CHAPTER 5
The Significance of Conflict

Conflict in our moral sentiments and beliefs is, first, a historically, socially, and probably psychologically conditioned phenomenon, the product of such things as pluralistic societies and rapid cultural change as well as, perhaps, more generally distributed psychological needs which tend to conflict. We can, to some extent, understand why we have conflicting sentiments, but that does not mean, or should not mean, that we therefore withdraw our loyalty from them. Second, it is not true that any situation in which there is no such conflict is better than one in which there is, or even—what is perhaps more plausible—that conflict reduction is an aim which always has a strong priority.

—Bernard Williams

The ascendency of ontological interpretations of political life discussed in the previous two chapters is part of a more broadly shared agreement that liberal political thought has a tendency to displace the disruptions of politics in favor of procedures for efficient administration or for reaching binding agreements. In this chapter I develop the argument that the contrast found in political theory, which is in turn echoed in critical ontologies of space and spatiality, between deliberative approaches to democracy apparently oriented to consensus and agonist approaches that are open to the rigors of intractable struggle is better thought of as a contrast between different ways of conceptualizing the sources and the appropriate responses to conflict. What is seen as value pluralism from one perspective can be seen as an ineradicable element of antagonism that inheres in human affairs from another. While the first perspective might well hold out the hope of arriving at some rational procedure for squaring different values, the alternative perspective holds that not just value pluralism but deeply rooted energies of discord, friction, and hostility make rational deliberation impossible and even dangerous. But the claim that appreciation of agonism and contestation in political processes is the special preserve of ontological styles of theory is belied by the centrality of this topic to critical theories of deliberative democracy. It is perfectly possible to
acknowledge the centrality of conflict, antagonism, and contestation in political affairs without buying into the genre conventions of the ontological interpretation of the political.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that there are different versions of agonistic political theory. Chantal Mouffe has suggested that agonistic theorists like William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and James Tully remain a little too enamoured of the comforts of deliberative ideals, failing to address antagonism in the deep ontological way in which her own work seeks to do. The style of agonistic thought that Mouffe criticizes does not depend on a stark contrast between consensus and antagonism. It relies instead on the sort of existential ethos Connolly once described: “Politics resides in this ambiguous space between the insistent rewards of commonality and the wonder of existence.” We saw in chapter 3 that the concept of the political is actually subject to different sorts of interpretations, sometimes inflected by a more “idealist” ethos, sometimes by a more “realist” one, in Hannah Pitkin’s terms, or in associative or dissociative terms, in Oliver Marchart’s description. Andrew Schaap makes a similar distinction, differentiating a “republican” from a “realist” style of agonistic political theory. Schaap suggests that the first strand, exemplified perhaps by Hannah Arendt, is concerned with politics in its horizontal dimension, that is, with questions of freedom, solidarity, and action in concert. We might also locate Lefort and Wolin in this line of thought, as well as Rosanvallon. The second strand, which would include Mouffe as well as the much darker thought of Giorgio Agamben, is concerned with the vertical dimension of politics, that is, with issues of sovereignty and decision, and is more clearly inflected by the legacy of Carl Schmitt. The difference between these two strands of self-consciously agonistic thought can also be characterized in terms of a primary emphasis on the conditions of possibility of solidarity and concerted action in pluralist societies versus an emphasis on understanding the dynamics of antagonism. Schaap suggests that “in both traditions, the anticipation of the political as an ever-present possibility conditions ordinary politics: the potential intensification of politics towards violent confrontation on the one hand or the potential disclosure of a common world to those engaged in political action on the other.” And we saw in the last chapter that Jacques Rancière’s work manages to straddle the difference between these two forms of anticipation, retaining a somewhat Arendtian concern with the constitution of common life while having a much darker sense of ordinary politics as a field of overbearing domination.

I would maintain that what is actually most valuable about the more realist strand of thought on the political is its emphasis on demands as a central aspect of political life, which are understood as both claims made by subjects as well as the impositions placed on them. But there is, I suggest, no good reason to hold to the rather dramatic picture of how this dynamic emerges in the world. Rather than thinking of the political, in either an idealist or realist sense, as a potential that might disrupt or be disclosed in ordinary politics, we might just think of the
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very ordinariness of “ordinary politics” as the ongoing enactment of the political in both senses. This proposal remains difficult to accept if one continues to hold to the restrictive definition of the political developed by poststructuralist theories of radical democracy and post-Marxist ontologies of the political. From this perspective, the essence of democratic politics is to express the political in its proper sense, and therefore it lies in the constant contestation of the boundaries of political life itself. For example, Ernesto Laclau presents populism as a political form that questions the institutional order “by constructing an underdog as an historical agent—i.e. an agent which is an other in relation to the ways things stand.” In this account, the conditions of possibility of the political and of populism are much the same. In a familiar move, Laclau presents social division as both constitutive of any demos but also constitutively disavowed by it. Developing Lefort’s notion of the empty place of democratic sovereignty, Laclau interprets populism as the formal expression that reveals the divided origin of the political but whose full realization would also be the end of politics, the coincidence of the political community with itself in totalizing unity. Laclau’s recourse to the paradoxical formula of projection and disavowal, of constitution and exclusion, is just one example of a broadly shared theoretical maneuver. It takes for granted that properly political action challenges the framing of politics itself and that this is a discrete activity set off against more mundane forms of political action that leave those frames in place. The stark conceptual spatialization of the political, and the rarefication of the type of action through which it is contested and re-instituted, follows from a theoretical commitment to avoid the reduction of political action to a mere representation or refraction of other realms, such as the economy or the social.

In this chapter I link the ontological splitting of the political and the associated spatialization of the political around an image of closure and ruptural events, already discussed in chapters 3 and 4, to a consideration of how agonism is figured in theories of radical democracy as a formal possibility arising from ontological features of the world itself. I take Chantal Mouffe’s elaboration of an agonistic theory of radical democracy as my exemplar. I then develop an alternative account of the relations between politics and the political, one that picks up on themes already discussed concerning the ordinary forms of political life through which the boundaries of the political are routinely contested and re-formed.

In laying the grounds for an account of how to theorize democracy ordinarily, as a mode of processing conflicts, I want to keep in mind an observation made by Doreen Massey about the tendency for the postfoundational critique of liberal notions of democratic consensus to run together two distinct arguments. First, there is an argument that the search for agreement is impossible because it seeks to close down the play of differentiation inherent in human relations. This argument is most clearly developed by Mouffe. I argue that poststructuralist radical democracy actually misconstrues the pragmatics of political life. Second, there is
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The argument that liberal political theory conceives of consensus and agreement in overly rationalist ways. This is a much more telling criticism, and one that is widely discussed by proponents of revised versions of deliberative democratic theory, among others. But ontologies of the political are actually poorly suited to develop this argument, because of their overwhelming focus on symbolic representations as the medium of subject formation and their recurring difficulty with notions of experience. This means that ontological interpretations of the political can comprehend observable patterns of human accommodation only by reference to, and as derivative of, ontologized relations of antagonism, hostility, and exclusivity. In the second half of the chapter I begin to outline an approach to understanding the situated contexts of action from which feelings of injustice arise, as a first step toward reconstructing democratic inquiry more fully along these lines in part 3.

Ontologies of Antagonism

Mouffe has developed her version of radical democracy in unrelenting opposition to what she presents as the orthodoxies of liberal political theory. She argues that liberal thought is characterized by its incapacity to fully grasp the nature of the political, by which she means the ineradicability of antagonism in political life. Any tradition of political thought found to be guilty of this charge qualifies as “liberal” in Mouffe’s work. Liberalism is defined by a commitment to “pluralism without antagonism,” she argues, and is overwhelmingly marked by rationalism, individualism, and universalism.

The pivotal claim of Mouffe’s agonistic vision of radical democracy is that facing up to the possibilities and perils of political life requires acknowledging “the dimension of the ‘we,’ the construction of the friend’s side, as well as the dimension of the ‘them,’ the constitutive aspect of antagonism.” She argues that the evasion of the political involves a denial of the dimension of antagonism in this very specific sense: it is an evasion of the consequences of a distinctive ontology of identity formation, according to which collective identities depend on the positing of hierarchical patterns of difference between Self and Other. On the basis of this ontology, Mouffe argues that the necessary determination of the limits of the political can never be resolved into a rational procedure of justification. It must take the form of arbitrary closure. But for this very reason, any settled political community is also always open to destabilization. In developing an argument for the necessity of delimiting the political and the ultimately unjustifiable basis for doing so, Mouffe has appealed to the authority of various thinkers, including Jacques Derrida and his account of undecidability, the reactionary political theory of Carl Schmitt, and the philosophical anthropology of René Girard. I want here to explore how Mouffe’s use of these and other authorities to sustain an ontological
account of the deep-seated force of antagonism informs a specific spatialization of the dynamics of political life.

As we saw in chapter 4, Mouffe’s account of radical democracy is shaped by a concern to find alternative conceptual resources for understanding the dynamics of antagonism, since these can no longer be modeled on an image of the dialectics of class struggle. In the course of this search, since the 1980s Mouffe’s work has been central to the rehabilitation of the Nazi legal scholar Carl Schmitt as an unlikely reference point for Left theories of radical democracy. Schmitt has been described as “the godfather of the concept of the political.” His critique of liberalism encompasses the politics of crisis situations, the spatial ordering of inter-state relations, and the politics of law and of war, and it is informed by a wider critique of technology. Foremost among the ideas for which Schmitt has become an authoritative reference is the proposition that the ultimately groundless nature of political action necessarily means that politics is all about sovereign assertions of pure will. In this respect, Schmitt’s is a starkly gendered account of the weakening effects of liberal parliamentary politics. In such regimes, epitomized for Schmitt by the Weimar Republic, public life is not manly enough, because it is about compromise and coalition making, and, in turn, it undermines the ability to make clear-cut definitions between friends and enemies. Political action, for Schmitt, is exemplified by the act of decision. In Schmitt’s thought, in which real democracy requires the internal homogeneity of an ethnically defined people, the notion of decision is attached to the image of masterful subjects, able to impose their will. Schmitt’s decisionism reduces all politics to the assertive exercise of sovereignty, an understanding encapsulated in the formula “sovereign is he who decides on the emergency situation.” The statement has become something of an orthodoxy in strands of radical theorizing about the politics of emergency and security in the first part of the twenty-first century.

Schmitt’s account of decisive action is intimately connected to the claim that the concept of the political refers not to issues of legitimacy but to an existential binary contrast between friends and enemies. Schmitt’s influential definition of the political depends on a precise mode of concept formation. Herbert Marcuse once observed that Schmitt’s thought actually provides only a series of counter-concepts—ideas developed to contrast and refute liberal idealism, historical materialism, or rationalist social science. As a result, it is a decidedly formal style of theorizing. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in Schmitt’s definition of the political. He argues that the concept of the political must “rest on its own ultimate distinctions,” on the rather spurious grounds that morality is defined in terms of good and evil, economics by the profitable and the unprofitable, and aesthetics by an opposition between the beautiful and the ugly. The equivalent distinction for political relations is that between friend and enemy: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.” It is important to emphasize that the primary term in Schmitt’s
friend/enemy formula is that of enmity. Friendship is a strictly derivative term in Schmitt’s conceptual schema, always and inevitably scarred by the existential primacy of hostility and antagonism.\(^{17}\) As he himself put it, “Because the sphere of the political is in the final analysis determined by the real possibility of enmity, political conceptions and ideas cannot very well start with an anthropological optimism.” It follows, for Schmitt, that antagonism is the defining characteristic of political relations: “The Political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping.”\(^{18}\) In this understanding, any diminution of antagonism is actually an affront to the proper value and force of political existence.

What Mouffe finds in Schmitt is one version of a generic account of the relational formation of identity. For her, Schmitt’s ideas “converge with several important trends in contemporary theory which affirm the relational character of every identity, the unavoidable couple identity/difference, and the impossibility of a positivity that would be given without any trace of negativity.”\(^{19}\) Another reference point for Mouffe’s argument about the inherently antagonistic roots of human sociability is René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. Girard’s core claim is that desire is not structured around a relation between a desiring subject and a desiring object. It involves instead a triangular relationship in which the value of the desirable object arises from the mediating glance of an Other, whose desire serves as a model to be imitated by the subject. Desire generates rivalry because the mediating figure who at first serves as a model for the self subsequently becomes a rival and then an obstacle to the realization of desire, in an escalating dynamic of violent conflict, vendettas, and scapegoating. Envy and jealousy are therefore at the very core of subjectivity for Girard. For this reason, from the perspective of the resolutely masculinist ontology of desire that Girard proposes, any struggle for emancipation or justice is doomed to failure, driven as it is by a desire that at its core is merely an expression of violent competition.\(^{20}\)

For Girard, “the true secret of conflict and violence is mimetic desire.” Human relations are all about mutual imitation and therefore reciprocity: “What characterizes human conflict is not the loss of reciprocity but the transition, imperceptible at first but then ever more rapid, from good to bad reciprocity.”\(^{21}\) The move from good to bad reciprocity is always a possibility, but the move in the opposite direction is apparently more difficult to sustain. In this understanding, institutionalized systems of authority are a way of controlling this escalating dynamic of mimetic desire and rivalry. The strong implication of Girard’s work is that order is founded on a necessary act of violence, which puts an end to the otherwise destabilizing dynamic of escalating rivalry. Sacrifice is a means by which a surrogate victim functions to put an end to the intensifying dynamic of hostility, but this works only to inaugurate a new structure based on sacrificial rites that keep violence contained and allow social life to flourish. Societies ward off the constant
possibility of collapse inherent in their own propensity toward violence through rites and rituals but also through processes of scapegoating. In short, community life protects itself against the risks of its own propensity toward violence by projecting that violence against innocents. For Girard, it follows that “the generative violence constitutes at least the indirect origin of all those things that men hold most dear and that they strive most ardently to preserve.”

Girard’s account of the dynamic of hostility that can be contained only through an act of ritualistic sacrificial violence has a structural similarity to Mouffe’s claim regarding the necessity of decision in establishing hegemonic relations of equivalence. The significance of Girard’s Christian apologetics for Mouffe’s broader project lies in her claim that he draws into view the mimetic effects of both empathy and hostility, only one side of which is emphasized by the Enlightenment tradition. Girard therefore serves as another authority for Mouffe’s representation of the inherently antagonistic dimensions of sociability: “The importance of Girard is that he reveals the conflictual nature of mimesis, the double bind by which the same movement that brings human beings together in their common desire for the same objects is also at the origin of their antagonism. Rivalry and violence, far from being the exterior of exchange, are therefore its ever-present possibility. Reciprocity and hostility cannot be dissociated and we have to realize that the social order will always be threatened by violence.” According to Mouffe, the dark side of relations of mutuality and reciprocity are continually denied by an Enlightenment tradition that runs all the way through to Habermas, whom she finds guilty of acknowledging only the rationalist aspects of human life and thereby foreclosing on “the recognition that violence is ineradicable.” A recurring theme in Mouffe’s appeal to authorities such as Schmitt and Girard is her conflation of antagonism with violence.

Mouffe assimilates both Schmitt’s account of the concept of the political and Girard’s theory of mimetic desire into a generic poststructuralist account of identity formation, one in which the pivotal concept is the “constitutive outside.” The authority for this idea depends in no small part on the reference made to Jacques Derrida as its source. Derrida is often invoked to provide philosophical authority for the ontology of antagonism first outlined by Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. In that account, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the delimitation of any political community is necessarily constituted through a process of exclusion. Their theoretical model draws most heavily on a psychoanalytical imagination, one indebted to Lacan’s account of the original division of the subject in a scene of foundational “aggressivity,” generating what he calls “the self’s radical ex-centricity to itself.” But Mouffe claims Derrida as the authority for the most general version of the thesis: “One of Derrida’s central ideas is that the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles—form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on.” In this interpretation, the importance of Derrida’s
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philosophy lies in demonstrating that “any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power.” And in turn this means, Mouffe argues, “any social objectivity is ultimately political and has to show traces of the exclusion which governs its constitution, what we can call its ‘constitutive outside.’”

The notion of the constitutive outside has become something of an axiom in contemporary critical thought. But it is worth noting that the idea is not directly derived from Derrida at all. It is sourced from a Wittgensteinian, we might even say ordinary, interpretation of Derrida’s work. Henry Staten uses the term to refer to the trope in Derrida’s writing in which apparently self-present phenomena are shown to be open and contaminated by otherness. This is not at all the same thing as claiming that identity is formed through the projection or abjection of a figure that both anchors and threatens identity. If the idea of the constitutive outside has a reference in Derrida’s work, then it is less as a model of an active process of constitution through exclusion and more along the lines of the analysis of the strange logic of the supplement, the trace, or difference. None of these terms is a figure for an active process. In fact, Derrida does not present figures of the outside as primarily effects of exclusion at all. Mouffe’s account of the constitutive outside therefore joins two quite distinct senses of the concept of Other. In the generic poststructuralist model of identity formation, the Other is posited as the projection of an active subject. Alternatively, the figure of the Other both in psychoanalysis and in strands of messianic thought elaborated by thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas as well as Derrida himself does not refer to a projected image, nor even to empirically specifiable categories of marginalized persons. It refers to the “wholly other,” to an element that cannot be assimilated into a subject’s experience, perception, or reasoned conceptualization. By linking the latter sense of Other to the former, Mouffe is able to present Derrida as the source for an understanding of identity as the effect of forms of power, exercised through decisive acts of exclusion that constitute the social field. It is then a short step to the claim that social objectivity is therefore the effect of a motivated political “decision” of exclusion and hegemonic closure.

The elision of the figure of the “wholly other” in the model of exclusionary difference proffered by Mouffe’s authoritative interpretation of “the constitutive outside” underwrites the ontologization of the distinction between politics and the political in her theory of radical democracy. In this move, the possibility of pluralistic sociability is made derivative of a more fundamental level of intractable antagonism. So it is that Mouffe arrives at the conclusion that the political refers to “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations.” Politics, on the other hand, refers to the practices through which this realm of conflict is ordered, shaped, given form: “‘Politics’ consists of domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations.”

There is a familiar spatial imagination at work in the generic model of the constitutive outside: “There is no consensus without exclusion, no ‘we’ without a
‘they’ and no politics is possible without the drawing of a frontier.” If you take this general model of identity formation and splice it with the more specific idea that all political identities depend on drawing a we/they distinction, then it follows that “the possibility of the emergence of antagonism can never be eliminated.” Against Schmitt, Mouffe argues that there is no necessary reason for antagonism to always appear as a relation of enmity. The task of democratic politics, for Mouffe, is to create conditions “that make it less likely for such a possibility to emerge.” Mouffe’s conceptual innovation is to differentiate antagonism, understood as an ever-present possibility of all politics, from agonism. Antagonism is a relation between enemies, defined by the lack of shared or common symbolic space between two parties to a conflict. Agonism, for her, is a relation between adversaries who do share a common space: “While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.” In this understanding, Mouffe asserts that “the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism.” This task involves providing channels for the expression of collective passions that do not degenerate into relations of enmity.

Mouffe’s account of radical democracy therefore depends on two distinct conceptual moves. The first is an interpretation of the distinction between politics and the political as structurally equivalent to the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological, where the former is interpreted as derivative of the latter, more fundamental layer. The second move involves a particular determination of the content of the political, once set off against politics, in terms of antagonism, hostility, and ineradicable conflict. We have seen, in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, for example, that the first, more formal move does not necessarily have to be given this particular inflection—it can just as easily be filled in with a more associative meaning of the political. Between the two moves that underwrite Mouffe’s account of the political, antagonism appears both as the general ontological condition of the political and as something that might also always find expression in the field of politics.

Agonism is therefore accorded only a derivative status in Mouffe’s account. Her vision of agonism is certainly quite different from a vision of rationally arrived at consensus. On the basis of the ontological account of the political as necessarily crossed by antagonistic hostility, Mouffe asserts “the impossibility of rational consensus on political decisions.” The prime task of democratic politics “is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs.” The target of this injunction is those political theories that posit an “overlapping consensus” (Rawls) or perhaps an “ideal speech situation” (Habermas) as some form of regulative ideal for shaping political action. For Mouffe, the failure of these
types of “liberal” theory is twofold. It is a failure to grasp the ontological status of antagonism as the condition of all objectivity. And it is in turn a failure to grasp the hegemonic constitution of the social, that is, the way in which social objectivity is inevitably formed through acts of power that enforce closure, exclusion, and decisions on an inherently open and fluid field. In Mouffe’s view, any idea of consensus is rendered suspect by the fact that the constitution of any community of agreement would necessarily depend on demarcating an external, excluded outside: “The fundamental question for democratic politics is not how to arrive at a rational consensus, that is, a consensus not based on exclusion: this would require the construction of an ‘Us’ that did not have a corresponding ‘Them.’”

So it is that the authoritative interpretation presents the notion of the constitutive outside as making consensus impossible.

Grasping the difference between adversaries and enemies is central to appreciating the concern that animates Mouffe’s claim that thinkers including John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck are all guilty of offering postpolitical visions of democratic theory. They do so by encouraging a moralization of the political field and in so doing risk generating friend/enemy antagonisms. The same concern informs Mouffe’s wider criticism of “the current infatuation with humanitarian crusades, ethically correct good causes and the hypertrophy of the judiciary.” These phenomena are all presented as examples of a moralizing liberalism that thinks politics can be reduced to rational procedures. And Mouffe finds the same impulse to overlook the constitutive antagonisms of the political to be at work in strands of radical political thought that reject the institutions and practices of representative democracy in favor of images of reciprocal community and autonomous organization. In her engagements across this range of contemporary thought and political practice, Mouffe’s insistence that the dimension of antagonism is an ineradicable feature of politics is based on the anxiety that denying this dimension only encourages a tendency to articulate we/they relations in moralized terms of good versus evil that can have potentially disastrous consequences.

Mouffe does not endorse the strongly ethical inflection found in Derrida’s work, and certainly not the reactionary conservatism more or less implicit in some of the other sources to which she appeals. She does strongly affirm the idea that democracy is a way of keeping various relations in tension, not least through the cultivation of a democratic culture that remains open to contestation and dispute. In Mouffe’s terms, the moralization of politics forecloses the possibility of the emergence of agonistic forms of political conflict, and by inadvertently encouraging the emergence of antagonistic confrontation, it might therefore actually threaten democratic politics. Her account of agonistic democracy finds in various strands of liberal political thought, but also in strands of radical theory, a constant tendency to seek to reduce constitutive energies of division and conflict, which actually risks undermining democracy by moralizing what are properly political
relations. And although Mouffe never puts it quite like this herself, the force of her argument about the dangers of postpolitical reasoning rests on the strong implication that it represents a disavowal of “the vocation of politics” itself, if we understand that to mean the cultivation of a form of character able to negotiate between an ethos of conviction that prioritizes the virtue of autonomy and an ethos of responsibility for the consequences of actions.40

Opening the Political

We have seen that Mouffe privileges a specific understanding of exclusionary relations of identification and differentiation in her ontology of the political. Her account turns on a set of spatial tropes of boundaries, divisions, frontiers, and constitutive outsides. Mouffe’s recurring claim is that the political should be understood by reference to the idea of ineradicable antagonism. She bolsters her claim with appeals to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, anthropology and political theology. Across these references, a set of recurring themes emerges: the idea that the political is defined primarily by an underlying dynamic of exclusion, antagonism, violence, or hostility; the idea that social order is constituted through the willful imposition of decision, sacrifice, or suturing; the idea that genuine democratic politics involves the contestation of the boundaries of the political; and an impatient disdain for styles of political theory that she considers too rationalistic.

As already noted, one of the distinctive features of Mouffe’s account of agonistic democracy, compared to those accounts that emphasize the cultivation of democratic ethos, is that it retains a strong sense of politics being tied to decisive action, rather than merely celebrating the pluralistic play of difference over order and stability. Her affirmation of the political moment of decision nevertheless depends on a stark opposition between two distinct temporal modes of action: deliberation oriented toward consensus and decisive action without ultimate foundations. The recurring problem addressed in Mouffe’s work is how the indeterminacy of the political, determined by ineradicable ontological antagonism, can be given contingent order through hegemonic acts of closure. This problem relies on an understanding of political time as a succession of moments that are either contingently tied into stable relations or just as contingently disrupted into new patterns of identification.

I would like to dwell a little longer on the style of concept formation that Mouffe’s work illustrates. It is a style that turns on making clear-cut conceptual oppositions, layering of conceptual terms into orders of priority, and the systematic spatialization of political relations into stark contrasts between insides and outsides, identities and exclusions, aporias and paradoxes, originary instabilities and their derivative stabilizations. It is here that Mouffe’s hierarchical derivation of the meaning of the politics/political distinction can be undone. Applying a simple
deconstructive axiom, one might suppose that if adversarial and agonistic politics depends on the domestication of ineradicable hostility, and if it is therefore always haunted by the risk that solidarity might dissolve entirely into populist antagonism, then it follows that there must be something about the political that lends itself to domestication and order in the first place. If the political is at all open to domestication, if antagonism can be pacified, it might be because consensual relations of solidarity, respect, toleration, and empathy always already contaminate the political. In short, the movement of domestication or pacification that defines agonistic politics for Mouffe indicates that antagonism is perhaps not quite so singularly definitive of the political as she proposes. If domestication and pacification inhabit both sides of the border between the political and politics, then this means that antagonism and consensus, hostility and solidarity are related in a pattern that is not one of territorialized exclusion at all. It is perfectly plausible to suppose that antagonism does not exhaust the list of features that might be ascribed importance when defining the political dimension of human affairs.

If antagonism is not, after all, the singular essence of the political, then this suggests that we might need to return to one of the issues raised at the start of this chapter. I noted there that poststructuralist theories of radical democracy claim that consensus is impossible, because it seeks to close down the play of hierarchical differentiation inherent in human relations. I also suggested that this claim, the theoretical background of which I have traced in Mouffe’s work, actually misconstrues the pragmatics of political life. I want to further elaborate on this claim, not so much in order to redeem a concept of consensus but as part of the effort to deflate the ontologization of conflict that is a feature of Mouffe’s agonist theory. We have seen that her account makes a conceptual connection between the temporality of decisive action and the formation of political community. Her claim is that the act of positing an identity both confirms and simultaneously threatens that identity: constituting “us” without determining a corresponding “them” is, apparently, impossible. We have seen that the assertion that the exclusionary relationship between identity and difference is unavoidable renders otherness into a strictly derivative term, distilled from the temporary stabilization of a properly open-ended play of differential meaning. In this view, individual subject formation, the constitution of the social, and the delimitation of political community are all understood to be the effect of a constitutive act of arbitrary power that operates through closure or exclusion and that is not therefore available to an analytics of justification or legitimation. This account of identity formation is, as we have seen, justified by reference to Derrida, and inflected by reference to Lacan’s account of subject formation as well to ideas of thinkers such as Schmitt and Girard. It informs a taken-for-granted spatial model in which the identity of any political community is premised on the expulsion or marginalization of another party, involving a simultaneous movement of repudiation as well as identification.

The theory of differential signification on which Mouffe’s political interpre-
ration of the constitutive outside depends does not, I would suggest, provide an adequate appreciation of the political force of little pronouns like “we,” “us,” and “them.” Mouffe’s account of we/they relations remains resolutely monological, consistent with the understanding of difference discussed in the previous chapter, in which the formation of political community depends on the willful power of nominalization to interpellate political subjects around fixed reference points provided by this or that empty signifier. Identity is therefore formed only through a Manichean drama of differential exclusion. This understanding implies that a political community can be conjured into existence simply by the force of collective will to share in such an identity. In short, Mouffe’s account of political community depends on the idea that constituting a “we” is “an act of encircling an area within a boundary.” But the spatial figure invoked here is not the appropriate one at all. Recalling the two distinct concepts of the Other discussed in the previous section, we can see that Mouffe’s strongly political interpretation of the theme of the constitutive outside wrongly assumes that identity is formed by actively positing a negative difference from other identities. But if, as Mouffe insists, “we” is the privileged subject of political discourse, then this proposition is better understood according to a spatial grammar of address and approach, rather than one of boundaries and exclusions. This suggestion depends on adhering more closely to the drift of Derrida’s own work, which provides us with a sense of community constituted by an opening up to otherness in situations of exposure and responsiveness. Rather than thinking of identity as formed by a constitutive act of exclusion, then, we might think instead in terms of a foundational receptivity, or of a constitutive disposition to welcome, as a spatial figure for the formation of political life.

In the alternative picture I am recommending, saying “we,” if we must continue to take this as an exemplary act of political life, is less an assertion of identity than it is an appeal for attention. Saying “we,” as Hannah Pitkin once observed, “is entering a claim.” She continues, “Part of the knowledge revealed in political discourse is the scope and validity of the claim entered in saying ‘we’: i.e., who turns out to be willing and able to endorse that claim.” The significance of this alternative picture can be grasped if we recall one of the central themes of Carl Schmitt’s account of the political, namely his deep suspicion of forms of democratic representation as marks of division within a polity. The alternative account of the political as formed through claims to attention recovers the importance of representation in political life, where this is understood as a process of both speaking for and to others. Speaking for others is often alleged to be impossible, and perhaps even a wholly unjustifiable impertinence. But perhaps we would do better to follow Stanley Cavell, one of Pitkin’s sources for her view noted above. Cavell suggests that the ability to say “we” cannot be separated from the “arrogation of voice” involved in supposing that one can rightfully speak for others.
Cavell actually makes two distinct points on this issue. First, speaking for others is a possibility that is considered impossible or scandalous, he argues, only if one overlooks the relationship between *speaking for* and *speaking to* others. Following from this, he suggests that *speaking to* others is often presumed to be much simpler than it actually is. We forget that it is hazardous, that it works only at the risk of misfires and infelicitous outcomes. The first point reminds us that political discourse is, preeminently, addressed to others—an argument we have already come across in the discussion of Arendt's account of judgment and political community. The second point reminds us that successfully addressing others only comes off if a relationship of attention between speakers and addressees, which cannot be guaranteed in advance, is successfully constituted by the response of the latter. The lesson to draw here is that if we keep in mind the hazardous quality of the process of speaking to others, we can better understand how speaking for others is not a zero-sum game of silencing or exclusion. It is an opening up of a scene of claims and counterclaims.

My reason for invoking Pitkin and Cavell here is to demonstrate that even if we hold to the paradigmatic form of action that Mouffe considers central to the formation of politics—convening a collective subject by saying “we”—there is actually no good reason to suppose that observable patterns of political life are always expressive of the temporary domestication of an abiding, singular will to hostility. Cavell in particular helps us see what is really most important about criticizing the traces of the rationalism found in various traditions of political thought. One of the criticisms leveled at political philosophers like Habermas and Rawls is that, in their influential formulations of public deliberation, they circumscribe too tightly the legitimate styles of communication to be allowed. While both writers emphasize publicity as a crucial medium in democratic life, they also seem to presume that public deliberation aimed at sustaining democracy and justice should be governed by the norms of civil conversation. The force of the criticism is, then, that these norms of rational, argumentative deliberation tend to elevate forms of discourse that are formal, general, dispassionate, and disembodied. Feminist theorists, for example, point out that, defined in this way, public deliberation “does not open itself equally to all forms of making claims and giving reasons.” In turn, this means that idealized models of public deliberation will silence certain categories of person and certain forms of injustice.

It is on these grounds that Cavell himself takes issue with the image of the “conversation of justice” in the work of Rawls, for whom the benchmark of reasonable public action oriented toward justice is the commitment to giving principled expression to one's grievances. Cavell suggests that there are modes of claiming injustice that exceed rational discourse of the sort envisaged by Rawls. These claims can take the form of a cry of frustration or a scream of anger. They are, in short, types of what Cavell has called “passionate utterance” that work as much by
engaging people in relations that are expressive and that move them as they do by appeals to rational coherence.\textsuperscript{52} Cavell’s point is that Rawls does not allow for the full range of registers for articulating grievances and feelings about relationships with other people—ways that exceed rules, knowledge, and principles.

In short, Cavell’s complaint against Rawls is that there is a multiplicity of ways through which selves and others become intelligible to one another and mutual accommodation despite their differences is made possible. In arguing that claims to justice are shown as well as rationally asserted, Cavell affirms that political action is irreducibly a form of public conduct that depends on scenes of address and response. If it has a favored spatial figure, it is one not of boundaries and exclusions but of the in-between.\textsuperscript{53} If we are to take seriously the possibility of investigating various genres of reasoning through which political communities are convened, then it must mean that we should no longer assume that the political is necessarily formed by reference to a singular mode of antagonism. Or, as Engin Isin puts it, “The logic of exclusion based on establishing opposite others is only one among numerous and countless strategies open to the formation of identities.”\textsuperscript{54} Rather than search for sources of antagonism at higher and higher levels of ontological generality in order to secure the autonomy of the political, we need to pluralize our understanding of the sources of conflict around which democratic politics might form.

To help with this reorientation away from an ontological apprehension of the sources of conflict, we should heed the advice of one of the philosophers most often invoked in support of accounts of agonistic democracy, Bernard Williams. Williams was a long-standing critic of “political moralism,” by which he meant the tendency to think that social and political conflicts can be resolved by the application of moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{55} He argues that rather than seeking to eliminate or reduce conflict from human affairs, the more appropriate task is to consider more carefully “the significance of conflict.” Williams calls for further analysis of what is at stake in observable conflicts. For him, to assume that democratic politics is weakened by conflicts of interest or differences over values is to get ahead of oneself. Assessing the significance of conflict does not require resolving fundamental disputes between, say, equality of opportunity or of esteem or between justice as equality or as entitlement. It might just as well require “sharpening them, by making it clear in what ways both have a foot in our sentiments.”\textsuperscript{56} Williams's argument is important here not least because of the sorts of ordinary disputes he has in mind when discussing the place of conflict in politics but also because of the sense he has of how these disputes arise from the ongoing flow of our lives. He does not present conflicts as expressions of some deep ontological layer of antagonism or hostility. Williams’s assumption is simply that people have different views, interests, and beliefs, and these often clash. That’s politics. Williams’s account of conflict is a call for the further analysis of what is at stake in observable conflicts.
I want to pick up on Williams’s suggestion that we should seek to better understand the significance of conflict. Over the last three chapters, I have traced some of the conventions of a style of conceptualizing the political that is shaped by an imagination of closures and exclusions and ruptures in which certain ontological layers are given priority over others. Adherents consistently present this style in opposition to traditions that they dismiss as overly rationalistic, concerned with consensus, and encouraging anti- or postpolitical tendencies. Debates about agonistic versus deliberative theories of democracy are just local versions of a much broader framing of political theory as divided between rationalist theories and those in which human affairs are ineradicably shaped by power, difference, and violence.

The distinctions invoked to differentiate between agonistic and deliberative approaches to democratic theory are certainly important, but their conceptual arrangement needs to be adjusted. Rather than counterposing reason and the passions as if what is at stake is getting one’s ontology right, we should think of these two terms as names for different modes of rationality or different motivating forces through which social life is coordinated. In order to develop this proposal further, I want to consider the significance of a conceptual distinction in Habermas’s social theory of action for orienting further inquiry into the dynamics of democratic politics—the distinction between communicative and strategic action, or, between forms of interaction that seek to rationally motivate others and those that seek to influence the behavior of others.57

Habermas, to recall, is the pivotal figure in the second of the two intellectual trajectories introduced in chapter 1, the route that rather than seeking the origins of political change in deeper and deeper ontological layers seeks instead to rethink plural rationalities of action. In his social theory, Habermas distinguishes between communicative action, oriented toward reaching understanding, and strategic forms of action, shaped by an orientation toward success. Action oriented toward success includes both instrumental action, assessed by criteria of efficiency and shaped by technical rules, and strategic action, which seeks to influence the decisions and actions of rational opponents. Action oriented toward understanding involves actions that are coordinated “not through egocentric calculations but through acts of reaching understanding.”58 Communicative action, in this precise sense, is not primarily oriented by individual success but involves the collaborative pursuit of goals through negotiating the definitions of shared situations. If suitably refined, Habermas’s distinction between types of action can be used to displace the stylized contrasts between rationality and passion, consensus and antagonism, that have often shaped debates about radical democratic theory.

Habermas tends to present the distinction between communicative and strategic action as a clear contrast between two competing modes of action: strategic
action, which concerns effects, consequences, and outcomes; and communicative action, which concerns mutual understanding and changing people's minds in reasonable ways. He also uses the distinction between “orientation toward success” and “orientation toward reaching understanding” to frame a historical narrative that contrasts the imperatives of “system integrated action contexts” with those of “socially integrated action contexts.” In this narrative, steering media dominated by strategic action (i.e., money and bureaucracy) are progressively decoupled from the lifeworld, which he presents as the background context that sustains the interpretative resources made use of in communicative action. Those media then turn back around and colonize lifeworlds in turn.

The precise tone in which Habermas narrates the relations between “system integrated action contexts” and “socially integrated action contexts” has certainly varied over the course of his career. But it remains a consistent frame across Habermas’s account of issues including international law, European Union politics, German unification, the rise of postnational politics, and democratic theory. Across this range of application, Habermas remains committed to the argument that communicative action oriented toward understanding is both normatively and descriptively primary to instrumental and strategic action. This commitment defines Habermas’s decisive move beyond the model of critical theory inherited from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s dark account of the all-encompassing pathologies of modernity.

Recalling the distinctions that Habermas makes between two modes of action and two modes of integration is a first step along the intellectual path that avoids the contrast between consensus and antagonism, reason and power. It allow us to move toward thinking about the relationships between various rationalities of power. But in order to fully develop this alternative trajectory, we need to adjust Habermas’s tendency to think of communicative action as entirely distinct from and always threatened by strategic logics of action. One place to start is with the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault is, of course, often thought of as a thinker wholly opposed to the project of Habermasian critical theory. Because he demonstrates that all human relations are infused with power, Foucault’s name is often invoked as the authoritative source that completely ruins Habermas’s commitment to the possibility of mobilizing the force of communicative action in the pursuit of democracy and justice. This appeal to Foucault usually depends on the idea that “power” in his work is really just a synonym for sublimated relations of domination or violence. But Foucault consistently uses the term “power” to refer to particular forms of action. With this in mind, it is notable that thinkers associated with the action-theoretic tradition of critical theory pioneered by Habermas have sought to clarify the type of action theory that is operative in Foucault’s account of modern power. For example, Axel Honneth describes Foucault as presenting an action-theoretic insight in which “the emergence of social power can be studied on an elementary level in the action-situations in which subjects with competing
objectives meet and contend for the achievement of their aims.” From Honneth’s perspective, Foucault focuses too narrowly only on one specific dimension of action: “His basic model is the strategic intersubjectivity of struggle.” In this interpretation, Foucault appears as a theorist not so much of power but of strategic action. Honneth accuses him of leaving no space for “normatively motivated consent,” because his work presumes that subjects “encounter one another only as opponents interested in the success of their respective aims.”60 In a similar argument, Thomas McCarthy suggests that Foucault ends up “conceptualizing social relations as strategic relations and social interaction as strategic interaction.”61

In finding an overly constricted view of action in his work, Honneth and McCarthy are nevertheless laying claim to Foucault for a tradition of action theory against which his authority is more often mobilized. And it is in turn notable that thinkers more sympathetic to Foucault’s own project are also now acknowledging the action-theoretic dimensions of Foucault’s later works on government and ethics, dimensions first noticed by thinkers from the critical theory tradition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.62 The emerging view of Foucault as an action theorist allows us to loosen the overly rigid contrast between communicative and strategic action that Habermas holds to. It suggests a refinement of this distinction, rejecting the image of two mutually exclusive modes of action locked in a tragic struggle of colonization and survival, in favor of the analysis of the variable combination of different rationalities of action.

Habermas’s conceptual distinction between two modes of action remains a crucial resource in helping us to pivot decisively away from ontological accounts of the double inscription of the political and toward the analysis of rationalities of action. Mary Dietz provides the clearest statement of how the distinction between communicative action and strategic action can be suitably adjusted to support such a reorientation.63 She suggests that the distinction between communicative and strategic action actually operates on two levels in Habermas’s work. In Habermas’s social theory, the distinction underwrites the claim that communicative action has explanatory primacy over strategic action, so that modes of action such as conflict or deception are finally seen as derivative of action oriented toward reaching understanding. And in Habermas’s political theory, the same distinction is used to develop a normative model of discursive accountability that limits and calls to account the operation of strategic action. Dietz explicitly raises the problem of what modification is required in the normative image of democracy once the explanatory claim about the priority of communicative over strategic action is called into question.

Dietz recommends reinterpreting Habermas’s distinction between communicative and strategic action in an explicitly Machiavellian spirit. In one sense, this implies adopting a perspective that looks with great suspicion on claims that politics can be fully rationalized in relation to norms of validity, coherence, or truth in the way in which Habermas often suggests. But more fundamentally, it implies
adopting a more realistic view of the irreducibility of conflict in human affairs than is perhaps acknowledged by Habermas, but without assuming that this has to be rooted in a deep ontological layer of antagonism or hostility. Agonism, for Machiavelli, is simply a matter of the different passions that shape human life. In political terms, he argues that there are two basic impulses, personified by those eager “not to be ordered around and oppressed” and those “eager to oppress the common people and order them around.” These two “humours” characterize the common people and the nobility, respectively. The discord and tumult that arise from the confrontations between “the desire to dominate” and “the desire to not be dominated” cannot be finally resolved. Resolution requires, instead, the institutionalization of forms of government that ensure that popular impulses against being dominated are allowed expression and effect. And the Machiavellian view of conflict as the basis of liberty is not necessarily the same as the argument that would reserve for the people only the role of contesting rule.

Beginning with Machiavelli’s analysis of the different dispositions shaping human life — those toward concord and those toward disagreement, or those toward domination and those toward freedom — Dietz seeks to reconfigure Habermas’s distinction between communicative and strategic action. It is not violence or antagonism that forms the ineradicable core of the political, in her view. Rather, against Habermas, Dietz argues that strategic action is the irreducible aspect of what Merleau-Ponty called the “the milieu proper to politics”: “Politics is an irreducibly strategic concern and a domain of strategic action.” Dietz makes this claim as a corrective to Habermas’s tendency to suggest that the core features of politics can be modeled on his discourse theory of deliberative democracy. Dietz’s point certainly holds against Habermas, who might well hold to an overly restrictive notion of strategic action undermining the orientation toward understanding. But the emphasis on politics as irredeemably strategic also holds against ontological interpretations of the political that we have discussed previously: “In identifying the strategic dimension of struggle that is politics, however, I do not mean to suggest that politics is fundamentally a context of domination, force, coercion, aggression, threat, or accusation.” This observation makes most sense if we see it as an effort to translate the debates between the Habermasian tradition and the ontological tradition into a concern with understanding plural rationalities of action. We have seen how one strand of the ontological interpretation of the political does tend to place relations of antagonism, hostility, or resentment at the center of its accounts. Because this view can perceive communicative dimensions of human life only as derivative and secondary, it can be “democratized” only by imposing homogeneity on the polity (following Carl Schmitt) or by appealing to a vocabulary of hegemonic closure and decision (following Laclau and Mouffe).

The idea that strategic action is the defining quality of political life helps us to move away from the ontological register in which discussions of the concept of the political and theories of radical democracy have become trapped. The important
lesson to be drawn from Dietz’s Machiavellian reading of different rationalities of action “is that politics alternately tenses and relaxes somewhere in-between pure persuasion and pure force.”

To put it another way, elements of communicative action and strategic action are always entangled, conditions of each other as much as contrasting imperatives. Furthermore, the relationship between them is not best thought of either in terms of an order of ontological or explanatory priority or in terms of a pathological detachment of social integration from system integration. It is, rather, a matter for further inquiry. By pursuing this train of thought, moving away from the search for ontological depths and layers and toward investigating the entanglements of different rationalities of action, we open up alternative sources of intellectual sustenance for a critical theory of democracy.

Cultivating Conflicts

Ontologies of the political and deliberative theories of democracy both have a tendency to posit one aspect of political life as having priority over others, and they then derive empirical expressions of political action from these prior commitments. In the previous section I suggested that thinking in terms of rationalities of action might enable us to escape the traps of heroic romanticism and rationalistic optimism that are associated with these two approaches, respectively. Dietz’s Machiavellian view of politics as irreducibly strategic invites us to shift register and to think about the ways in which democratic politics articulates various rationalities of action. One way to develop the idea that conflicts arise through the concatenation of different rationalities in the context of situated problems is through an analytical distinction between “more or less” and “either-or” conflicts. Such an approach can help move us more decisively beyond the ontological determination of orders of priority of different modes of antagonism. It also will require us to shift theoretical register away from political philosophy and back toward social theory.

We have seen that poststructuralist theories of radical democracy emphasize the primacy of antagonism in defining the dynamics of political life. Of course, analyzing the sources of antagonism is a standard feature of political analysis, in Marxist theory certainly, but also in mainstream political science. What is distinctive about Mouffe’s claims is the argument that antagonism has its source in the very structure of ontology itself. I have suggested various reasons for deflating the claims made on behalf of ontological interpretations of the political, when presented in both associative and dissociative registers. Deflating these claims reveals that one can place the analysis of conflict at the center of political life without reducing it to a single, core essence. From a pragmatist perspective, for example, politics is the name given to a range of overlapping practices that address the persistent conflicts and disputes that arise from living together in a world of pluralism and difference. One can also find the emphasis on conflict as an
ineradicable feature of political life in the Schumpeterian theory of democracy defended by Adam Przeworski. He proposes an idea of democracy as “a method for processing conflicts,” an argument that is set against a long tradition in Western political thought that has looked on conflict and division with deep suspicion as well as against non-Western models of democracy that claim to embody unity and harmony. Przeworski argues that the guiding theme of democratic politics and theory should be how “to process conflicts in peace without curtailing political freedom.” Such a view does not limit politics to elections, recognizing that “conflicts over policies, competition for political influences, are the bread-and-butter of everyday politics. Political activities are not limited to elections—not even to efforts to influence outcomes of future elections.”

Przeworski’s is an explicitly minimalist view of democracy. It is one in which democracy is defined as a system for processing conflicts, and this is certainly not to be mistaken for reducing, hiding, or controlling them. His work illustrates that there are various ways in which one might conceptualize the ineradicability of conflict, contestation, and discord in political life without having to make strong ontological claims about the sources of antagonism. I want now to develop a different line of thought, an explicitly deliberative strand of democratic theory, but one, like Przeworski’s, concerned with conceptualizing the rationalities of action that shape democratic politics.

To begin the task of thinking ordinarily about politics, understood as a concatenation of plural rationalities of action, I want to further develop Dietz’s suggestion that political life is inevitably constituted by strategic action. To do so, let us consider another conceptual distinction, that between arguing and bargaining. Jon Elster presents these as two ideal-typical ways of coordinating action in situations of conflicting interests. The distinction might appear to map roughly onto Habermas’s distinction between communicative action and strategic action. But it actually cuts across it. Elster combines elements of both aspects of Habermas’s distinction in a different pattern, so that strategic considerations are found to inhabit both arguing and bargaining. Rather than supposing that argument is the medium of virtuous deliberation, free from the instrumental impurities associated with market-like practices of bargaining, deal-making, or negotiating interests, Elster suggests that argument has various strategic uses in furthering the intrinsic values associated with democracy.

Elster’s distinction between arguing and bargaining is not so much a matter of different forms of reasoning; it has more to do with distinguishing the stakes involved in different disputes. Bargaining, Elster argues, is a “more or less” form of conflict, focused on splitting the difference. It is characteristic of fields of action in which material or symbolic resources and benefits are divisible. Wage bargaining over shares of surplus value, in the Marxist tradition, would be an exemplary case. Elster’s claim is that there are types of conflict that cannot be resolved either simply by splitting the difference or by sequestering them away. The democratic
response to this type of conflict is argument, which Elster presents as a process in which interests, views, and positions are formed and transformed in an interactive process of engagement. In contrast to bargaining, arguing is indicative of an “either-or” form of conflict, characteristic of situations where there are competing comprehensive doctrines or values, as in the case of ethnic conflict or religious conflict. In fundamental respects, the stakes in this form of conflict are indivisible (for example, they might often take the form of claims and counterclaims to rightful possession of territory).

The contrast between arguing and bargaining is, then, an analytical distinction between two types of conflicts. It implies that some disputes or controversies lend themselves more to one version of action than the other. The distinction also suggests an analysis of different aspects of a conflict situation, an analysis that attends to those features that lend themselves to either-or or more or less forms of engagement or escalation. Elster’s simple distinction can be located within the broader account of sources of social conflict provided by Albert Hirschman. Hirschman’s specialty as a social theorist was in the development of counterintuitive accounts of the dynamics of collective action in markets, organizations, planning practices, and public life. His work displays an unusual sensitivity to the interactive dynamics between different actors, shaped by the organizational and material features of their fields of action. Hirschman sees these interactions as ones in which conflict and contradictions are central, generating experimental practices, social innovations, system breakdown, and novel forms of accountability and influence.

Hirschman’s own intervention into debates between deliberative and agonistic theorists of democracy is oriented by a concern to move beyond the celebration of the ineradicability of conflict, on the one hand, and to avoid the temptation to develop rationalizations of consensus, shared norms, or community, on the other. He suggests that the agonistic tradition of thought that concerns itself with elaborating on the positive dimensions of conflict “tends to be so conscious of staging a perilous attack on orthodoxy that it often limits itself to accomplishing that daring feat and does not proceed to a careful examination of the conditions under which the paradox of conflict and crisis actually generating progress does or does not hold.”76 Hirschman’s account of different types of social conflict is meant to help facilitate precisely this sort of examination of the different qualities of conflict situations and their evaluation. He starts with the observation, as discussed in chapter 2, that democracies tend to come into existence as certain kinds of compromise formulae, rather than through agreement on basic values. In short, Hirschman approaches democratic politics as a response to a certain sort of collective action problem in which enduring conflicts are transposed into new forms of accommodation, cooperation, and dissent.

Hirschman’s claim that conflict is a pillar of democratic society is both a response to and a development of the argument about the difference between divisible and indivisible forms of conflict provided by both Elster and Helmut Dubiel.77
In making his own argument about democracy as a practice of “cultivating conflicts,” Dubiel makes use of Hirschman’s well known account of the dynamics of exit and voice as the mechanisms through which organizations engage with their clients, customers, members, or citizens. Dubiel’s key claim is that “democratic societies are held together not by the mute concord of their citizens but by the forms that give shape to their antagonisms.” This remark sounds a little like the arguments of Lefort or Mouffe, but Dubiel’s authoritative reference is to Georg Simmel’s sociological account of conflict as an interactive medium of integration and socialization.

Cultivated conflicts are, according to Dubiel, distinct from both exterminationist warfare and relations of managed competition. But the idea of cultivating conflict that Dubiel recommends is not just about containing or framing more fundamental antagonisms. It is closer to the sense of tending—the controlled promotion of conflicts. And not all conflicts can be tended or cultivated: “The term democracy, then, embodies the institutions and legal forms, the psychic and cultural qualities, that have the capacity to ‘cultivate’ social conflicts. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, democracy has nothing to do with prepolitical consensus.” Dubiel’s argument is that members of secularized societies relate to each other only via conflicts and that therefore political conflicts are the integrative force of such societies. His view segues with philosophical accounts that hold that, rather than requiring prior agreement to be reached on procedures and the bracketing passions and moral sentiments, democratic politics presumes that affective attachments to particular conceptions of the good can serve as a resource for cultivating democratic dispositions toward justice.

While he argues that democracy requires the cultivation of conflicts, Dubiel draws an analytical distinction between what he calls strategic- and identity-based aspects of conflict. Strategic conflicts revolve around the pursuit of interests on a competitive basis, interests that are in principle divisible. Identity-based conflict is about issues of respect and recognition and therefore tends to be more indissoluble than strategic conflict. Dubiel insists that the distinction is between aspects of conflicts, not between two separate types of conflict: “While the distinction between divisible and indivisible conflicts has, then, heuristic and analytical value, all explanatory precision is lost if this analytical separation is mistaken for an empirical one.” Real world examples will not map tidily onto this contrast. Nor is the contrast one between a level of more fundamental conflict and a derivative expression or layer of domestication. Dubiel’s argument is that conflicts around strategic issues are also about issues of respect, that is, about both material resources and dignified existence. It is necessary to think of “the strategic dimension of divisibility as inextricably intertwined with the identitarian dimension of indivisibility.” Different types of conflict will combine these aspects in different ways.
If Dubiel is one reference point for Hirschman’s account of different aspects of conflict, then the other is the work of Marcel Gauchet, a central figure in the emergence of a revivified strand of liberal political theory in recent French thought. Gauchet is one source for an account of democratic political life as being founded on constitutively divided forms of self-formation, according to which conflict is a factor in cohering and integrating social fields divided between “directors and executants.” Hirschman dubs his account of the dynamic of democratic community and conflict the “Gauchet-Dubiel thesis,” but it is inflected in significant ways by characteristic features of his own thought. The legacies of Hirschman’s own personal involvement with the German social democratic Left in the 1930s is evident in his recourse to a distinction between antagonistic and nonantagonistic contradictions. The distinction is derived from long-standing debates in Marxist political thought, stretching from Lenin through Mao and including contributions by Lucio Colleti as well as Laclau and Mouffe.

Hirschman locates his discussion in the shadow of this tradition because his aim is to deflate attempts to determine in advance the significance of certain sorts of conflict compared to others. The question of whether conflicts act as “solvents” or “glue” needs, he suggests, to be “brought down to earth” by being located in the dynamics of particular social formations. Conflicts in pluralist market societies can, Hirschman argues, be differentiated into two broad families: “Many conflicts of market society are over the distribution of the social product among different classes, sectors, or regions. Highly varied though they are, they tend to be divisible conflicts over more or less, in contrast to conflicts of the either-or nondivisible category that are characteristic of societies split along rival ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines.” The key contrast Hirschman draws here, echoing both Dubiel and Elster, is between divisible and nondivisible conflicts, or between conflicts of a more or less or either-or type. Hirschman invokes the distinction to reconfigure the inherited narrative of the privileged significance of class struggle in Marxist thought:

As is well known, conflicts of the more or less type are intrinsically easier to settle than conflicts of the either-or variety: even when the parties are initially far apart they can theoretically “split the difference” or “meet half-way” (“half a loaf is better than none”) whereas these kinds of compromise solutions are often less available when the sections making up a society and coming into conflict are divided by matters of religion, language, race, or gender. In the light of this distinction, it is today difficult to understand how Marxism was so long so successful in presenting social conflict, impressively dressed up as Klassekampf for “class struggle,” as the principal, ultimate, and most irreconcilable type of conflict of modern society, when it is in fact the conflict that lends itself most readily to the arts of compromise.
The argument here parallels that of Dubiel, whose account of the democratic cultivation of conflicts contrasts with a classical Marxist interpretation in which the political mediation of class struggle is understood as a mechanism for pacifying an otherwise revolutionary energy. Dubiel presents class conflicts as a model for more or less styles of conflict, that is, as examples of divisible conflict predisposed toward compromise. Democracy, in his account, is an effect of the cultivation of class struggle, not its containment. Marxism, in this understanding, misdiagnoses the dynamics of class struggle, because it assumes the contradictions between capital and labor will become ever more intense. By contrast, and like Dubiel, Hirschman argues that the conflicts that are endemic in class-divided societies tend toward the more divisible type. Therefore they “lend themselves to compromise and the art of bargaining.” In this account, “muddling through” is the default mode of political life in class-divided democracies.

The arguments of Dubiel, Elster, and Hirschman challenge the underlying view of radical politics in both Marxist and post-Marxist political theories, in which specific models of conflict are prioritized in advance and then used to diagnose the contemporary conjuncture: the fundamental contradictions of class struggle for classical Marxism, or the ontology of ineradicable antagonism for post-Marxist radical pluralism. All three thinkers are adept at making analytical distinctions rather than strongly ontological ones, suggesting an alternative mode of inquiry based on more careful attention to the defining qualities of different conflicts. In this spirit, I would recommend another of Hirschman’s concepts, which is concerned with addressing the emergence of democratic politics around situations of injustice. In his work on the determinants of the success or failure of large-scale modernizing development projects, Hirschman once argued that attention should be paid to the “structural characteristics” of different fields of action, in order to better understand the forms of leverage different actors possess to shape outcomes and processes. This involves examining the degrees of “discipline” or “latitude” for creative action that are created by particular configurations of materials, technology, market dynamics, and organizational form in particular fields. The assumption is that different fields of action—the development of railway systems compared to road transport systems, for example—will be characterized by particular patterns of behavior, adjustment, learning, risk, innovation, and conflict. The differentiated analysis of the structural characteristics of fields of action underwrites Hirschman’s well-known account of the dynamics of exit and voice as two routes through which situated actors may be able to assert some level of influence over firms, politicians, or officials. My suggestion is that investigating the plural rationalities of action that shape democratic politics might be well served by pursuing further inquiry into the structural characteristics of different forms of contention. It is a prerequisite for identifying the experiences of wrong and the forms of accommodation that give political life its distinctive, variable shapes.
The Significance of Conflict

Back to the Rough Ground

In the course of this chapter, I have sought to give weight to the “varieties of agonism” that can be found in political thought. The reason to do so is to displace the authoritative account of the primacy of antagonism, hostility, and violence that has come to characterize radical ontologies of the political. There is no need to accept the trap of presuming that the only available options are rationalistic consensus or agonistic pluralism. We have seen that it is common enough to accuse various liberal traditions of displacing politics by developing moralized theories of justice or rationalistic theories of consensus. But the last three chapters have traced the ways in which self-consciously radical ontologies of the political work to displace politics in a different way. They do so by insisting that ordinary understandings of politics need to be supplanted so that we can grasp the core dynamics of the political and enable genuine political action. In short, if we accept the framing of debates in terms of consensus versus contestation, rationality versus power, deliberation versus agonism, we run the risk that politics as an ordinary phenomenon will disappear from view.

Attending to the plural rationalities through which political action arises and develops provides a route for moving back toward the rough ground in which democratic politics emerges as a series of problems. In shifting attention away from the ontological register in which theories of the political are often couched and toward an action-theoretic register that can encompass Habermas and Foucault, Elster and Hirschman, I have tried to avoid becoming trapped in the terms of a debate in which ontologies of the political have a built-in advantage. The key to this shift lies in following Dietz’s suggestion that the political is characterized by strategic forms of action.

When rendered in strongly ontological registers, agonistic accounts of democracy suffer from a rather one-sided view of democracy in which proper democratic energies are always reserved for fundamental reconfigurations or disruptions of whole political systems. The work of Jacques Rancière, discussed in chapter 4, marks a high point of this view, presenting democratic politics as a rare and momentary fracturing of the deep consensual frame that otherwise orders normal routines. But it is just one version of a more broadly shared spatialization of the political in terms of fixed orders and the temporary exposure of their contingency. The excess of the political over any particular configuration of politics is made visible through a vocabulary of boundaries, closures, and exclusions, on the one hand, and ruptures, disruptions, and events, on the other. The spatial image of closure supports and is sustained by the temporal image of the punctual event that resists institutionalization.

I suggested in chapter 4 that ontological interpretations of the political are characterized by a layering of the distinction between politics and the political into hierarchical orders of conceptual priority, and that this in turn informs the
systematic spatialization of political relations in stark contrasts between insides and outsides, identities and exclusions, originary instabilities and their derivative stabilizations. For all the stated investment in antifoundationalist accounts of contingency and paradox, this genre of political thought, with its vocabulary of instituted orders and overbearing constituted powers, is marked by a continued investment in an image of the totalized closure of the social field. Shorn of the sociological baggage of classes, the economistic residues of forces and relations of production, and political attachments to the Party, post-Marxist ontologies of the political nevertheless remain strongly wedded to what Roberto Unger has called “structure fetishism,” only now the structure in question is that of the very ontological constitution of the world as such. Structure fetishism is expressed in the view of change “that opposes interludes of effervescence, charisma, mobilization, and energy to the ordinary reign of institutionalized routine, when, half asleep, we continue to act out the script written in the creative intervals.” The idea that insurgent action disrupts routines and opens up authentic freedom but that the forces of order will inevitably clamp down again on the rebellious spirit remains remarkably resilient in radical ontologies of the political. This idea is in turn a sign of a lingering sense that crisis is the central dynamic of political change.

To give an impression of the differences in interpretations of the concept of the political that I have sought to draw out in part 2 and to move toward fleshing out the alternative, action-theoretic perspective further in part 3, I close this chapter by considering Francis Fox Piven’s account of “dissensus politics.” Piven’s narrative of episodic periods of egalitarian reform in the United States ascribes a pivotal role to protest movements, able to intermittently exercise influence in between periods of elite domination. In that respect, it appears to fit into a broad paradigm of analysis that contrasts top-down impositions of order to bottom-up eruptions of radical energy. As we have seen, the picture of politics oscillating between periods of stability and temporary periods of intense disruption is a recurring motif of radical political thought. What is distinctive about Piven’s argument is that for her the politics of dissensus is intimately entangled with, and indeed dependent on, the rhythms and routines of electoral politics and policy making. Piven’s version of the temporal contrast between order and disruption is rooted in a sociologically thick understanding of the dynamics of popular mobilization and of the routines of state-society interaction. It draws on an analysis of the history of poor people’s movements that emphasizes the difficulties of mobilization and organization and the resulting tendency for influence to be expressed through protest and riotous assembly.

Most important for the argument I will develop in the rest of this book, Piven’s account of dissensus politics depends on a specific understanding of the form of action through which everyday life is reproduced and political action emerges. The success of democratic reform movements depends, she argues, on the interaction between electoral dynamics and what she calls “disruptive power.” Disruptive
power is a form of power implicit in networks of cooperation and interdependence. The power of those at the bottom of hierarchies lies in “their ability to disrupt a pattern of ongoing and institutionalized cooperation that depends on their continuing contributions.” Piven's formulation of dissensus politics does not, then, draw a sharp contrast between action that is routine and action that is disruptive. Disruptive power involves the withdrawal of cooperation in social relations and therefore has any purchase only because it is rooted in institutionalized dynamics of interdependence.

From one perspective, Piven's account of dissensus politics appears to conform to a political imagination that sees proper politics as primarily about events of rupture that are fundamentally transformative in some way, interspersed with periods of settled order. But from another perspective, it is important because it identifies expressions of disruptive power and enactments of dissensus politics as continuous with forms of action that are embedded in ongoing patterns of interaction and cooperation. Developing the second of these perspectives is a central concern in my discussion of critical theories of democracy that follows.

The spatial and temporal image of sudden disruptions and ordered settlements is the conceptual accompaniment to the strongly ontological interpretation of the double inscription of the political. We have seen throughout part 2 that the intuition behind the distinction between politics and the political can be interpreted in a less grandiose fashion, in “descriptive” rather than “revisionary” ways, to use Strawson’s terms discussed in chapter 3. The ontologization of radical political thought, and indeed of social theory more broadly, has the unfortunate effect of trapping us before a picture of the world in which movements of becoming, of fluidity and flux, and of process itself are understood as the defining ontological features of both human life and natural worlds. These features are also accorded normative priority over the stability, continuity, and order that they apparently make possible and yet that also contain them. It is a remarkably one-dimensional picture of how change happens and how to recognize it when it does happen. But there is little reason to take this picture quite as seriously as its proponents suggest. After all, unique, creative, unexpected acts are just as likely to play a part in the reproduction of routine actions as they are to disrupt or transform them. The reason to leave behind the ontological interpretation of the political is to escape the overly territorialized imagination of enclosure and exclusion, as well as the temporal imagination of disruption and rupture that accompanies this way of thinking. In making the possibility of political agency dependent on the movements of ontological strata, it is an imagination that distracts attention from the ordinary forms of action through which injustice is articulated as a wrong in the course of political life. It is to this issue that I will direct attention in part 3.