct interpretation of Heidegger’s philosophy, much less
with the vexed question of the relationships between Heidegger’s own personal
and political opinions and his philosophy. I am interested in the ways in which
the account of the difference between the ontic and the ontological has been given
a political inflection.

The idea that democracy is best apprehended through an appreciation of the
double inscription of the political depends in no small part on a politicized inter-
pretation of the Heideggerian theme of ontological difference, according to which
there is a sharp distinction between things as they are given to experience and a
more fundamental dimension that constitutes the given as such. Fred Dallmayr
warns against the temptation to transform the distinction into “a rigid bifurcation between structure and infrastructure, between foundation and derivations, or between noumenal and phenomenal spheres of analysis.” Dallmayr’s warning anticipates exactly how the distinction has in fact been interpreted in a burgeoning field of Left ontologies. He argues that the appropriate construal of the distinction is not just a matter of how the difference between politics and the political is interpreted. It is a matter of whether the difference between the ontic and the ontological should be interpreted as a derivative one at all.

The derivative interpretation of ontological difference is in fact a crucial feature of the double inscription of the political in theories of radical democracy. For example, Chantal Mouffe affirms, “One could say that ‘the political’ is situated at the level of the ontological, while politics belongs to the ontic.” This type of claim makes the ontic level of politics an expression of a more fundamental level, the political. Theorists who follow this line of thought argue that the distinction is necessary because it allows us to draw into view the ontological dimension at which society is itself instituted and upon which the very possibility of a renewal of radical politics is premised. This sort of argument has two implications for how the political emerges as a theme in democratic theory. First, it requires a reading of the ontic/ontological distinction in terms of a layer-cake model of levels and priorities. Second, the politicization of the distinction reinforces a representation of political life that juxtaposes appearances, settlements, and naturalizations against disruptions, exposures, and invention. As a genre, ontological interpretations of the political therefore reiterate a classically Heideggerian motif of searching after the fundamental significance of things through a form of experience that exceeds immediate impressions. This genre presents familiar political phenomena as dependent on something other than themselves, but not in terms of social or economic variables. Rather, mundane politics is related to an inaugural movement that is somehow constitutive of the autonomy of political life itself. In turn, proper politics involves the disclosure of this very structure in thought and action.

The strong ontological interpretation of the political has become central to a theoretical narrative in which political life is constituted by “the ceaseless play” of having to posit a foundation as a condition of action and the inevitably imperfect and incomplete nature of any such foundation. This narrative informs the view that established patterns and routines necessarily depend on a set of constitutive conditions in order to proceed, but that those conditions cannot normally be acknowledged or made present from within those patterns and routines without fundamentally disrupting their smooth operation. In important respects, this view of action transposes a generic poststructuralist critique of epistemological foundationalism into the vocabulary of political analysis, and it remains trapped within the terms of certainty and doubt inherited from that same critique. The discovery that foundations cannot be grounded in a source of certainty beyond question often leads to the embrace of paradoxical formulas such as “contingent
foundations,” “strategic essentialism,” or “contingent universalism,” all of which still assume that action must always require some form of firm grounding, however temporarily fixed it might actually be. Postfoundational theories of the political simply shift this form of skeptical reasoning away from questions of the justifiability of knowledge claims or the dynamics of identity formation and inscribe it into the ontological structure of the world itself. The postfoundational construal of ontological difference therefore opens up a sense of the world as always open to radical transformation by rendering the world into a kind of tragic philosophical trial. Politics is the dull and routine administration of tightly choreographed competition, but this realm is susceptible to dramatic events of rupture in which the conditions of those dull routines are temporarily made present, disrupting and reconstituting politics anew before retreating from view once again.

But what if the discovery of the absence of secure foundations for action as well as belief is not interpreted in quite so melodramatic terms? What if the consequence of the lack of certainty is not necessarily the dizzying experience of pure contingency that must also require some temporary remedy? What if we just stop thinking of ordinary politics as a settled order derivative of a more fundamental layer of constitution or institution? Perhaps a first step toward suspending our credulity before the genre conventions associated with ontological interpretations of the political is to reconsider the force of the most explicitly Heideggerian account of the double inscription of the political. This will lead us to reconsider the theoretical significance of a tradition of democratic thought developed in the shadow of questions about the meaning of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Partaking of the Political

So far in this chapter I have traced some of the features of a genre of argument that claims that the meaning of democracy is best disclosed by grasping in theory and unleashing in practice “the specificity of the political.” This genre has different inflections, to be sure, and I want to avoid the temptation to either embrace or dismiss all of its elements. As already noted, among the most significant sources of the ontological interpretation of the political is the work of Claude Lefort, not least as the authority for the translation of the difference and ambiguity between the political (le politique) and politics (la politique) into English-speaking social thought. Lefort uses the distinction to contrast two styles of analysis, suggesting that le politique resists empirical analysis and is open only to philosophical inquiry. He argues that the conceptual delimitation of the political in the first sense escapes the procedures of political science or sociology. The purpose of political philosophy, Lefort contends, is to identify the principles behind different “forms of society,” which refers to “the ideas that are generative of the constitution of the social.” These ideas inevitably include religious principles, since for Lefort
the elaboration of a political form cannot be separated from the elaboration of a religious form. Any experience of politics must include a reference to a source of authority that is beyond question in some sense. Lefort's elaboration of the political around the theme of the permanence of the theologico-political is part of a wider argument that seeks to clearly differentiate political philosophy from social science analysis of politics. Whereas political science "attempts to circumscribe an order of particular facts within the social," the task of political philosophy is "to conceptualize the principle of the institution of the social."

Lefort's account of the concept of the political is more existential in its emphasis than it is strongly ontological. It rests on the idea of "forms of society," which refers to different modes of instituting the social—to different ways of generating the "principles or to an overall schema governing both the temporal and the spatial configuration of society." According to Lefort, these principles "order the experience of coexistence." Showing his phenomenological credentials, in a formulation that owes something to the thought of Merleau-Ponty Lefort holds that the formation and enactment of these principles is "inseparable from the experience of the world, from the experience of the visible and the invisible in every register." Lefort's political philosophy is part of a broader tradition of French political thought that seeks to distance itself from Marxism by elaborating on the constitutive relationship between twentieth-century totalitarianism and modern democracy.

The task of analyzing different forms of political society is informed by Lefort's influential understanding of the significance of democracy as a historical form. For Lefort, the formation of both democracy and totalitarianism is a process that occurs at the level of collective representations of power. In Lefort's understanding, democracy is a distinctively modern mutation in the way social life is organized, that is, in how it is both staged and given meaning. Lefort's crucial claim is that "democracy requires that the site of power remain empty." Democracy is a form of society characterized by the disincorporation of power. For democracy to exist, a figure of "the sovereign" cannot appear to incarnate the whole community, to embody "the people," and cannot stand above the law. What is distinctive about democracy here is that politics is disassociated from the nonpolitical, so that a certain form of separation is instituted between politics and other activities. In turn, totalitarianism stands as both the external reference point and the ever-present possibility inaugurated by democracy. For Lefort, democracy opens the historical conditions for the possibility of totalitarianism, which he understands as the reassertion of a society without division, unified and embodied in the figure of an all-powerful sovereign.

Lefort himself tends to disavow the idea that the political is "noble" but politics is only "trivial," insisting that the analysis of forms of political society is intimately tied to reflection on the actualities of political action. His political philosophy is a central reference point for the emergence of democracy as an organizing theme.
in post-Marxist thought, not least for establishing the distinction between politics and the political as quite central to theories of radical democracy. I will return to its use in chapter 5, when I discuss the poststructuralist account of democracy developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. At this stage it is important to underscore how Lefort’s thought places questions of contestation and disagreement at the heart of democratic practice, without identifying one single source from which these questions are derived.

In important respects, Lefort’s view of the dynamics of political life is a development of Merleau-Ponty’s own appreciation of Machiavelli for placing conflict and struggle at the center of an account of “the milieu proper to politics.” Machiavelli affirms discord and dispute as the source of vitality in a polity, as the source of agonistic energy that sustains freedom and ensured accountability. In so doing, Merleau-Ponty suggests, Machiavelli “finds something other than antagonism in struggle itself.” What Machiavelli finds in struggle, Merleau-Ponty proposes, is “a principle of communion”: “By putting conflict and struggle at the origins of social power, he did not mean to say that agreement was impossible; he meant to underline the condition for a power which does not mystify, that is, participation in a common situation.” In Lefort’s elaboration of the same themes in Machiavelli’s work, he argues that the lesson to be drawn from the realistic view that political life is shaped by conflict is not that “discord is good in itself.” It is, rather, that political life requires an ongoing juggling of the imperative of achieving “concord” without institutionalizing this imperative in a way that would mask or forbid the expression of more disharmonious passions. In this understanding, the formal equality of citizens before the law, while certainly not the same as “real” equality, is not a mere sham either. It is the basis on which systems of rule are “exposed to the effects of social division, that is to say, conflicts.”

Drawing into view the phenomenological inheritance behind Lefort’s account of the agonism of political life allows us to differentiate two quite distinct views of the relations between conflict and agreement. Such a distinction can be easily missed in loud assertions about the inherently contestatory qualities of the political. On one side, there is a view in which antagonism and agreement are diametrically opposed, often rendered in spatialized terms of exclusion and closure, disruption and rupture. On the other side is the more Machiavellian view, in which discord and dissonance are understood as the very medium of being together with others and where the political is understood to be the dimension in which the possibility of shared life is disclosed. In this view, rules, laws, and institutions are not thought of as imposing order in a negation of the properly unconstrained energies of the political. These are seen, rather, as the medium in which discord and dissonance are shaped more or less effectively into means for holding rulers to account and thwarting the abuse of power by cultivating the conditions of freedom.

These two divergent views of the relations between communion and con-
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Conflict, agreement and antagonism allow us to appreciate the significance ascribed to Lefort’s account of democracy as a constitutively indeterminate formation, founded on the absence of foundation, in assertive accounts of “the politics of deconstruction.” In particular, Lefort serves as a key reference point in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s formulation of “the retreat of the political.” Their elaboration of this theme is an influential inflection of the strongly ontological interpretation of the double inscription of the political. At the same time, and like Wolin, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy give primacy to the dimension of being together with others in their account of the political. They therefore help us clarify different substantive emphases at work in accounts of the double inscription of the political.

The motif of the retreat of the political presented by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy has a double reference, both of which depend on a version of the distinction between le politique (the political) and la politique (politics). First, it refers to the claim that the question of the meaning of the political withdraws when we just accept obvious understandings of politics. Second, it refers to the claim that only by refusing this obviousness is the way opened up to treating the political in new ways, or re-treating it. The retreat of the political in the first sense is, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, a function of the claim that everything is political. They argue that this radical cliché both depends on and reproduces received understanding of politics. It therefore leads to “the closure of the political,” that is, the elision of the question of what is political under the sway of obvious meanings of politics. In this account, the retreat of the political “means that the very question of the political retires and gives way to a kind of obviousness of politics or the political.” For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, accepted ideologies that are complicit with the closure of the political include nationalism, class politics, and rights-based discourses.

In a variation of an argument we have already become familiar with, the closure of the political is an effect of the disappearance of “political specificity,” evident in the subsumption of the political into social, economic, and psychological discourse. In the process, politics is converted “into a form of banal management and organisation.” Alluding to Lefort’s account of forms of society, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest that this amounts to nothing less than a totalitarian phenomenon. It marks the saturation of the whole field of human affairs by an instrumental, calculative sense of politics.

According to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the most pressing task before us is to analyze and challenge the obviousness of current understandings of politics. Re-treating the political is a task that falls primarily to philosophy, of course. For them, the task of “questioning of the essence of the political” is an inherently philosophical one. The political is an object of a privileged sort of philosophical questioning because, so the argument goes, the political has an internal relationship to philosophy. We saw in chapter 1 how Heidegger’s interpretation of the
betrayal of Greek thought in Roman translation is exemplified by an account of the transformation of an originary meaning of the political. It is this account that underlies the special claims Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make for the privileged relationship between philosophical reflection and the questioning of the political. Re-treating the political is not just a matter of opening established meanings up to question. It is about restoring the honor and privileges of philosophical reason.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy use the distinction between politics and the political not only to refer to two ontologically distinct levels but also to specify a kind of philosophical activity in which what it means to be in common is open to question. In their emphasis on the issue of commonality and community, they are closer to the associative framing of the question of the political also found in Wolin and Lefort than to variants of radical democracy that emphasize antagonism. This associative emphasis is further developed in Nancy’s own work. For him, “the political is the place where community as such is brought into play.”  

The question of the “in-common” is central to Nancy’s own elaboration of the political and of its allusive relation to an idea of “communism.” In his work, “being-in-common” is not a matter of unity but about sharing the absence of substantial identity, a sharing that is also a division. For Nancy, the political refers to “a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing.” This formula plays on the polysemy associated with the French verb *partager*, which suggests sharing but also separating, participating, dividing, partitioning. What this line of thought therefore draws attention to is the double sense of political life as a form of sharing in collective action as well as an experience of sharing out in the form of allocating, distributing, or dividing.

Developed in the 1980s in the specific context of debates about the future of the French Left, the invocation of the political as the experience of the question of being-in-common was also a way of signaling the Left commitments of the philosophical tradition associated with Derrida’s practice of deconstruction. In this latter role in particular, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s account of the retreat of the political was accused of amounting to little more than a justification for the withdrawal from real political action. In certain respects, of course, the accusation might well confirm the terms of their own analysis, insofar as it tends to rely on an established understanding of what proper political commitment should be concerned with and how it should be undertaken. In their understanding of the retreat of the political, the disavowal of the analysis of politics in terms of interests and struggle is no retreat at all. It is rather a necessary part of “a retreading of all that being-in-common involves (being-together or being-with).”

In one sense, the narrative of the retreat of the political can be interpreted as an important reminder to be sensitive to the contingent framing of any particular instance of political debate or contestation. But this is a much weaker interpretation than the authors of this account actually intend. Nancy, for example, has explicitly made the ontological inflection of political difference central to the very definition
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of the Left and the Right. These two poles can be differentiated according to their relative openness to the question of the political per se. The Right, for Nancy, defines the political as being “in charge of order and administration.” By contrast, “left” means, *at the very least*, that the political, as such, is receptive to what is at stake in community.” Nancy here defines Left politics as an agent and medium of a special kind of philosophical experience that can resist the temptations of totalitarian incorporation. In this account, Left politics is a kind of satiation of the ontological need for forms of noninstrumental thought.

Rather than worrying about whether a theoretical argument is political enough, the most pertinent criticism of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s avowedly deconstructive approach to the question of the political is that it reserves for philosophy alone the task of questioning existing understandings of what counts as political. Access to the required experience of questioning is not extended to other forms of action or other modes of knowing, which are presumed to be too closely entangled in received models of politics.

Aspects of the Political

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s version of the double inscription of politics is significant because it exemplifies the way Heidegger’s thought is often used in post-foundational ontologies of the political. In particular, the distinction between the ontic and the ontological, derived from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and interpreted through the lens provided by Heidegger’s own later elaboration of the essence of technology, casts a long shadow over ontological interpretations of the concept of the political. In the relation between these two philosophical reference points lies the space for very different interpretations of the significance of the distinction between politics and the political.

*Being and Time* belongs to a broader modernist tradition that is suspicious of mechanistic, utilitarian styles of reasoning. Heidegger divines that the metaphysical closure that condemns Western thought to forget the question of “Being” is expressed in the consistent determination of being as presence. It is a closure exemplified in the Cartesian image of a world of objects standing separate from and being represented to a self-present subject, a subject capable of apprehending its own presence by deducing that its own “I think” confirms its status as “I am.” The closure of the question of Being is constitutive of Western thought, according to Heidegger, by which he means a philosophical tradition going back to the Roman appropriation of Greek thought. Western thought, Heidegger asserts, takes the “present-at-hand” as its primary concern and is therefore dominated by contemplative modes of apprehending the world. Objects that are “present-at-hand” are the focus of explicit attention, but we do not notice how they have come to be available in the first place, or “ready-at-hand.” So it is that what is ontically familiar is ontologically strange. The distinction between present-at-hand and
ready-at-hand is related to a series of related distinctions, including those between being and Being and the ontic and the ontological. Between these pairs Heidegger posits a relation of “forgetting.” The task of philosophical discourse is to attend to the forgotten background against which the modern epistemological model of detached knowing becomes intelligible. The strong implication is that this epistemological model involves a form of engagement with the world that is fallen, bereft of all that is truly authentic.

In contrast to the view provided in discussions of “the political difference,” ontological interpretation and ontic interpretation are not presented as two distinct levels in Being and Time. They are more like different aspects of existence. Everyday phenomena are not presented as separate from or distinct from another realm, that of Being. Rather, they are shown to both express and conceal authentic Being. According to Heidegger, a specific relation of the ontic and the ontological characterizes Dasein, that is, the being-in-the-world of human life that distinguishes it from that of other entities. Dasein, for Heidegger, is “ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it,” and therefore in turn “Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.”

This intimate relationship defines entities with an ontological attitude, those with an orientation toward the interpretation of Being. What is forgotten, according to Heidegger, is the intimate relationship of the “ontico-ontological” that defines Dasein. The project of fundamental ontology therefore has the task of clarifying the preontological understanding of Being that is already an aspect of the ontic. This task involves keeping a scholastic distance from ordinary modes of idle talk and chatter.

Heidegger’s original account of ontological difference has been subject to various interpretations, and no little controversy. Across a range of traditions of social thought, it stands as a source for thinking about how to elaborate on the conditions through which things in the world—objects, issues, or dilemmas—show up as intelligible or actionable. Strands of hermeneutic and phenomenological social theory use it to critique propositional forms of knowledge, purely contemplative apprehensions of the world, and calculative styles of scientific reasoning. It is also often invoked to bolster accounts of the embodied, meaningful qualities of social life that are rolled into practices (accounts which easily overlook the fact that forms of cognitive and calculative knowing are themselves practices). And in political interpretations of the ontic/ontological distinction, as we have seen, the ontological is often presented as a layer equivalent to the political, so that the political is presented as fundamental and constitutive, as more authentically expressive of the essence of political life. In rendering the distinction as a contrast between routines on the one hand and disruptive and foundational events on the other, political interpretations of ontological difference tend to repeatedly elide the sense found in Heidegger’s original formulation of two aspects being folded together in practices.

I want now to return to Dallmayr’s warning about mapping the ontic/ontological distinction straight onto a distinction between the obvious manifes-
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tations of politics and a more fundamental dimension of the political. His point is not just that we should be wary of too quickly making this move. Recall that Dallmayr invites us to question the derivative and hierarchical interpretation of the relationship between the ontic and the ontological on which strong ontological interpretations of the political depend. The layered interpretation of ontological difference in accounts of the double inscription of the political relies heavily on Heidegger’s writings subsequent to *Being and Time*. In particular, Heidegger’s analysis of the essence of technology underwrites the translation of the notion of ontological difference into political theory. The question of technology is central to Heidegger’s displaced nonengagement with his own political commitments to the Nazi Party in the 1930s. And it is the source of a much starker and explicitly normative contrast between rationality and thinking, where the latter refers narrowly to certain select forms of poetic and meditative reflection. By juxtaposing technologized reason and meditative thinking, Heidegger is able to suggest that in the modern world everything is rendered “immediately at hand” and thereby turned into a “standing reserve,” as objects waiting to be instrumentally used in some way. This is the process he calls “enframing,” that is, the ordering of things to be calculated and put to use. Enframing encourages a will to mastery and conceals other ways of relating by turning people and life into things to be ordered. The realm of proper and authentic questioning is reserved for art. In Heidegger’s account of enframing, objects are made available for use, including as objects of knowledge, by being offered up to be represented. This is nothing short of a historical event, one through which the world is itself “conceived and grasped as a picture.” The idea of enframing has subsequently informed various forms of radical social theory, including critical accounts of colonial power and of the calculative rationalities of the modern state.

Heidegger’s later analysis of technology is a significant influence on the interpretation of the ontic/ontological distinction in political theory. Reading ontological difference under the sway of his account of enframing, one easily arrives at the idea that what appears obvious as politics is in fact a fixing in place of the world as an accessible, measurable, calculable field to be managed and manipulated. Politics in this immediately accessible sense is understood to depend on but also to cover over a more fundamental source of constitutive energy. And this more fundamental realm is best revealed not by empirical analysis or anything so crude as methodology but only through a special kind of esoteric philosophical reflection.

By recognizing the different elements of Heidegger’s thought that have informed ontological interpretations of the political, we can better see how these interpretations perform a conceptual two-step in asserting their authority. In a first move, they construe ontological difference as a difference between different layers of existence in which the ontological layer is given an ill-defined priority. This construal is in turn quite crucial to the subsequent politicization of ontological difference. In a second move, the splitting of politics into two layers is presented as the very movement of politicization itself. In this move, the mundane affairs
of worldly politics are opened up to a style of critique in which they are taken as a symptom of the covering over of genuinely political energies, the stabilization of properly contingent forces, or the perversion of authentically robust virtues of political contestation.

Ontological interpretations of the political therefore tend to rely on what Robert Brandom has called a “layer-cake” interpretation of Heidegger’s account of ontological difference. This is not, as we have seen, the inflection originally given by Heidegger himself, for whom what is at stake is more like a difference between different aspects of action and intentionality. The layer-cake interpretation transforms the ontological aspect into a level that is both prior to and autonomous from the ontic layer of everyday existence. In turn, the layer-cake interpretation of the distinction between ontic and the ontological is also often used to bolster the claim that utilitarian or contemplative thought depends on a more basic, foundational level of practice.

We can pause here and ask how we should understand best the relationship between the two aspects of action that Heidegger’s original account of ontological difference helps to clarify. Rather than thinking that the ontological has a conceptual priority over the ontic (and by extension, the political over politics), as if it were a separate stratum, Brandom suggests that the relationship is one of explanatory priority. By this he means that the possibility of treating things as “occurrent,” as present at hand, depends on understandings that are already implicit in practice. Any representational perspective on action is certainly dependent on the shape of practical, nonconceptual dealings with things. To put it another way, knowing that depends on knowing how. But these aspects of acting do not belong to two wholly separate realms. They are better thought of as entangled together, as suggested in a wide range of contemporary theories of practice in social theory and philosophy. To take one example, Charles Taylor suggests that the significance of Heidegger’s thought really lies in establishing that “our understanding of the world is grounded in our dealings with it.” Our understanding of the world is therefore based not solely on representational knowledge but also on a background of practices that can themselves be taken as objects of reflection. The task of giving what Taylor calls an “ontological account” of action is to articulate these background conditions (without presuming they can all be articulated at once). And these conditions are not something of which one is simply unaware. Background is implicit in action but is not the focal point, and aspects of it can therefore be articulated, or made explicit, in Brandom’s terms, although only by other aspects being backgrounded in turn.

The interpretations of ontological difference proposed by philosophers of action such as Brandom and Taylor are not the only ones available, nor are they quite the same. They are part of a live philosophical debate about how to locate Heidegger’s thought within a broader field of antirepresentational accounts of embodied action, intentionality, and rationality. They do help us to see that the issues raised by Heidegger’s thought are central to enduring debates about how
best to understand action. In ontologies of the political, by contrast, the adoption of the layer-cake interpretation of ontological difference effectively elides any sense of rational action at all. The source of creative change is displaced either into preconceptual realms of affect or into the tectonic movements by which settled orders are suddenly disrupted. But we can see that the account of ontological difference that Heidegger presented does not necessarily need to be interpreted in the strongly contrastive, layered fashion that characterizes ontologies of the political. By restoring the concept of action to the center of discussion, it becomes possible to acknowledge that giving an ontological account of the political might involve the explication of the practices and background affirmations on which political action and knowledge depend. There is no need to presume that the pursuit of this task needs to rely on a picture of the duplicitous process by which a more fundamental level of either antagonism or commonality is covered over or erased and yet always on the verge of reasserting itself.

We should now be able to see that there are different ways of interpreting the significance of the double inscription of the political. In one direction, in strongly ontological interpretations that allude to the authority of Heidegger, there is a split between two layers, one of which is made more fundamental than the other. The resonance of this ontological interpretation of layers, levels, and priorities relies on a version of what Paul Ricoeur once famously called “the hermeneutics of suspicion”: it continues to depend for its rhetorical force on revealing assumptions about the obviousness of political life that are not immediately evident. The strongly ontological interpretation of the political thereby contributes to a style of analysis that distracts from a consideration of the dynamics of action. It does so by casting ordinary political life as in thrall to settled, given, obvious understandings of what matters, understandings that apparently form the very core of what it means to be a subject. I argued in chapter 2 that ordinary political life might be exactly where we should look for an understanding not so much of what the political really means but of how and why the question of the political ever comes to matter. If we orient ourselves in this second direction, then our attention alights on the task of elaborating the practical conditions shaping any instance of political action. The question remains whether the concept of the political can be of any use in this task.

**Instituting the Political**

We have seen how the conceptual splitting of politics into two distinct layers is associated with a consistent presentation of the political as a constitutive dimension that is both necessary for and yet itself eludes the imperatives of order. The unruly energies or groundless relations of the political are given recognizable form by a kind of tragic necessity, through an act of fixing in place that is also a betrayal.
of the authentic energy of the political. In this way, ontological interpretations of
the double inscription of the political generate a normative juxtaposition of two
images of time and space: serialized stability and fixed order on the one hand,
creative movement and disruptive becoming on the other.

The fundamental question raised by discussions of the concept of the political
is whether we have to think of the constitutive relationship between processes of
enframing and the actions they facilitate as visible only through a special kind of
philosophical revelation. The double inscription of the political might be inter-
preted in less grandiose ways than those favored by Left ontologies. We could just
think of the distinction between politics and the political as a highly formalized
expression of a much more ordinary intuition—according to which any given
pattern of political contestation involves a form of selective attention to certain
issues that might always be reconfigured. This is pretty much how Dallmayr sug-
gests we think about the distinction between politics and the political. For him,
politics refers to day-to-day decision making and the practices of partisan politics
and the political refers to “the frame of reference within which actions, events, and
other phenomena acquire political status in the first place.” The importance of
this more ordinary interpretation of the double inscription of the political is that
it indicates a different placement of the two terms, which are no longer thought
of as starkly contrasting dimensions but more as two aspects folded together in
the ongoing movements of political life.

To illustrate the less grandiose interpretation of the double inscription of the political I am recommending, we might consider Habermas’s diagnosis of the
emergence of so-called new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Habermas
distinguished between conflicts sparked by what he called “problems of distribu-
tion” and those that concerned what he calls “the grammar of forms of life.” The
latter were animated, in his account, by resistance to the impingement of systems
of commodification, monetization, and bureaucratization into lifeworld contexts.
For Habermas, this relationship between system and lifeworld imperatives gen-
erates political mobilizations around issues of gender, race, ecology, and peace.
All of these movements were not concerned with compensations or demands in
the realm of the politics of distribution but instead were focused on “defending
and restoring endangered ways of life.” The distinction that Habermas used to
account for the emergence of new social movements—between conflicts arising
within the sphere of the politics of distribution and those concerned with the
grammar of forms of political life—is an alternative variant of the double inscrip-
tion of the political that I have been tracing through this chapter. In Habermas’s
account, it is not a distinction mapped onto a picture of ontologically discrete lay-
ers and levels or a contrast between instituted orders and ruptures. It is a distinc-
tion that is made present as an observable element of ongoing patterns of political
contestation.

Habermas provides just one example of how existing ideas of politics can be
opened up to scrutiny by placing them in a different frame and questioning what counts as political. To take another example, the reconstruction of the concept of the political is central to various strands of feminist theory. The historical significance of the slogan “the personal is the political” is, after all, to expand the scope of activities considered as properly political. It is certainly not to restrict the political to a select type of heroic action.

We can, then, think of the double inscription of the political in more heuristic terms, as distinct from a strongly ontological interpretation of the double inscription of the political. By approaching concepts in a heuristic fashion, we place the emphasis on using them to help better understand “how to find things out.” One important reason to adopt this attitude toward different interpretations of the political is because it allows us to appreciate the ways in which these interpretations project specific imaginations of the spatial and temporal conditions of political action. This is illustrated in the heuristic use of the distinction between politics and the framing of the political found in the social theory of Roberto Unger. Unger seeks to loosen the attachment to images of crisis, ruin, and rupture in radical political thought and provides instead a revised view of the relations between stability, conflict, and change. The fundamental distinction in his social theory is between formative contexts and formed routines. Unger’s presentation of the distinction between these two aspects of action rejects the view of political virtue that elevates “the existentialist idea that true freedom consists in the perpetual defiance of all settled structure, in the endless flight from one context to another.” For Unger, this decidedly modernist disposition “fails to take into account both the bad news that we must live and think most of the time in a context and the good news that we can create contexts that more fully respect and encourage our context-revising freedom.” On the one hand, the distinction between formative contexts and routine actions is crucial to distinguishing between conflict and compromise within existing contexts and conflicts over formative contexts—or between structure-preserving and structure-transforming contexts. On the other hand, the distinction is not a stark categorical differentiation of ontological layers. Unger insists that it is important to maintain a sense of “the relativity of the distinction between context-preserving and context-breaking activities.” For Unger, the animating principle is that “everything is contextual and that all contexts can be broken.”

Change does not come in the form of events outside of closed systems or through systems rupturing under the weight of constitutive paradoxes. It arises from the ordinary dynamism of formative contexts and formed routines.

The conceptual distinction between context-dependent and context-revising aspects of action acknowledges that any given pattern of political contestation is a contingent framing that might well be altered or mutate. But it belongs to a style of theory that does not succumb to the ontological need or have recourse to the authority of philosophical revelation. The distinction is not a stark opposition
between two separate ontologically separate layers. Formative contexts of action are not invulnerable to the low-level conflicts of ordinary life, nor are they only subject to dramatic disruptions.\textsuperscript{101} For Unger, formative contexts of action and routine activities are intimately related aspects of any field of activity. The distance between them, the degree to which ordinary moves within formed routines can also redefine those routines, varies across social formations, and it can also be taken as an index of the degree of democratization of social fields.\textsuperscript{102}

I close this chapter by considering another strand of thought in which the concept of the political is deployed in a less melodramatic register than that found in ontological interpretations of the political. Picking up the phenomenological interpretation of the historicity of the political developed by Lefort, and also at work in Wolin and Arendt, Pierre Rosanvallon develops a form of analysis that focuses on the variable experience of politics as it is enacted through institutional formations of action. Rosanvallon's work belongs to the tradition of democratic thought associated with the critique of totalitarianism developed by thinkers like Arendt and Lefort, as well as François Furet. But it seeks to escape the traps laid for democratic theory by the antitotalitarian imagination, of defining democracy only by reference to its perversions and annulments.\textsuperscript{103}

Rosanvallon's work rests on his own distinctive conceptualization of the political as both “a field” and “a project,” in an argument structurally similar to Unger's account of formative contexts and context-revising action. Seen as a field, the political refers to the idea of living together, to the conditions of common life. But rather than presenting this field of common life as an immanent level underlying observable social realities, Rosanvallon recommends also thinking of the political as always actively in formation—as a contentious and contested project of elaborating on the dimensions of the political understood in the first sense. On the basis of this active sense of the constitution of the political through concerted action, Rosanvallon presents his own version of the distinction between the political and politics. He uses the political as a noun to refer to “a modality of existence of life in common as a form of collective action that is implicitly distinct from the functioning of politics.” In a formulation similar to Wolin's, Rosanvallon uses the political to refer to matters that constitute political life “beyond the immediate field of partisan competition for political power, everyday governmental action, and the ordinary function of institutions.”\textsuperscript{104} Rosanvallon is making an analytical distinction here, without mapping it onto ontologically distinct layers. In this account, politics and the political are understood to be intimately connected rather than divided between two levels or two temporalities.

For Rosanvallon, democracy is a distinct instantiation of the political: “Democracy, in fact, constitutes the political in a field largely open to the very fact of the tensions and uncertainties that underlay it.”\textsuperscript{105} This definition leads to the idea that democracy is an “experiment in freedom,” an experiment in which the question of the constitution of the political is itself up for grabs. Defining democracy in
this way, so that it is elevated to the special status of being the political form that is able to catch its own shadow by instantiating the experience of reflexivity, is in fact a broadly shared feature of radical theories of democracy.

What is most distinctive about Rosanvallon’s account of democracy, compared to those of other thinkers considered in this chapter, is his emphasis on the organizational dimensions of the political. For Rosanvallon, democracy consists of concurrent processes, involving an expression of popular will as well as an institutional arrangement for the ongoing delivery of the public interest or the public good.106 This follows from the idea that there are two inseparable aspects of the political, one of “institution” and one of “regulation.”107 These two aspects are not offset according to a temporal division in which inaugural acts of creation are followed by domestication. Rather, he uses the distinction to open up to analysis the emergence of new forms of the political. The recurring theme of Rosanvallon’s work is that democracy answers to two imperatives: “it has to arrange for periodic choice among significantly different individuals and programs, and it must establish institutions that rise above those differences to promote the general interest.”108 In Rosanvallon’s work, elections, voting, parties, partisan practices, administration, and law are not denigrated as mere politics or as “police.” They are the necessary institutional expressions of the variable history of the political.

Rosanvallon’s account of the changing forms of political life is shaped by an uneasy tension between a pessimistic sense of decline and diminution and a more neutral emphasis on the historical reconfigurations of the political. The tension plays out in his account of the emergence of what he calls “counter-democracy.”109 This idea certainly sounds a lot like postdemocracy or antipolitics. Rosanvallon uses the term “counter-democracy” to refer to the emergence of “a durable democracy of distrust.” Counter-democracy finds its expression in the proliferation of powers of oversight; in new forms of monitoring, opposition, and limitation of government power; and in new practices of vigilance, denunciation, and evaluation.110 For Rosanvallon, these are three modalities through which citizens come to exercise surveillance over power, not vice versa. They presage, for him, the emergence of new modes of legitimacy. In contrast to accounts of postdemocracy, Rosanvallon argues that in our time the sources of democratic legitimacy have proliferated and have been relocated. He identifies three new sources of legitimacy: ideals of impartiality (embodied in the role of the judicial system), of reflexivity (expressed in the oversight performed by a field of nongovernmental organizations), and of proximity (expressed in the proliferation of identity politics and practices of localism).111

The diagnosis of counter-democracy and of new forms of democratic legitimacy exemplify a distinctive type of conceptual analysis. Rosanvallon is concerned with analyzing forms of what he calls “democratic activity,” not with static models or ideals or the agentless movements of ontological layers. It is a form of analysis of the political that allows for a sense of variation without necessarily
requiring a straightforward judgment that proper politics has been suspended or that real democracy has been erased. And it is a form of analysis that starts from the acknowledgement that there “has been simultaneous diversification of the range, forms and targets of political expression.” On this basis, Rosanvallon does not find a process of depoliticization in contemporary transformations of the political. Rather than bemoaning a decline of citizenly activity, he suggests there might be an emerging problem of what he calls “the unpolitical,” an idea that refers to “a failure to develop a comprehensive understanding of problems associated with the organization of a shared world.”\textsuperscript{112} We can see that Rosanvallon is, in the end, unable to resist appealing to a narrative of loss, intimating that there is a diminution of concern with responding to the calling of the political. But even here it is important to recognize that for Rosanvallon, the political refers to the problem of living together, not to an element of permanent antagonism. And more fundamentally, the political is the product of forms of action, not an ontological layer forever subject to foreclosure or exclusion. There is, for Rosanvallon, lots of democratic activity today, but much of it has nonpolitical effects in the sense that it does not contribute to an awareness of a shared world.

Rosanvallon’s work represents an alternative to the prevalent interpretations of the concept of the political offered by post-Marxist and poststructuralist traditions of thought. His thought certainly shares some of the characteristics of the ontological interpretations of the political discussed earlier in this chapter and those to be considered subsequently. It has its own version of the conceptual distinction between the political and politics, although it is a distinction deployed in a less stark manner than is found elsewhere. Rosanvallon also tends to present democracy as a distinctive experiential mode of hyper-reflexivity toward the contingency of all settled formations, but he does allow that this is a more or less ordinary experience rather than a rare, sudden event of either denaturalization or political subjectification. But what is most distinctive about Rosanvallon’s work is that it traces the changing experiences of the political through the history of institutions, rather than as something that is interminably suspended in a fugitive realm and is only available to the special sensitivity of philosophical reconstruction.

**A Kind of Loving**

In this chapter I have traced some of the routes taken along the first of Axel Honneth’s two trajectories of post-Marxist social thought, the trajectory that seeks to locate transformative political possibilities in ontological features of the world. I have focused on versions of political theory that find this possibility in the very structure of ontological difference itself, by splitting politics into two parts and arranging them in a serial order of derivative priority. I have emphasized that these sorts of theories provide ontological pictures of what political life is properly
about and have discussed the way in which they often present the structure of fundamental ontology itself as the potential source of politicization.

The most important contribution of the ontological interpretation of the political is the insistence that politics should not only be thought of as a field in which preexisting interests are processed or inherited identities confront each other. It is a genre that shares with other strands of critical social theory a suspicion of forms of liberal pluralism that see politics primarily as a form of bargaining and aggregation as well as a mistrust of forms of liberal political philosophy that suppose that political argument needs to be contained within preestablished parameters. In both cases, the radical democratic spirit balks at how such traditions ignore or control for the ways in which political activity is transformative of interests and issues, as well as identities and solidarities, and it seeks to reaffirm that politics is a generative and constitutive activity in its own right.

The animating concern that often links various ontological interpretations of the political is a commitment to recovering the force of conflict, controversy, and uncertainty that liberal political theories and actually existing liberal democracy are both accused of erasing from view. One way of thinking about this accusation is that it amounts to a claim that some theories, and some thinkers, are unable or unwilling to love politics enough or to love it in the way that it deserves to be loved. Liberalism, after all, is often seen not only as too rationalistic but also as actively hostile to passionate forms of public expression. The affective force of ontologies of the political lies precisely here, in the proposition that one should be willing to abandon oneself to the dizziness of the ambivalence and delights of the rough-and-tumble that makes politics what it is. The compromising, trimming, and withholding characteristic of liberal theories are, from this perspective, expressions of lukewarm embrace when what is called for is wholehearted abandonment.

But in this demand that we should love politics more fully, proponents of the political turn out to be more prescriptive than those they suppose are not passionate enough. Strong ontological claims about the political tend to be used to bolster very particular understandings of how democracy should be defined. These are understandings that sometimes appeal to more or less antiquarian etymologies of the word “democracy” or that sometimes appeal to more or less convincing claims about the fundamental essence of the political. The ontologization of politics also depends on strong claims about just how the conceptualization of politics itself should be conducted, privileging the recall of lost or forgotten meanings covered over by the rationalisms of modernity. And so, almost by definition, observable political practices are always likely to fall short of what is required to qualify as proper politics in the refined and rather precious sense associated with ontologies of the political. From the perspective of these ontologies, democracy comes to serve as the utopian name for a style of politics in which the authentically disruptive energy of the political should be allowed to play itself out without reserve.
In considering different examples of the use of the politics/political distinction, I have also sought resources to support the second of Honneth's two theoretical trajectories, the one that seeks to better understand plural rationalities of action. We have seen that there are significant differences within what is often presented as a rather homogenous field of thinking about the concept of the political. First, I have suggested that there is a significant difference between strongly ontological interpretations of the concept of the political, sometimes heavily dependent on a politicized reading of Heidegger's account of ontological difference, and accounts of the political that are more concerned with understanding the dynamics of human action. This first difference of interpretation does not exactly map onto a second one, although they do overlap in places. This second difference is that between what Oliver Marchart calls associative and dissociative interpretations of the political. One thing that thinkers such as Wolin, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, and Rosanvallon all share is an understanding of the political as a realm in which the conditions of collective action and common life are most at stake. This emphasis contrasts with the darker emphasis on interminable struggle and hostility found in other accounts of the political, to which I will turn in more detail in the next two chapters. I should say here that this second difference is not a matter of a contrast between consensus and discord. It is, rather, a difference in how issues of agonism are interpreted—a difference in how the idealistic and realistic aspects of politics identified by Hannah Pitkin are combined in different theoretical traditions. And it is, as we will see, a difference in thinking about the shape of political time and space. Finally, it is a difference to do with contrasting ways of imagining the public milieu in which theoretical reflection itself circulates.

We have, then, begun to see how a fundamental division emerges over just how to interpret the relationship between given identities and interests, and the transformative work of politics. In Lefort's work, in Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's account of the retreat of the political, and in Rosanvallon's work one finds a concern with elaborating on the political as a particular type of experience. This concern reflects a shared focus on developing a phenomenological account of the conditions of political life. The next chapter will elaborate further on this interpretative division as it shapes poststructuralist theories of radical democracy.