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CHAPTER 4

The Scandal of Consent

The consent which underlies reproduction of capitalist relations does not consist of individual states of mind but of behavioral characteristics of organizations. It should be understood not in psychological or moral terms. Consent is cognitive and behavioral. Social actors, individual and collective, do not march around filled with "predispositions" which they simply execute. Social relations constitute structures of choices within which people perceive, evaluate, and act. They consent when they choose particular courses of action and when they follow these choices in their practices.

—Adam Przeworski

Democracy and Ideology

The previous chapter raised the question of how the concept of the political should be interpreted in theories of democracy. One key difference of interpretation is captured in Hannah Pitkin's distinction between the idealist and realist dimensions of political life and also in Oliver Marchart's distinction between associative and dissociative concepts of the political. The distinction at stake is not simply one between more consensual or more agonistic perspectives. It is, rather, a distinction that turns on different ways of understanding the dynamics of conflict and discord. Understood in this way, the difference of interpretation is closely related to another difference, one that separates strongly ontological views of the double inscription of politics from more phenomenologically inflected views. While for the former the political refers to a layer of antagonism, energy, or vitalism that might always be unleashed against settled orders, from the latter perspective it appears more like a horizon of experience within which political action comes into view.

In this chapter and the next I will further refine these differences of interpretation. In chapter 5 I will accentuate the differences between ontologically inclined and action-theoretic perspectives in order to specify the very different understand-
nings of the sources of antagonism that are available to us. But first, in this chapter, I emphasize the difference between these two perspectives in order to restore to view the importance of experience to understanding the emergent dynamics of democratic politics. In particular, I open up to scrutiny the taken-for-granted emphasis on concepts of subjectification that has come to define radical theories of democracy under sway of the strongly ontological interpretation of the political discussed in the previous chapter. I suggest that the ascendancy of the vocabulary of political subjectification marks the eclipse of an alternative emphasis on the conditions of creative action that a phenomenological imagination keeps in view.

My discussion starts by focusing on how the concept of hegemony has served post-Marxist thinkers as a means of thinking about democracy in the wake of the collapse of classical paradigms of class politics. The notion of consent is central to debates about hegemony; these debates are in turn one of the places where the Marxist tradition more or less consciously engages with a key concept of democratic theory. The defining theme in Western Marxism from the 1920s onward has been how to understand the means by which capitalist exploitation is legitimized through the active consent of those who are the main sources of economic value and therefore the primary victims of injustice. The absence of widespread political upheaval against capitalism is attributed to the operations of ideology, which is seen to operate through sophisticated theories of subject formation.

In the work of Louis Althusser a lineage of Marxist theories of ideology is translated into a theory of social reproduction mediated by subjectification. Combining Lacanian psychoanalytical theory with Antonio Gramsci’s account of hegemony, Althusser recasts the concept of ideology in ways that still resonate across the disparate field of cultural theory. He argues that ideology is something that people could never be liberated from. It is the necessary mechanism through which individuals are made into subjects. The formation of subjectivity works through institutional practices overseen by churches, schools, and universities, which Althusser labels “ideological state apparatuses.” Althusser defines ideology as the “representation of the imaginary relationships to their real conditions of existence.” “Imaginary” in this formulation refers to the idea, derived from Jacques Lacan, that the relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence is always necessarily mediated by the images with which they identify in the process of becoming subjects.

As already noted, Althusser’s theory of ideology, with its differentiation of repressive state apparatuses from ideological state apparatuses, is a reformulation of Gramsci’s account of hegemony. Gramsci’s singular contribution to Marxist theories of culture and politics was to split the “superstructure” into two distinct dimensions, or levels: “the one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the State.’” The distinction between civil society and political society corresponds to the function of ‘hegemony’ that dominant groups exercise throughout society on the one
hand, and on the other hand to that of ‘direct domination’ exercised through the State and ‘juridical’ government.”

The distinction between political society and civil society allows Gramsci to develop a dual perspective, emphasizing the role of both relations of coercion and relations of consent in political processes. And it underwrites a whole series of related conceptual pairs, including persuasion and force, morality and politics, hegemony and dictatorship, and leadership and domination.

Althusser’s account of ideological state apparatuses carries over Gramsci’s distinction between two modalities of power but lays the basis for a generalized analysis of cultural practices as mediums of subject formation. The traces of Althusser’s account of ideology are still evident in contemporary theories of culture, discourse, governmentality, and hegemony. His account resonates in a broad agreement that subjectivity turns on a double operation, through which individuals become subjects of their own actions in the process of being subordinated to the authority of a higher, external power.

The history of critical theories of cultural analysis developed in the wake of Althusser’s reformulation of ideology is, in no small part, the history of the displacement of action-centered theories by theories that prioritize the formation of subjectivity in scenes of subjection. As we saw in chapter 1, it is also here that the roots of an ambivalent theory of democracy can be located. Roland Barthes finds a specific political imagination to be at work in Saussure’s account of the arbitrariness of the sign, which is a crucial reference point for the development of theories of culture as the medium of subject formation. For Barthes, Saussure presents meaning as wholly conventional, anchored not by transcendental authority but only by the agreement of all members of a community. And yet no single individual is empowered to change the system, since this can happen only through a strange form of unintentional collective action. This account of meaning has come to serve as the model for a wide range of theories of culture: culture is widely understood as a field in which power is exercised over subjects but also therefore as a field where power can be resisted and potentially transformed by working on inherited forms of subjective identification.

It is possible to use concepts from linguistics and other specialized fields as models of political action only by translating them in more or less unmediated form into ontological categories of subjectivity, desire, or motivation. Such a move leaves us trapped within a view in which the subject is an effect of the play of signs and representations or requires us to affirm the unpredictable and anonymous agency of an affective layer of prior determination. Cultural theory is not the only field in which it is assumed that cultural practices are instrumental in the formation of subjectivity and, through this, necessary for the reproduction of relationships of unequal and unjust power. The same assumption is a central feature of post-Marxist theories of the political that are a focus of this chapter. Part of the attraction of poststructuralist theories of radical democracy and ideas.
such as Rancière’s notion of “the distribution of the sensible” lies in the idea that whole social formations are functionally integrated around the operations of subject formation, through which macrolevel processes are secured at the level of microlevel identifications. This chapter traces the consequences of the elision of questions of consent in radical theories of democracy that view power as primarily working at the level of processes of subjectification. I seek to trace an alternative trajectory through this conceptual terrain, one in which questions of consent are kept alive by being made central to an understanding of democratic politics as the problematization of relations of delegation, dependence, and support.

Taking Democracy Seriously

The concept of hegemony serves as a kind of staging post through which Marxist theorists have often passed en route to thinking about democratic politics. In this respect, what is important about Gramsci’s elaboration of the concept of hegemony is that he “unwittingly recovered the natural law meaning of civil society as a society founded on consensus.”7 There is a fundamental division in how the theme of consent in Gramsci’s original discussion of hegemony has subsequently been interpreted. One strand of interpretation, which would include cultural theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, takes relations of consent seriously. A second strand of interpretation is deeply skeptical of the idea of consent that is so central to Gramsci’s own account of hegemony. For example, any space for a meaningful model of consent falls from view in Althusser’s transposition of Gramsci’s original division of the superstructure into two parts. Hegemony disappears into a process of ideological interpellation in which individuals are constituted all the way down as subjects, through scenes of subjection to external authority. From an avowedly Althusserian perspective, Gramsci’s toying with the idea of consent as well as force is a regrettable theoretical error.8

To appreciate the degree to which Gramsci’s account of hegemony is premised on a theory of motivated, rational action, it is useful to call attention to his intellectual debt to a tradition of Italian spatial linguistics in which relations of status and emulation are used to explain language change.9 Gramsci’s interest lay in an appreciation of how this tradition demonstrates that cultural change involves “a whole complex of molecular processes.”10 The relevance of Gramsci’s engagement with spatial linguists in developing his account of hegemony is that they provided him with a picture of action being undertaken against a background of expectations: “Rather than by means of direct imposition, the spatial linguists saw change as being effected by the operation of prestige on the one hand and active consent on the other.”11 Gramsci does not therefore reduce the aspect of consent to an ideological ruse or to a “sleight of hand.”12 His account of hegemony opens up to investigation the role of norms in orienting actions. Any affirmation of hegemony
as an ongoing process really makes sense only if it is understood in these terms, as a process of configuring possible alternative pathways of action.

The implication of this action-centered interpretation is that hegemony must somehow express people's interests and aspirations if it is ever to be effective. Gramsci makes the point clearly enough himself when he insists that in establishing hegemony “the dominant group is coordinated concretely with the general interests of the subordinate groups.” In one sense, this is a statement about how any group must combine with others to pursue their own interests. But more strongly, it also suggests an understanding in which hegemony cannot “perform its function of coordinating individual wills unless it is validated continually by daily life.” The idea here is that hegemony must touch on people's experiences and expectations if it is to orient their actions. This is why we might prefer to use the term “consent” over “legitimacy,” to avoid the mentalist associations of the latter, which tend to undermine the emphasis on strategies and forms of action that the idea of hegemony implies. Emphasizing the action-theoretic aspects of Gramsci’s ideas also provides the key to appreciating the abiding significance for democratic theory of Stuart Hall’s engagement with Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony and the national-popular in his analysis of Thatcherism in the 1970s and 1980s. Hall presents hegemony as a field of strategic interaction between situated purposive actors. He is often thought of primarily as a theorist of culture, or perhaps of cultural politics. Here I read Hall as primarily a theorist of electoral-representative democracy.

The background for Hall’s treatment of concepts of hegemony, discourse, and ideology was a set of historical transformations in the structures of electoral representation and party mobilization in British politics. Hall’s work, as part of the collective project associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham in the 1970s and then at the Open University, was embedded in a broader series of academic debates about the need for Marxist theory to “take democracy seriously.” The debates in which Hall intervened in this period were concerned primarily with theorizing political strategy and with finding resources for doing so in a context in which electoral democracy was the presumed object and medium of popular mobilization. The research programs of nascent cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s analyzed a broad set of institutions pivotal to post-war British social democracy, conceptualizing them as the sites of civil society. It was in civil society—in schools, in broadcast cultures, in welfare systems—that the hegemonic processes were to be found, understood as processes of winning consent but not securing consensus. For Hall, Gramsci’s “analysis of situations” is the source for a type of conjunctural analysis of the relationships between political regimes, state forms, and popular trends that rejects the image of the imposition or legitimation of domination. Hall assumes that understanding these relationships requires recognizing that the exercise of hegemony results “from winning a substantial degree of popular consent.”
Hall’s interpretation of Gramsci’s ideas is distinctive because of its twin emphases on hegemony as an organized phenomenon and as necessarily articulated with popular experiences and sentiments. This dual dimension of hegemony is central to Hall’s well-known account of the emergence of Thatcherism as a version of authoritarian populism. Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism in British politics can be thought of as an account of cultural politics only insofar as it is understood to refer to the ways in which popular sentiments and discords are articulated with public narratives that end up being electorally consequential. In intellectual debates of the 1980s, Hall’s account of Thatcherism was accused of overestimating both the popularity of Margaret Thatcher as a political leader and the importance of ideology in determining political outcomes. But the accusation failed to acknowledge how Hall consistently took a distance from increasingly assertive discourse-theoretical models in which hegemony is understood as a process of producing new subjectivities. Hall’s insistence on the idea of popular morality as the field in which class is experienced certainly sounds empiricist. It also indicates a continuing investment in the concept of experience, a concept that was then being rapidly effaced under the weight of theoretically sophisticated accounts of the interpellation of subjects through discourse.

Hall’s argument is that the recurring mistake of left-wing parties, politicians, and academics is to presume that hegemonic strategies are “ideological” in the double sense of being about the false beliefs inculcated in subject populations. In fundamental respects, Hall’s account of the cultural politics of authoritarian populism in the United Kingdom is premised on the proposition that hegemonic strategies are not, in fact, ideological at all. He insists that the effectiveness of New Right discourses of crime and delinquency and moral decline in the 1970s lay in the fact that these themes “touch the direct experience, the anxieties and uncertainties of ordinary people” and that they are therefore best understood as articulating “the real material sources of popular discontent.” Hall’s originality was to argue that winning consent is a matter of harnessing popular discontents. Hall proposes that the consent won through organized efforts at constructing hegemony cannot be considered either a mere sham or a wholly contingent discursive construct: “Thatcherism’s ‘populism’ signals its unexpected ability to harness to its project certain popular discontents, to cut across and between the different divisions in society and to connect with certain aspects of popular experience.” Hall argues that Thatcherism, understood as an emergent hegemonic project, articulated shared experiences that were felt and sensed in the everyday lives of large numbers of people. The insistence on the role of experience is an index of the degree to which Hall’s own account of Thatcherism depends on his taking democracy seriously as the political form through which authoritarian populism emerged. In Hall’s account, the rise of Thatcherism emphatically established that ideology was not a determinant factor in the success of right-wing politics in Britain in the 1980s: “If nobody was prospering under Thatcherism,
ideology alone could not parachute such an ‘illusion’ into the heads of the majority. However, if some people are doing well—as they are, especially, in personal terms, in the ‘South’—and the ideological climate is right, and the alternative ways of measuring how ‘well’ you are doing are effectively silenced or stigmatized, then the small number who define themselves as ‘doing well’ will be swelled by a much larger number who identify with this way of ‘getting on.’”

In Hall’s account, consent is actively sought and perhaps even won insofar as hegemonic projects succeed in articulating public narratives that express the felt experiences and popular discontents of segments of a population. It should also be said that consent, for Hall, is not equivalent to consensus.

Hall’s account of Thatcherism is, it is worth remembering, an account of the cultural dynamics of electoral competition in liberal democracies. But crucially, the cultural aspects of his account do not depend on a totalizing account of the production of subjectivity. Hall presents culture as the medium in which everyday familiarities with institutions, labor markets, and political processes give rise to popular sentiments of expectation and discontent. Rather than assuming that Hall’s account of hegemony belongs naturally to a tradition of cultural theories of subjectification, we can therefore more usefully place it alongside contemporaneous theorizations of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project that combined the politics of power and the politics of support. In terms of this analytical distinction, Hall’s account of Thatcherism established the grounds for the analysis of a new politics of support in postimperial Britain from the 1960s. This was a politics shaped by the disruptions of the permissive society, inequities of welfare, the end of deference, the democratization of everyday life, and experiences of living in a multicultural society—all giving rise to what Ralph Miliband dubbed “a state of de-subordination,” a process that had diffuse sources and unpredictable political consequences.

To make clear the significance for my own argument of restoring to view Hall’s concern with the experiential conditions of action, it is useful to acknowledge that debates about Thatcherism in the 1980s remain a key source of contemporary academic conceptualizations of neoliberalism and neoliberalization. Debates about these concepts are, however, overwhelmingly concerned with the politics of power, focusing primarily on control of the organs of state and policy making. They have much thinner accounts of the politics of support. When this matter is addressed, the default mode of argument is to fall back on functionalist ideas about elite-led politics, in which policy is ascribed remarkable determinant power as a mode of “governmentality.” As a result, the politics of support is conceptualized instrumentally, as an automatic effect of the production of new types of “neoliberal subjects.” The prevalence of this style of theoretical narrative is itself an indication of the degree to which Hall’s account of the cultural politics of support has been marginalized by the rise of theories of signification, discourse, and governmentality that can find no space for the account of popular experiences that
Hall developed. Hall’s own later reflections on neoliberalism are certainly marked by a rather pessimistic sense of the all-encompassing presence of neoliberal ideas and dispositions in early twentieth-century Britain. But here, too, the analytical emphasis is on the ways in which ideological concepts find a foothold in popular consciousness only because they articulate with longstanding features of both common sense and good sense, the political significance of which always remains open for rearticulation.27

Hall’s most singular contribution to theories of radical democracy is therefore to have taken seriously the problem of how consent works and to have done so without reducing consent to a refraction of coercion mediated through the dynamics of subjectification.28 Hall’s account of the cultural politics of hegemony revolves around an acknowledgement of the abiding importance of electoral politics. I have emphasized this aspect of his work to underscore the degree to which it contains an action-theoretic account of political life. The point of affirming politically that hegemony is something that has to be constructed and constantly sustained—that it has to be “won,” not just “reproduced”—carries weight only if it acknowledges that the concept of hegemony rests on the assumption that there is scope for creative agency among situated actors. Once we recognize this aspect of Hall’s account of hegemony, we can reconsider the significance of a second translation of Gramsci’s ideas into a theory of democratic politics. I want to suggest that the avenues of theoretical curiosity laid down by the account of radical democracy developed in the mid-1980s by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe helped to close off the more open-ended inquiries suggested by Hall’s style of conjunctural analysis.

The Vicissitudes of Hegemony

Hall’s account of Thatcherism as a form of “authoritarian populism” draws explicitly on the conceptualization of populism originally developed in the 1970s by Ernesto Laclau. Laclau’s account of populism is guided by the challenge of defining the “specificity of the political” as it is understood in Althusserian variants of Marxist and post-Marxist theory. This task was premised on the idea that it was necessary to move beyond “the empirical plane.”29 In contrast to the concern of Wolin, Arendt, Pitkin, and others to define the political against the utilitarianism of political science, in the Althusserian milieu the primary concern is to carve out a space of at the very least “relative autonomy” from economic determination for “political practice.”30

According to Laclau, populism is the process of articulating class with non-class social relations such as nationalism and ethnicity. Populism is, in this account, not just a political form that makes reference to “the people,” but a kind of collective interpellation that sets the people or the popular against a dominant bloc.31 While
Laclau’s original account of populism is directed at opening up Marxist political analysis to non-class relations, his analysis of the politics of populism depends on an important theoretical sleight of hand. On the one hand, “class” continues to have a precise conceptual definition at a high level of abstraction, developed in relation to Marxist concepts of the relations of production and the technical division of labor. On the other, “the people” is ambiguous because Laclau claims that the concept lacks this type of precise referent. He then maps the definitional ambiguity ascribed to non-class social cleavages onto the work that populism does in the world, as a means of drawing together different interests. The strategic work that populist discourse is meant to be able to do in sustaining hegemony is, then, derived from a theoretical analysis in which “the people” cannot achieve the same level of abstract conceptual clarity as “class.”

It is Laclau’s model of populism that Hall developed in his account of Thatcherism as a form of right-wing populism offset against a social democratic status quo. However, Laclau’s own analysis has little concern with the issues of consent so central to Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism. It is instead embedded in the conceptual vocabulary of interpellation. In Althusser’s original account, ideological interpellation is the mode in which individuals are provided with identities and speaking positions that secure “obviousnesses as obviousnesses.” The concept of interpellation holds that there are various mechanisms through which subjects are produced as if they are autonomous individuals.

Debates in the 1970s about the significance of antiessentialist Marxism formed the backdrop of Laclau and Mouffe’s elaboration of a theory of radical democracy in the 1980s, one part of flourishing and often contentious intellectual debates about the “New Times” ushered in by the ascendance of New Right policies and politics, the end of the Cold War, and the onset of globalization. Among the key legacies of these debates was a deep suspicion of the view of politics as a process undertaken by actors in pursuit of interests that are derived directly from objective class positions. The idea of “relative autonomy” was steadily supplanted by attempts to account for the complete autonomy of politics from external determinations. Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is in large part a genealogy of the concept of hegemony in Marxist political thought, and the concept of democracy developed in the book is highly dependent on the recurring dilemmas derived from that tradition. The break with that tradition that Laclau and Mouffe make is their rejection of the idea that political relations are relations of representation, the assumption that underwrites Leninist notions of substitutionism and the vanguard party. Laclau and Mouffe replace the logic of representation with the logic of articulation, in which relations between agents are a result of political construction and struggle among dissimilar elements rather than an expression of underlying commonality.

The starting point for the argument presented in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is a narrative of the multiplication of the sites of political struggle. According to
Laclau and Mouffe, the “extension of social conflictuality to a wide range of areas” requires the development of a politics of radical democracy, one that abandons the privileging of the revolutionary class subject. In making this argument, they make use of the concept of antagonism, which is central to the Marxist traditions’ analysis of class struggle, but they detach it fully from any residual economism. Antagonism is understood as the generative ontological source of politics, where politics is the explicit formulation of social relations as relations of subordination. In this understanding, antagonism can be produced by commodification of social needs, by intervention of state bureaucracies, or by cultural leveling or destruction, and not necessarily and always with reference to positions in the production system.

At first, then, the concept of antagonism in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy appears as part of what seems like an empirical claim about multiple sources of conflict and the need to theorize the conditions for alliance formation. But quickly the concept acquires an ontological status as the very limit of the social. Antagonism is used to name a particular kind of relation, not one of contradiction in which the terms of the relation are fully themselves but a relation whose terms are inherently incomplete. It is a usage based on an analogy from Lacanian psychoanalysis, in which the presence of the Other “prevents me from being totally myself.” According to Laclau and Mouffe, “antagonism is the failure of difference.” They mean by this that it is a form of relation that undoes all stable ways of relating selves and others. Antagonism therefore marks “the limit of all objectivity,” in the sense that it is the point at which the possibility of the negation of objective relations is exposed.

We can see that antagonism is the name for whatever threatens the integrity of the self and the social. It appears as a kind of quasi-transcendental condition of (im)possibility of the social. It is a figure for the very groundlessness of modernity itself, it turns out, insofar as antagonism “escapes the possibility of being apprehended in language,” because apparently “language only exists as an attempt to fix that which antagonism subverts.” The fundamental point of this strongly ontological conceptualization of antagonism is to disallow any and all appeal to experience or social facts in explaining political conflict.

Laclau and Mouffe’s argument in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy retains a widely held culturalist emphasis on thinking of social formations ideologically, that is, as tied together through the constitution of subjectivities at the level of meaning. The ontological account of antagonism is connected to a distinction between two logics of relationality that form the crux of Laclau and Mouffe’s democratic theory. They describe two modes of structuring political space, one based on a principle of equivalence and the other on the principle of difference. The first simplifies political space by dividing it into two antagonistic camps; this involves developing chains of equivalence across groups and antagonisms. On the other hand, what they call a democratic subject position is based on the logic of differ-
ence, where the social is not divided in two but is made more complex. Whereas the former implies a politics of rupture, in the form of “popular struggles,” the logic of difference implies a politics of adjustment. Democratic struggles, Laclau and Mouffe argue, do not divide political space into two; they involve instead a lessening of “the charge of negativity” associated with antagonism.42

Having deduced these different modes of political articulation from an ontology of antagonism, Laclau and Mouffe then mapped this distinction onto a geopolitical divide between “advanced industrial societies” and “the periphery of the capitalist world.” In the latter, their argument goes, the starkness of domination and exploitation endow popular struggles with a clearly defined enemy. They argue that popular struggles “only occur in the case of relations of extreme exteriority between the dominant groups and the rest of the community.”43 In the West, they proposed, the proliferation of points of antagonism is played out in the multiplication of democratic struggles without coalescing around “the people” through relations of equivalence, set off against a clearly defined antagonist. The multiplication of democratic positions has therefore diluted the automatic unity of political opposition around a popular pole. In short, the very historical success of democratic struggles in the West has reduced the space for the emergence of popular struggles. The multiplication of points of antagonism is in this way presented as a function of a “modernity” that remains located squarely in the “mature” capitalist world.

Laclau and Mouffe therefore reject the idea that antagonisms automatically generate popular struggles and suggest instead that such struggles might in fact be a relatively rare occurrence. They retain as a theoretical possibility the development of an “expansive hegemony” through chains of equivalence, that is, for popular struggles to develop from democratic struggles. But they suggest that the conditions for this transformation have become historically much more difficult. In fact, they view the political consequences of populist modes of struggle with great suspicion in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, precisely because they imply the negation by the ascendant grouping of the other party to a dispute. This ambivalence is further developed in Laclau’s later work, in which he presents populism as the consummate form of politics. All political movements will contain a populist element, because they will interpellate “the people” against an adversary or enemy. Populism, in this account, fills and reconciles the “empty space” Lefort identifies as constitutive of political life itself. And for Laclau, herein lays the potential for populism to devolve into the negation of politics.44

We can see, then, that there are two registers at work in Laclau and Mouffe’s ontology of the social in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, from which they deduce an account of radical democratic politics. First is a general account of the social as a system of differences with no fixed meaning, and therefore always open to the possibility of struggle. Societies are, on their view, constituted by the repression
of the impossibility of objectivity. In the general account of the social, hegemony is understood as a process of suturing, borrowing again from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The analogy underwrites the claim that the social is structured around a lack: "Hegemonic practices are suturing insofar as their field of operation is determined by the openness of the social, by the ultimately unfixed character of every signifier. This original lack is precisely what the hegemonic practices try to fill in."45 Hegemony is here the name for a necessary impulse toward closure that is finally impossible.

The second register is a historical one, which reinforces the ontology of closure and suturing with a narrative that provides the democratic content for the claim that hegemony is the mode of instituting the social. Appealing to Lefort's antitotalitarian narrative of modernity in the West, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the "democratic revolution" enables relations of subordination that constitute the role of serf, slave, or worker to be transformed into relations of oppression, that is, transformed into sites of antagonism. The discursive registers for this transformation are provided by the historical inauguration of democracy after the French Revolution in 1789: "Our thesis is that it is only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination that the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality."46 The claim here is not just that democracy provides a discursive register of equality and liberty in which reflexive relations of subordination can be translated into relations of oppression around which people can be mobilized. It extends to the much stronger proposition that the constitutive movement of nonclosure and antagonism is now the imaginary horizon that institutes society itself. Radical democracy is, in this account, the further radicalization of the West's democratic revolution through the deepening and extension of the egalitarian imagination.

Identifying the two registers at work in Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy—one ontological, one historical—allows us to see how the family of concepts they develop tends to have both a descriptive and normative aspect. For example, democracy is the political form in which the ontological contingency of the foundations of the social is made explicit. Radical democracy is a politics that self-consciously mobilizes this feature of democracy for further egalitarian ends. Democracy as hegemony necessarily attempts to secure "a definitive suture," but in so doing denies "the radically open character of the social which is instituted by democracy."47 In this formulation, hegemony becomes the name for an object of analysis understood as a process of articulations and contingent suturings. But it is also presented as a model of strategic organization and mobilization. Laclau and Mouffe are recommending that politics should be pursued in this hegemonic spirit. Likewise, notions of articulation, of antagonism as the limit of the social, and of hegemony as the necessary suturing of foundational contingency are all
presented as ontological generalities. But they also serve as the basis for arguments about forms of political struggle in which reflexivity toward these conditions is presented as the normatively favored option.48

Laclau and Mouffe’s account of radical democracy stands as the perfect example of the ontologization of the political. It finds in a theoretical account of the wholly contingent foundations of the social the much-sought-after principle of negativity that proves that transformative political action is still possible, even after the idea of a universal bearer of revolutionary energy has been abandoned. But the account of hegemony they develop is actually shorn of any consideration of the problem of consent that concerned Hall in his account of hegemony. Relationships between force and consent are instead transubstantiated into the semiotic play of differential deferral and closure. The paradoxical model of democracy that Barthes found to be implicit in Saussure’s theory of the sign therefore finds its purest realization in the theory of radical democracy as hegemony, a theory that combines the affirmation of absolute contingency with the evacuation of any scope for motivated, rational action.

The Closures of Radical Democracy

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Laclau and Mouffe lay the basis for an influential conceptualization of political life as a set of contingent relations held together by the force of “discourse.” Their achievement was therefore to generate an empirical methodology of discourse analysis, one that focuses on the deployment of “empty signifiers” in political practices.49 Empty signifiers are those terms that tie specific struggles and demands into chains of equivalence.50 In this understanding, the political is modeled on mythological systems involving a succession of divine names: “Like mystical fullness, political fullness needs to be named in terms deprived, as much as possible, of any positive content.”51 Understood as empty signifiers, concepts such as freedom, the people, order, or democracy function as contingent universals around which disparate struggles are temporarily aligned.

In an important sense, this version of radical democracy does not actually rely on a theory of discourse at all, at least not if we think of discourse as a doing word. It actually provides a theory of politics as a practice of naming. Laclau and Mouffe present politics as so many acts of nomination that have their own interpellative force. They assume that individual and collective identities are constructed around names.52 It is an account of “discourse” derived from a specific interpretation of Lacan’s suggestion that the subject is formed by a “lack”—not of any specific thing or object that a subject might want to have but a lack of being itself, a kind groundlessness that generates a restlessly displaced desire that can never be fully satisfied. For Lacan, this is the dynamic played out in the dialogic encounter between analyst and analysand.53 The poststructuralist account of rad-
ical democracy takes this theme and transposes it into a generic model in which subject formation works through the temporary fixing of meaning by identification with abstract nouns. In turn, this image is taken to be a good analogy for the formation of group identities and of whole social fields. There is no space left in this interpretation of “discourse” for the type of relational analysis of the formation of hegemony along the lines developed by Hall, with its apparently naive notion of experience. For Hall, experience is discursive in the sense that it is necessarily shared with others. Instead, in Laclau and Mouffe’s work one finds an explicit disavowal of the validity of the concept of experience, on the rather shaky grounds that “all experience depends on precise discursive conditions of possibility.”

In this elevation of psychoanalytic and linguistic concepts, the idea of articulation itself undergoes a transformation, away from the sense in which Hall used it to refer to the shared forms of expression available to situated actors and toward a sense of joining disparate elements together and fixing them in place.

The image of hegemony as a process of suturing together fluid relations by fixing meaning around proper names depends on a spatial imagination that opposes fixity and closure to fluidity and openness. This imagination is a basic feature of a much broader field of poststructuralist theory. In elaborating on the political implications of radical democracy, Laclau once explicitly contrasted space—understood as a mode of fixing, freezing, and closure—to time—understood in terms of fluidity, movement, and dislocation. In response, Doreen Massey argued that Laclau’s contrast relied not so much on the difference between space and time but on the difference between two notions of time: time as genuine dynamism and time as mere repetition (which is what Laclau presents as space). Massey’s own project of elaborating a notion of “spatial politics” relies on positing an alternative ontology. Her ontology seeks to free the concept of space from its theoretical subordination to the chain “stasis/representation/closure,” in favor of thinking of space in relation to “openness/unrepresentability/external multiplicity.” Massey’s alternative account therefore holds fast to an ontological style of argument even as it changes the terms of evaluation of key concepts. Space is no longer understood simply as mere extension or as a field. It is understood conjuncturally, as the sphere of meeting up, of coexistence, of the unexpected and unpredictable. In this way of thinking, space takes on a privileged status as the very site of politics, “as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity.” The same slippage between ontology and normativity evident in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy therefore also appears in Massey’s theory of spatial politics. An argument that starts out by giving an ontological account of the qualities of relational space turns out also to provide the model of a normatively favored style of relating to and across difference.

The shared style of argument by ontology in poststructuralist accounts of radical democracy belongs to a broader intellectual culture that equates genuine political action with the formal possibility of reconstituting the conditions of meaning.
itself. It is one part of a structure of theoretical feeling that revolves around the idea that authentic political life is expressed in the formation and disruption of orders and frames and that the task of critical analysis is to reveal the contingency of foundations and the uncertainty of given meanings. The master metaphor of this style of political thought is that of blindness and insight: whether inflected by a vocabulary of constitutive outsides, constitutive lacks, suturings, or partitions of the sensible, the constant theme is the idea that orderly systems are secured through the expulsion or marginalization of a term that in turn might be used to reorder them in new ways.

The spatialized interpretation of the concept of the political finds its clearest expression in the influential account of democracy developed by Jacques Rancière. Rancière hardens the division between politics in its proper sense and the commonsense idea of politics as a mode of government, a regime, or a way of life—"the arena of "police,"" in Rancière's terms. Rancière's political thought has a different intellectual trajectory than those discussed already, tracing a route out of Althusserian Marxism not via the concept of hegemony but through a reconstruction of the aesthetic conditions of subjectivity. Rancière's vision of democracy is therefore quite distinct from that of Lefort, which is carried over by Laclau and Mouffe, in which democracy is a modern innovation haunted by the possibility of totalitarianism. Democracy, for Rancière, is instead an ancient practice that occasionally reappears through temporary ruptures of instituted "police" orders. Rancière is the source of a view of space as the very medium for the constitution of police orders, and in turn the scene for acts of disruption through which proper politics finds expression.

Rancière's version of the splitting of politics into two dimensions provides a straightforward expression of the political imagination that contrasts closed systems and intrusive interruptions. It an understanding of politics that remains faithful to a revolutionary imaginary, only one now shorn of its totalizing ambition but still holding fast to the idea of societies as functionally integrated, enclosed totalities. What is genuinely distinctive about Rancière's account of radical democracy is that the process of ordering is understood not by reference to an image of semiotic closure or symbolic framing but rather in terms of what he calls the "partition of the sensible." In this understanding, democratic politics is the transformation of "the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies,' that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying." The idea that politics is a process of challenging and transforming the processes that assign people to positions in a social order has a long pedigree in radical cultural thought. Rancière's version of this idea presents proper politics as nothing short of an aesthetic experience in which subjectivity itself is both undone and given new foundations.
In the next section I elucidate key aspects of Rancière’s political thought. His account of democratic politics crystallizes defining features of what I have called the ontological interpretation of the political while containing traces of an alternative interpretation that I will further discuss in part 3. While it shares certain characteristics with other ontological interpretations of the political, Rancière’s work is marked by a much more explicit focus on the ways in which politics is shaped by felt experiences of injustice. This emphasis on the motivations of political action is, however, subsumed beneath a vocabulary of subjectification and disidentification, so that authentic politics is finally reduced to the punctual eruption of insurgent energy. To fully develop the trace of an account of political action evident in this strand of thought, we would need to fundamentally adjust our picture of the times and spaces in which action emerges.

The Political Sublime

Rancière’s political thought has a longstanding concern with spatial figures of boundaries, divisions, and partitions. He mobilizes these spatial figures to support an argument about how politics as it is ordinarily understood and practiced should really be understood as “the art of suppressing the political.” The spatialization of the political in Rancière’s work is also related to a broader argument about how the disruptive principle of equality is contained by imperatives to reproduce order. The prominence of equality in Rancière’s political thought is connected to the central importance accorded to the idea that political action is preeminently about making demands. For him, crucially, politics is seen as “a function of the fact that a wrong exists, an injustice that needs to be addressed.”

Rancière’s effort to identify the specificity of the political proceeds by contrasting a proper understanding of politics to more standard definitions: “To think through this specificity will force us to distinguish it from what normally goes by the name of politics and for which I propose the term policing.” Democracy, for Rancière, refers to the instituting force of politics itself. Politics starts, in this account, when those who are previously uncounted demand to be accorded equal status. Rancière therefore defines democracy as an inherently “dissensual” practice, referring to a type of action that disrupts a settled order. It is a definition that accords explanatory and normative primacy to the “part of those who have no part.” Proper politics involves the rupture inaugurated when those who do not count in existing distributions of order and meaning make a scene. Politics, in this view, involves configuring spaces for the appearance of subjects as “the people,” or “workers,” or “citizens.”

In Rancière’s account of democracy as a rare and fleeting event, he posits a paradoxical relationship between democracy as demos and as kratein, referring to a dimension of both ungovernability and government.
derivation of the word “democracy,” demos, for Rancière, is the name given to those with no title to govern. So it is that politics is not about the art of governing at all. It refers properly to the interruption of “the logic by which those who have title to govern dominate—a title confirmed only by the fact that they do dominate.” In this understanding, those who have no proper title for governing are the privileged practitioners of democracy. Democracy is politics, properly speaking. It is the reconfiguration of existing distributions of parts, of public and private, universal and particular; it is not to be mistaken for governing or rule.

For Rancière, then, politics is not to be construed as the exercise of power or even for a concern with common affairs. These would both require a preexisting designation of “the common.” His account of democracy as an aberrant form of instituting politics turns on a stark categorical distinction between two ways of symbolizing the common, or “two types of partition of the perceptible,” which he calls police and politics. The idea of the partition of the perceptible, or of the sensible, refers to “the cutting up [decoupage] of the perceptual world that anticipates, through its sensible evidence, the distribution of shares and social parties.” In a strong sense, Rancière presents political communities as aesthetic communities, insofar as they depend on settled distributions of what can be known, what is visible, what can be articulated as meaningful. The notion of the partition of the sensible plays on the dual aspects of partage and avoir-part, of division and separation as well as taking part—of partaking and participation. The partition of the sensible refers to “a cutting up of the world”: “This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation.” The notion of the partition of the sensible is, then, another example of a more general structure we have already discussed: the idea of a background order of given meanings and objects, in this case a division of the sensory field itself, that constitutes routine actions. Rancière provides a distinctive version of a widely held spatial interpretation in which the possibility of action is dependent on exclusion and separation, a condition that in turn establishes the possibility of disrupting instituted patterns of action.

Rancière presents the two ways of symbolizing the common, police and politics, as “two logics of human being-together.” The logic of police and the logic of equality enacted through politics are two ways of counting the parts of the community: police counts “actual groups defined by differences in birth, by different functions, locations, and interests that constitute the social body.” In contrast to this empirical logic, politics counts the supplement “a part of the no-part.” Police refers to a settled partition of the seeable and the sayable, and politics is the disruption of any such settlement. Rancière suggests that the distinction between police or policing and politics is not meant to be a value judgment. This declaration is somewhat belied by the claims he makes about the proper meaning of key concepts and the evaluations he offers of their eclipse.

It is worth acknowledging that Rancière elaborates the distinction between
police and politics as part of an attempt to define the proper vocation of political philosophy.\textsuperscript{75} Rancière’s thought shares with other accounts of the double inscription of the political a deep suspicion of both philosophy and social science. In his account, both fields seek to monopolize legitimate speech by projecting figures of the poor as silent or inarticulate.\textsuperscript{76} In particular, social science, which for Rancière is exemplified by Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology, is complicit with the order of police by seeking to know and represent those who cannot apparently fully know themselves. Rancière’s own critical account of the “philosophy of the poor” amounts to an attempt to circumscribe for himself a position in which he will claim neither to inhabit the space of the poor in order to speak in their name nor to disavow them as illegitimate subjects.\textsuperscript{77} By including social science within his normative account of the difference between police and egalitarian orders, on the side of police, Rancière effectively immunizes his own account from any form of social contextualization or empirical questioning. It is a style of political theory that effectively seeks to make itself irrefutable.\textsuperscript{78}

Despite, or perhaps because of, his attempt to circumscribe a place outside of social inquiry, Rancière’s distinction between the two logics of police and politics has become central to a range of discussions about the contemporary postpolitical condition, as well as to applications of concepts such as governmentality and biopolitics. The term “police” derives from the work of Michel Foucault and others, where it refers to a generalized mode of ordering bodies in different regulatory fields.\textsuperscript{79} In Rancière’s usage, police becomes a synonym for processes that constitute social orders by making clear-cut demarcations, placing bodies in fixed positions to be counted. To provide an account of police is therefore to reveal the modes through which things appear in the world as perceptible, as visible or audible. Politics, by contrast, is a term reserved for “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no part.”\textsuperscript{80} The police order is not necessarily without conflict and dispute, it should be said, but for Rancière the harms that drive politics as such are not derived from the internal distribution of a police order. They derive, rather, from the process of exclusion or marginalization through which any police order is constituted in the first place.

Rancière therefore provides an account of two opposed, heterogeneous orders that are also bound together and always running up against each other. According to this rather formal definition, what makes something political is that “it must give rise to a meeting of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance.”\textsuperscript{81} The same type of action—a strike, an election, or a protest—may or may not be political in the precise sense meant by Rancière, depending on the situation in which it occurs. To count as political, such actions must take the form of processing a “wrong” in the name of equality on behalf of those who have no share in
Rationalities of the Political

a settled order. The claims that are articulated within an established distribution of parts or shares, and any efforts to regulate the conflicts that such claims express, are just functional to the reproduction of the order of police. Nothing significant, nothing properly political, arises from them: “Political struggle is not a conflict between well defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways.”

From within this theoretical paradigm, the definition of properly political politics has a kind of self-confirming, analytical truth value. Given Rancière’s delineation of the terms “politics” and “democracy,” it follows that conflicts based on empirically observable differences or interests are by definition not properly political. Ordinary conflicts are really expressions of order, insofar as they are disputes between already demarcated interest groups over already agreed-upon issues. The understanding of police order as having no politics proper to it follows from the idea that police is a field of consensus. By aligning police with consensus, which is defined simply as identifying with conventional understandings of social division and interests, Rancière is able to define democracy as quite separate and distinct from “the consensus system.” Consensus is “the reduction of politics to the police.” It is the annulment of “dissensus,” understood as the making visible of the partitioning of the sensible.

Rancière’s usage of the idea of “consensus” does not therefore refer to a process of agreement. In fact, it is not a process of any sort at all. It is the name given to durable formations of the common that expel fundamental conflicts. Rancière uses “consensus” to refer to the obviousness of the givens of experience. The idea of the partition of the sensible as an order of consensus therefore reiterates a more longstanding and more broadly held habit of claiming an inherently political significance for any account of how routine practices depend on background conditions. For all its distance from more resolutely Heideggerian versions of this habit discussed in chapter 3, Rancière’s version is not significantly different from them. Like them, it finds in an account of the general conditions of intelligibility of the social field the very source of domination and injustice, and in turn the possibility of emancipatory transformation.

On Rancière’s understanding of the instituted order of police as an order of consensus, “dissensus” is the name of politics as the supplementary act of introducing surplus objects and subjects into the established field. Dissensus is something altogether more fundamental than conflicts of interest or opinion, since it “is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself.” One question that arises here is why this possibility of keeping a distance from what is familiar is not allowed to be ordinary. In Rancière’s work, this possibility is not only politicized but is also accorded a special status as rare and extraordinary. And this reservation is related to the idea that proper politics is mediated through processes of subjectification. So for Rancière, democracy “is the name of what comes and
interrupts the smooth working of this order through a singular mechanism of subjectification.”

In presenting democracy as a mode of subjectification, Rancière has in mind a specific understanding of this process. Subjectification is “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.” In this understanding of subjectification, becoming a subject is always also “a disidentification.” And this is especially so in the case of political subjectification. This involves “removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted.”

Rancière’s emphasis on politics as subjectification remains true to a vision in which the social order is functionally integrated through processes of subject formation that work through mechanisms of identification, counteridentification, and disidentification with naturalized orders of obviousness. Rancière’s distinctive inflection of the theme of subjectification is to use the vocabulary of Kantian aesthetics rather than that of semiotics or discourse theory, allowing an emphasis on sensory perception as the constitutive medium of subjectivity. But while the content and the mediums of what Althusser calls “interpellation” are certainly more differentiated and refined in Rancière’s thought, the overwhelming emphasis in his distinction between police and politics remains centered on modes of subjectification as the means that secure “obviousnesses as obviousnesses.”

The emphasis placed on processes of subjectification and disidentification reveals how Rancière’s account of democracy stands in a long line of thinking about politics as primarily a cultural practice. It helps to account for the attraction of Rancière’s thought in the English-speaking academy in a period when previously dominant models of semiotic or discursive subject formation have been challenged by an emphasis on embodiment, affect, and the senses. Rancière’s achievement is to represent democracy as primarily a cultural phenomenon, one that involves the disidentification of subjects, mediated by select aesthetic forms. For Rancière, the interruption that politics forces on the police order is aesthetic to its core, precisely because it is about the configuration of the sayable and seeable. Politics is the interruption of a prior distribution of what can be said by the articulation of a wrong, but it is also a performance of new distribution of what can be seen and said. In this second sense, as the maintenance of dissensus, politics is presented as an aesthetic mode that “inscribes one perceptual world within another.”

Rancière therefore presents a distinctive account of the aesthetic constitution of politics, one that departs from strands of thought that see the aestheticization of politics as a form of depoliticization or worse. His account of aesthetics is not about beauty, art, nor even sensibility. It is about the cultivation of a subjective disposition equal to the apprehension of the sublime. Politics is itself sublime: it
has no model and is not reducible to calculative rationality, and it takes the form of the performance of an experience that overwhelms settled forms of selfhood.93 Despite its investment in a kind of populist version of cultural refinement as its model of political action, Rancière’s political theory does contain a valuable kernel in its insistence that democratic politics is motivated by a felt sense of injustice. At the center of his understanding of politics are experiences of harm, injury, and pain. Political subjects, in Rancière’s account, are subjects of a wrong that has been apprehended and transformed though a process of subjectification, as described above.94 And in this account, politics involves making a scene, making one’s voice heard, in places and in arenas previously closed off or inaccessible: “Political argumentation must polemically construct the scene of its validity,”95 Rancière therefore provides us with a model of politics as animated by a distinctive sense of wrong, the content of which is variable. But “wrong” in this account is not really about questions of victimhood or suffering. It remains a formal category, a name for a mode of subjectification in which demands for equality are articulated. Rancière reduces various wrongs to one single form, so that they are all made to always conform to the spatialized logic whereby the part that has no part asserts its presence in the name of equality. In claiming that “the feeling of injustice” motivates politics, Rancière certainly does not mean to suggest that politics is a matter simply of appropriating rights that have been previously denied. Politics is not a matter of rights to inclusion at all. To count as politics, action must involve a reconfiguration of the spaces in which the identities of actors are established, that is, it must also take the form of an invention of a new disputatious subject.96 Rancière’s version of the conceptual splitting of politics into two parts, one more fundamental than the other, differs in important ways from those versions of this maneuver already discussed in chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter. However, it does share some fundamental conceptual characteristics with those other versions. Like others, Rancière’s vision focuses on the constitution of order through processes of extrusion and exclusion. And proper politics is in turn presented as the force of disruption that unsettles an instituted order by folding back into that order the disavowed conditions of its own formation. There is, then, a double spatialization at work in Rancière’s thought. First, the social order is formed through a process of ordering, a process that takes the form of a kind of abjected exclusion. Order is thus both established and threatened by an excluded part. And second, Rancière accords privileged status to public scenes of claims-making as the highest form of political action by which instituted orders are disputed and disrupted.97 What is most significant about the affirmation of the spatiality of politics in Rancière’s work is that it fixes in place a specific temporalization of politics both as rare and as an event of rupture. Here we find the perfect case of political time imagined as punctuated equilibrium, in the way described in chapter 1: given patterns of routine are temporarily suspended by a force of disruption, a force that will then dissolve as new routines are established. This is an imagination of
space and time that severely constrains any project that seeks to do justice to the felt sense of injustice that, with Rancière, we might want to agree animates claims for democratization. To clarify this difference between ways of interpreting the double inscription of the political, we can usefully contrast Rancière's vision with another version of post-Marxist democratic theory, that developed by Etienne Balibar.98

Both writers emphasize the centrality to politics of the demand for rights. Like Rancière's, Balibar's vision is worked out against the backdrop of Marxism's rather difficult historical relationship to democratic theory and practice. In contrast to Rancière, Balibar's account of the dynamics of democratic citizenship is forthright in its acknowledgment of the necessity of power relations to the realization of emancipatory goals. There is in Marxism, Balibar argues, a deep ambivalence between a messianic, eschatological view that hopes for the transcendence of existing forms of politics and a view in which politics is thought of in terms of struggles for inclusion in existing structures of power. The distinction between these two views helps us to differentiate a perspective that holds fast to Marx's dictum that "between two equal rights force decides" from a view of "conflictual democracy," a view that is premised on the idea that "only power checks power."99 It is the latter emphasis that Balibar's own work develops.

In Rancière's "anarchic" vision of democracy, properly political events have no determinative content but consist only of the rare events when those not represented in current orders make their presence felt. In this view, the value of rights inheres only in the act of laying claim to rights not currently held. Rights, in this view, can never really be exercised or possessed.100 Rancière's view therefore does not allow that democratic rights, once established, need to be implemented, exercised, and possibly defended too. This account always presents institutionalization as a diminution of properly political or democratic energies, which are only reserved for more or less rare moments of dissensual claim making. Balibar, by contrast, argues that citizenship is a process by which demands both for new rights and for the expansion of existing rights extend the bounds of what he refers to as "equaliberty." He argues that the complex relations between equality and freedom are played out in a "dialectic of insurrection and constitution." This sounds rather a lot like Rancière's vision, but Balibar's placement of the two terms of this dialectic is significantly different: "There will be a permanent tension between the conditions that historically determine the construction of institutions that conform to the proposition of equaliberty and the excessive, hyperbolic universality of the statement." Here Balibar locates the possibilities of democratization within existing practices of democratic citizenship and in the forms of agency that are generated by these frames. In his view, the defining problem of politics is the relation of the citizen to the powers of law and institutions. This relationship is always shaped by practices of resistance, insurrection, and insubordination, or what Balibar refers to "as so many modalities of the critical, negative relation of
the citizen to the law and to power.” In Balibar’s vision, democratic citizenship is inherently conflictual in a more or less ongoing way, and not only in moments of dramatic interruption.

As already suggested, the contrast between Balibar’s vision and Rancière’s lies in a difference between two images of political time. In one view, stable and established orders are occasionally interrupted, are reordered, and then settle down again. In the other, conflict is presumed to be a routine feature of “constituted orders,” and to have various generative dynamics, rather than to arise only at rare moments of constitution or crisis. The contrast is, then, also one between different styles of theorizing. To try to establish a proper order of derivation between different forms of conflict is, as Balibar puts it, to fall into the trap of transforming political problems “into a representation of the political.” In contrast to other thinkers who valorize political rupture without any concern with specifying the agency of such transformation, and rather than supposing that radical democracy must eschew questions of the exercise of power so that the role of the people is reserved for the strictly eccentric contestation of forces of rule, Balibar challenges us to imagine the institutionalization of democratic citizenship as contestation. If we accept the challenge, it would lead us to look for traces of “the political” in the most ordinary scenes in which democracy is enacted. To help us shift perspective in this direction, we might also want to broaden our horizons beyond the milieu of the global North that has come to provide the exemplary cases of postpolitical despondency.

Governmentality and the Politics of Support

This chapter began by tracking how the concept of hegemony has served as one site for the development of post-Marxist theories of democracy. By elaborating on the different ways in which the concept of hegemony is mobilized in the work of Stuart Hall and in the theory of radical democracy developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I have sought to accentuate the contrast between action-oriented interpretations and more ontologically inclined interpretations of political life. The strongly ontological interpretation of democracy as hegemony provided by Laclau and Mouffe sits comfortably within a culturalist tradition in which political orders are secured by mechanisms of subject formation. The vision of politics as changing the subject finds its clearest statement in Rancière’s political thought. It has little concern with the strategic challenges of mobilization and organization that shape accounts of radical democracy as hegemony, nor with how democracy might require the exercise of power and not just its contestation and disruption.

Rancière’s work is, in these respects, one example of how the concept of hegemony has fared rather poorly since debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Images of political spontaneity inflected, for example, by ideas developed by Antonio Ne-
gri and other inheritors of Italian autonomist thought have certainly helped to
displace such concerns, as has a resurgent interest in anarchist thought. And in
academic fields of cultural analysis, where Gramsci’s work was once so central,
concepts such as biopower, discipline, and governmentality associated with the
work of Foucault have been proposed as a more appropriate theoretical lens for
understanding dynamics of power and resistance. I suggested in chapter 1 that
Foucault might well provide an account of power that is better suited to under-
standing democracy as a specific mode of exercising power, not just resisting it.
I want to develop this thought in the rest of this chapter. To do so, it is necessary
first to recognize that using concepts drawn from Foucault’s work requires one to
negotiate the same tensions found in interpretations of the concept of hegemony.
Interpretations that emphasize Foucault’s notion of power as dependent on the
strategic interactions of free subjects, which is where the democratic potential
of Foucault’s thought really lies, tend to be overshadowed by interpretations that
deploy Foucault’s ideas to support accounts of totalizing modes of subjection.104

The standard interpretation of ideas like governmentality and biopower is
quite consistent with a long-standing tendency to think of technical or adminis-
trative procedures as vehicles of depoliticization. Demonstrating that such pro-
cedures are in fact infused with power relations is the first trick that one learns in
becoming proficient in critical analysis. Pointing out that they are doubly political
because they also effectively cover over their own political status is a second, more
advanced trick. Taken together, these two critical maneuvers are central to the
stark spatialization of order and rupture that ontological interpretations of the
political fix in place. But far from presenting the emergence of government as a
depoliticizing mode of power, in the early 1980s Foucault himself lamented the
intellectual fashion for preferring the political to mere politics, on which such
an analysis often relies: “Nothing seems more dangerous to me than that much
vaunted shift from politics (la politique) to the political (le politique).”105 Foucault
refers here to the style of analysis developed by Lefort and continued by thinkers
such as Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy, which I discussed in chapter 3.106
His caustic reference to those debates in French political thought suggests that
a revision of the strongly ontological interpretation of the double inscription of
the political might be called for. In his own reconstruction of Greek political dis-
courses, Foucault distinguishes between two fields of political problems: problems
of the constitution and problems of the exercise of power (politeia and dunas-
teia). For him, it is among the second set of concerns, revolving around the ways
in which society is actually governed, that one finds “political problems in the
strictest sense.”107 Foucault’s contention that the problems of the “political game”
deserve more attention in their own right suggests that they should not be seen
as merely derivative of either a more fundamental ontological realm or a field of
consensual management.

Foucault’s comments on politics, the political, and problems throw into new
relief how the idea of “police” might be best interpreted. In the original genealogical derivation of this idea, it refers to “all the methods for developing the quality of the population and the strength of the nation.” In this definition, police is not presented as a realm of consensus at all but as generative of new forms of contention and power, ones that in turn require further analysis. As we saw in chapter 1, Foucault’s account of governmental power actually suggests a markedly different way of thinking about the relationship between government and the emergence of political contention. His suggestion that democracy might be intimately related to, rather than opposed to, the dynamics of governing populations at various scales cuts across narratives of depoliticization and the postpolitical condition informed by ontological interpretations of the double inscription of the political. Like Hall with his account of hegemony, and despite the theoretical differences that separate these two thinkers, Foucault invites us to take democracy seriously as a mode of power dependent on the strategic interaction of different actors.

In order to further elaborate on the implications of Foucault’s remarks about the internal relationship between democratic politics and the arts of government, I want to consider Partha Chatterjee’s account of democratic politics and routine forms of bureaucracy, corruption, and graft in contemporary India. Chatterjee provides an account of political life that revolves around a fundamentally different imagination of the relations between democracy, government, and political action than the one that has solidified in ontologies of the political. Rather than being shaped by a concern with depoliticization or the rise of the postpolitical, his account is animated by the question of how to theorize politics in deeply unequal societies “in a period of unprecedented engagement with modern electoral politics,” not least by previously marginalized groups.

Chatterjee’s account of postcolonial democracy is a development of the critique of colonial power in India by the Subaltern Studies Group of historians. Using ideas drawn from both Gramsci and Foucault, this scholarly project of postcolonial theorizing has challenged the marginalization of subaltern struggles under colonialism by nationalist narratives of elite leadership and heroism. The central figure in these accounts of Indian colonial politics is the peasantry, a residual category in classical Marxism. Taken as the privileged figure of subaltern agency, the peasantry serves therefore not simply as the image of resistance by the marginalized or the subordinated but as the figure for exploring the particularistic limits of both nationalist and Marxist narratives of universalization.

In Ranajit Guha’s classic account of subaltern agency, informed by Gramsci’s work, a diverse set of peasant, worker, and petit bourgeois movements were active under British rule, none of which achieved hegemonized leadership. As a consequence, national liberation was only partial because it was elite dominated and did not overcome communalist divisions. This reflects the degree to which the colonial state depended on domination through coercion, so that “vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people” were never effectively incorporated into
colonial hegemony. In arguing that colonial rule represents a situation of “dominance without hegemony,” Guha argues that interactions based on persuasive relationships were outweighed by more obviously coercive modes of power. In Chatterjee’s own contribution to this critical revision of colonial historiography, the account of the “structural dichotomy” between the domain of subaltern politics and elite politics characteristic of colonialism is refined by combining Gramsci and Foucault to develop a concept of “modes of power,” defined primarily by reference to distinctive forms of property relations. Chatterjee argued that more than one mode of power is always operative in any given social formation. In the Indian case, this means that the model of hegemonic leadership posited by Gramsci is severely limited.

Chatterjee’s account of “the politics of the governed” seeks to link this historical analysis to the contemporary dynamics of Indian society. The politics of the governed is a heuristic frame for thinking about democratization in post-Independence India. In a shift of theoretical register, it locates democratization squarely within the field of postcolonial governmentality. In so doing, Chatterjee conceptualizes governmentality not as a field of top-down subjectification but as a field of claims and counterclaims. Chatterjee finds “the condition of possibility for democracy” in the grubby, compromised, often illegal, and sometimes violent activities of demand and response that define the politics of the governed.

In part, Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed is a challenge to the disdain for ordinary politics among intellectuals and elites in India, where an ideal of civil society is often held as the proper norm. For Chatterjee, the invocation of the norm of civil society is complicit with a denial of the structural inequalities that condemn so many to the instrumental politics of political society. Rather than presuming that democratic mobilization necessarily takes the form of rights-based claims on the state articulated by citizens in civil society, Chatterjee argues that the expression of popular demands in what he calls political society is the real source of democratic energy.

The distinction between civil society and political society takes on a very different resonance in Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed, compared to Gramsci’s use of the same distinction. Chatterjee uses the distinction to define a sphere of civility and rights (civil society) and a world of pragmatic bargaining over resources (political society). His account refers to a split between a small and restricted civil society (which he takes to conform to citizenly norms of civility, consent, and contract) and a field in which people are treated not as citizens but as a population, that is, as targets of policies enacted by the state and by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The division is the mark of a hiatus between modernity and democracy that Chatterjee takes to be a feature of the non-Western world. Crucially, he understands political society as “a site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies aimed at population groups.” Chatterjee outlines a dynamic of strategic maneuvering,
centered on issues such as access to land, housing, or basic services, in which the expectations of population groups and the reciprocal obligation of state agencies to "look after populations" are negotiated.117

Most people in India, Chatterjee claims, live outside the fields of formal civil society, but he contends that they are nevertheless objects of all sorts of policy interventions. Chatterjee suggests that the enactment of these interventions should be thought of as thoroughly political. They are structured through claims and demands and are the very scenes where new forms of political action emerge around issues of security, welfare, and livelihood.118 This insistence on the political quality of administration, bureaucracy, and policy is part of Chatterjee's argument that there is no need to think of some of the characteristic qualities of politics in the non-Western world, such as the resilience of populism or of political violence, for example, as deviations from proper democracy at all. They are ordinary features of the formation of democracy in particular contexts.119

According to Chatterjee, the resilience of political society in India is an index of deep-seated inequality and also the way in which inequality is reproduced. In this view, the extension of the state's reach is an effect of a specifically democratic imperative to compensate for the costs of capitalist development. Chatterjee suggests that processes of "accumulation by dispossession" and exploitation, when set in the context of existing or emerging democratic settlements, can generate an expansion of certain sorts of public, redistributive functions of the state, not their diminution. The implication of this argument is that this governmental process needs to be understood as an extension of the political field, not as an index of postpoliticization.120 Chatterjee's crucial conceptual innovation is to think of governmentality not simply as a mode of strategic intervention by state actors but as a medium for political claims-making and for the processing of conflicts. What is therefore most innovative about the idea of the politics of the governed is that it seeks to unwrap "some of the conditions in which the functions of governmentality can create conditions not for a contraction but rather an expansion of democratic participation."121

Chatterjee's strong claim, consistent with the earlier Subaltern Studies analysis to which he contributed, is that the entanglement between state and population is a relatively recent process in India. Popular politics has been reconfigured, he argues, by the extension of the reach of the state through various governmental programs. The extension of government through development polices claims legitimacy on the basis of providing for the well-being of target populations. And strategies for governing populations depend not primarily on domination or subjection but on the attempt to configure a set of interactive relationships.122 As government agencies and NGOs have developed extensive networks, reaching into rural areas in particular, this generates demands by peasants on government officials and elected representatives. In this account, "the steady widening and deepening of the web of governmentality" into rural India has been associated with
the “deepening of democratic demands.” According to Chatterjee, this set of relationships is where “the everyday operations of democratic politics, organization, and leadership come into play.” Seen from one angle as so many instruments for the extension of control, from another angle programs of community building, participation, and empowerment appear as so many practices of bargaining, deal making, and negotiation.

The picture Chatterjee provides is one in which attempts to deliver services in more or less administratively efficient ways generate agitation and further attempts to regulate claims and expectations. The argument can be seen as a variation on Ian Hacking’s notion of “making up people.” Strategies that seek to govern the conduct of others generate unexpected consequences from those targeted: “Populations respond to the regime of governmentality by seeking to constitute themselves as groups that deserve the attention of government.” One implication of Chatterjee’s argument that is important for my general argument is that these interactive relationships are necessarily situated not only in time and space but also around disputes over specific issues, not least around the provision of certain sorts of stuff—water, basic consumer goods and services, access to health care. Chatterjee’s analysis of the dynamics of political power in contemporary India therefore locates the possibilities of democratic politics in the proliferation and extension of agencies distributing education, health, food, electricity, and other materials and services. His favored examples for the politics of the governed include mobilization by residents of illegal urban settlements, landless rural people, day laborers, and refugees, all of whom he understands as actors “who make a claim to a habitation and a livelihood as a matter of right and use their association as the principal collective instrument to pursue the claim.”

The situated focal points of the politics of the governed inform Chatterjee’s suggestion that political society is the realm in which exceptions are constantly made. But rather than thinking of this feature as a sign of the arbitrary imposition of sovereign command, Chatterjee presents it as the condition of political action understood as a field of situated bargaining over claims and counterclaims. While not necessarily conforming to idealized models of law and citizenship, the claims generated by the extension of the reach of the state are emphatically political in nature: “They could only be made on a political terrain, where rules may be bent or stretched, and not on the terrain of established law or administrative procedure. The success of these claims depends entirely on the ability of particular population groups to mobilize support to influence the implementation of governmental policy in their favour. But this success is necessarily temporary and contextual. The strategic balance of political forces could change and rules may no longer be bent as before.” What Chatterjee describes here is a process akin to “the dialectic of control” between states and citizens outlined by theorists of state formation and citizenship in the West. The distinctive inflection he provides to the image of a dialectical interaction between parties bound together over shared—that is,
divisive—concerns lies in his sense that this dialectic does not follow a single trajectory of territorial consolidation and the progressive extension of formal civil, political, and social rights of citizenship. It is instead a much more localized and variable dynamic.

Chatterjee’s analysis of political society marks a significant shift away from the classical paradigm of subaltern resistance in postcolonial theory, which tends to emphasize more or less dramatic acts of insurgency or rebellion. The account of the politics of the governed challenges heroic images of the political subject, whether presented as a subject of revolutionary events, of the politics of the street, or of the politics of resistance. Chatterjee suggests that “what we need is a different conceptualization of the subject of political practice—neither as abstract and unencumbered individual selves nor as malleable objects of governmental policy, but rather as concrete selves necessarily acting within multiple networks of collective obligations and solidarities to work out strategies of coping with, resisting, or using to their advantage the vast array of technologies of power deployed by the modern state.” Or, to put it another way, Chatterjee encourages us to stop thinking of the subjects of the politics of the governed as recalcitrant targets of totalizing symbolic mechanisms of subjectification. We might think of them instead as subjects of rational action, articulating their demands, expressing their identities, and acting out their passions in fields of situated action in which specific things are always at stake.

Chatterjee’s conceptualization of democratic politics puts the emphasis on the ways in which formal relationships between “states” and “citizens” are configured by a whole set of intermediary actors: police officers and social workers, activists and agitators, politicians and experts. It is in the relationships revolving around these and other intermediaries that the politics of governed is formed, relationships in which rules are interpreted and bent, laws suspended and circumvented. Chatterjee’s account does not see the subjects of political action as enframed within discursive orders or perceptual fields. He instead presents them as actors making strategic moves in a complex set of games of compulsion and constraint, obligation and oppression. Chatterjee’s work is, then, an example of a style of critical thought that takes democracy seriously by seeking to understand the interactive dynamics between differentially empowered actors working in relation to different sources of legitimacy and capacity. The emergence of new forms of the political, from this perspective, is not a matter of dramatic events of political subjectification but is instead rooted in routine struggles, everyday interactions, and bureaucratic frustrations.

While Chatterjee outlines how the extension of governmental strategies generates a political dynamic, we might still want to pause and ask why this variable dynamic of the politics of “partaking”—participating and engaging with state actors in order to make use of resources—should be thought of as democratic. The legitimacy of governmental agencies and NGOs might well depend on their ability
to provide resources and services for populations, but this does not necessarily require legitimacy of a democratic type. It might well require a circumvention of rules and procedures as much as their strict enforcement. Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed is certainly a useful reminder that there are ways in which support is gained and legitimacy is secured that cannot be modeled on processes of interpellation. But more than this, a crucial aspect of Chatterjee’s argument is that the practices of governing populations are embedded in the routines of electoral competition. Chatterjee’s argument rests on the idea that the populations subject to development policies are able to make instrumental use of their status as voters in elections in order to mobilize strategic power in fields of postcolonial governmentality. The fields of formal citizenship and governmentality therefore overlap and intermingle in important ways. Electoral politics and the developmental politics of governmentality have become intimately intertwined, Chatterjee argues, invoking the case of rural West Bengal as an example “where the Left parties have converted the functions of governmentality into potent and amazingly stable sources of local support from a clear majority of population groups.”

In Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed, practices of governmentality are effectively refigured as means for the ongoing maintenance of the politics of electoral support.

Chatterjee’s interpretation of contemporary democratic politics in India is not an uncontroversial one. The idea that political society is separate and distinct from civil society and characterized only by strategic action and instrumental rationalities seems to imply that citizenship rights and the rule of law have no significance for the struggles of the poor and disempowered. In response to this worry, civil society and political society might be better thought of as two styles of action that can be combined in different ways in particular contexts. This approach is better suited to the analysis of how the vocabularies of citizenship and democracy become “vernacularized” in processes of popular politics.

Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed differs markedly from a tradition of radical political thought that presents what Hannah Arendt tends to call “the social” or what Jacques Rancière calls “police” as necessarily containing, contaminating, or domesticating authentic political action. In contrast to these sorts of interpretations, Chatterjee’s account of the politics of the governed confirms Foucault’s suggestion that dispersed practices of government should be understood as the source of distinctive forms of agonism that deserve analysis and specification of their own. The analysis of the politics of the governed challenges the received interpretation of practices of government as mechanisms for rendering technical what are in fact contentious issues, or as a means for imposing consensus. Far from serving as a medium of depoliticization, and further still from being a rare thing that appears only in events of rupture and dissensus, for Chatterjee politics is an integral part of the routines of the developmental state and practices of governmentality. He shows us that practices of governing populations
generate conflicts and demands that are resolutely political, are processed through combinations of force and persuasion, and combine aspects of communicative action and strategic action. He also sees them as potential fields for the expansion of capacities for collective action that are not contained by the normative image of citizens in civil society.\textsuperscript{138}

**Changing the Subject**

This chapter started by tracing how the concept of hegemony has been used in different strands of radical political thought as the means to open up the analysis of democratic politics. The idea can be used to address a set of questions about how consent is sought and won as well as to bolster an ontological determination of the political field as a field of subjectification. The theoretical shift from hegemony to the analytics of governmentality can easily support a further reduction of the problem of consent to a process of subjectification under the sway of “police” imperatives. Alternatively, the shift can be used to challenge the idea that practices of government are vectors for depoliticization. Chatterjee returns us to the question of how the politics of support is pursued.

The difference I have traced in this chapter is between a theoretical imagination focused on isolating the determinant force of disruption on which the very possibility of the political is presumed to depend versus a theoretical imagination concerned with analyzing politics in terms of the animating expectations and injustices that shape political conflicts between situated actors. The emphasis in ontological interpretations of the political on the aporias of subjection is one example of a more broadly shared theoretical structure of feeling, one in which changing the subject is presented as the core dynamic of political life and, therefore, of radical political strategy too. This presumption raises fundamental questions about the limits of the democratic imagination of certain traditions of social theory. The assumption that the demonstration of historical contingency means that identities, institutions, and practices both can and should be changed is central to the political unconscious of a great deal of avowedly critical thought in the humanities and the social sciences. The payoff of theoretical arguments that there are no stable, a priori individual or collective identities, only contingent identifications generated through the articulation of subject positions and partial closures of fields of perception, is a view of political life that posits that people's subjectivities are readily available for remaking under the force of the revelatory exposure of their own fabrication.\textsuperscript{139} Styles of political thought that seek the deep ontological core of the political share in the same culturalist understanding of the dynamics of self-formation. Whether understood in terms of the distribution of the sensible, through a theory of empty signifiers, or through notions of the magma of imaginary significations, these are styles of theory shaped by a residual functionalism
in which it is assumed that social formations are, indeed, held together at a deep level through broadly ideological means, that is, by getting at the subject. It might be more appropriate, more democratic one might even say, to inquire into why people's subjectivities and identifications come to matter so strongly to them, and in turn to ask what price would have to be paid by any of us in the pursuit of their transformation.\footnote{140}

And so we are returned to the interpretation of consent and consensus that we encountered first in chapter 1. From one of the perspectives traced in this chapter, consent and consensus can be thought of as much the same thing, as means of hoodwinking people by fixing in place before them what is obviously seeable and sayable. In this view the problems of the politics of support are reduced to the functional needs of elites. From another perspective, consent and consensus can be thought of as different processes, allowing us to see that the politics of support—seeking after and perhaps securing consent—is much more than a matter of securing identification. It has as much to do with bargaining and compromise over tangible resources and rights to participation. Nothing necessarily leads to the latter set of processes having a democratic shape or a fair and equitable outcome, of course. All consent is “grudging,” we might well suppose.\footnote{141} This is not the same as saying that it is always illusory, though, because consent is not best thought of either in terms of a philosophy of consciousness or via the residues of a theory of ideology. The inequities and advantages that grudging consent hides from view are perhaps better conceptualized in terms of “adaptive preferences,” or “systematically distorted communication.” These are theoretical ideas that allow us to keep in view people’s own implication in their actions. Shifting to this view of how politics works also holds out the possibility of taking democracy seriously as a mode of power of a particular sort, as something more than an ideal visible only in fleeting moments between its otherwise inevitable suspension. To lay the ground for the conceptual reorientation required if we are to develop this possibility further, we need to consider more directly how questions of conflict should be best conceptualized. We turn to this topic in chapter 5.