INTRODUCTION

Arguing with Theory

What is theory good for? Theories are things we argue with. They provide the resources for making validity claims, for drawing inferences, and for constructing generalizations. Arguing with the help of theory is a means of engaging in reasoned debate. And theories are things we use to score points in the midst of an argument. But theories are also things we argue with in another sense, insofar as argument entails passionate, sometimes unreasonable disagreement. Theories can make us angry and invite criticism, if not outright dismissal, because they unsettle our most cherished thoughts. In the social sciences and humanities, arguments about theory are often undertaken as if the choice of an approach is expressive of a whole way of life.¹

This book is a working through of my own attachments to particular traditions of thought, with a view to how those traditions enact distinctive forms of democratic ethos. My aim is not to propose a theory of democracy, much less a theory of political action. Action does not require a theoretical foundation, after all. The premise of this book is that theory matters not because it guides our actions but because it helps to direct our curiosity to issues that deserve further attention. In this spirit, my discussion of various theories of democracy and the work of various political thinkers—arguing with them and against them—is animated by my desire to understand how best to pursue inquiry into the emergence, sustenance, and extension of democratic politics. I take it for granted that theories are never freestanding discourses, even when they look like they are. Theories are always theories of something, always about something other than themselves. But as I will argue, theories of democracy are never straightforwardly and only about an external empirical referent. They are always also theories about how to criticize and defend and justify particular understandings of what democracy is and should be. The subject matter of this book is a series of intellectual debates that are as much about how to argue the case for democratic politics as they are a set of propositional discourses about how to define democracy. I am concerned,
then, with identifying some of the “styles of reasoning” that characterize different traditions of radical democratic theory.

In political theory, but also in fields such as human geography, planning theory, and environmental studies, arguments about the meaning of democracy have for some time been framed by a contrast between theories of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, on the one hand, and poststructuralist theories of agonistic pluralism and ontologies of the political on the other. In this framing, the naïvely consensual or overly rationalistic orientations of deliberative democrats, personified in the avuncular figures of Jürgen Habermas or perhaps John Rawls, are set against perspectives that acknowledge more honestly the degree to which human affairs are ineradically shaped by power or difference or violence. This book locates critical theories of deliberative democracy and associated strands of political thought squarely within what Philip Pettit has called “the contestatory turn” in democratic theory. Appreciation of the ineradicable place of contestation in political processes is not the special preserve of self-styled agonistic theories of the political. In making this argument, I will suggest that contestation is best understood as one among a variety of rationalities of action shaping political processes, rather than as an expression of a deep ontological dynamic of antagonism, enmity, or hostility.

In making an argument about how best to locate contestation in political thought, I also seek to elaborate on a specific meaning of critical theory. A great deal of avowedly critical thinking in the social sciences and humanities supposes that the primary task of critique is to challenge common sense and existing consensus; to expose processes of naturalization, normalization, and universalization; to reveal established settlements as contingent; to disrupt obviousness and inevitabilities; and to disturb closures and contest hegemonies. Such understandings of critique reveal a preference for the contingent over the necessary, the open over the closed, and the contested over the agreed upon. The main tasks of critical analysis, following this line of thought, are to reveal, to expose, and to disturb. This view of critical theory relies on the assumption that bad things happen because “people must have been got at” by the bad guys in one way or another, by secreting from view the processes that keep them enthralled to their own subjection. The generic terms of criticism in this shared way of thinking are underwritten by a modernist aesthetic defamiliarization. Theory is meant to assist in laying bare the devices through which overarching structures are reproduced.

The recommendation that the ordinary, the instrumental, and the everyday can and should be made strange and thereby disrupted is a recurring theme of the cross-disciplinary field of “Theory.” The interpretation of the reflective distance opened up in the maneuver of defamiliarization differs across traditions of thought. A central theme of my own consideration of different traditions of political thought in this book is how the relationship between the familiar and its conditions is presented in accounts of radical democratic politics, including in discussions of the concept of the political and in philosophical discussions of the
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ordinary. The urge to defamiliarize is, I will show in part 2, central to a genre of political thought that seeks to split politics in two, dividing off a settled world of politics from a more fundamental dimension that is both constitutive of that settled world and also a potential force for disrupting it and reordering it anew. I will argue throughout this book that we should resist the temptation to identify the possibility of political change with forms of extraordinary action that are sharply set off from the ordinary rhythms in which politics is routinely experienced and known.

There is something rather consoling about habits of mind that locate the task of critique in demonstrating that what appears to be essential, natural, necessary, settled, or stable is, in fact, assembled, constructed, contingent, historical, or made. These habits allow one to cope with a world of political disappointments by always knowing in advance how unhappy outcomes were secured. One way of resisting such consolations is to start from the assumption that critique is a dimension of ordinary life. Accordingly, the notion of critique I work with focuses on the tension between given facts and emergent norms. It is an idea of critique indebted to the tradition of critical theory descended from the Frankfurt School. Throughout this book, I will use the phrase “critical theory,” without capitalization, to refer specifically to the lineage of thought that follows in the footsteps of this tradition. Although the phrase often refers more broadly to a range of critical traditions, I restrict it in this way to make visible the distinctive concerns of a living tradition of thought that, through the pivotal figure of Jürgen Habermas, now thrives as a strand of democratic theory. Iris Marion Young summarizes the operative understanding of critique in this tradition as an approach that aims “to evaluate the given in normative terms.” The idea of normative evaluation is likely to raise a few hackles, since the word “normative” has taken on a rather negative connotation in contemporary postfoundational critical thought. Young’s further embellishment of this practice of critique is therefore crucial: “Critical theory presumes that the normative ideals used to criticize a society are rooted in experience of and reflection on that very society, and that norms can come from nowhere else.” This idea of critique as the interpretation of meanings and values already present in the lives of our fellow citizens guides my own evaluation of the ethos of different traditions of radical democratic thought. My engagement with those traditions is, then, shaped in part by a concern with exegesis. Above all, though, I seek to reconstruct the distinctive ethos of a critical theory of democracy. I am concerned here, in short, with undertaking a certain sort of reading of political theories. Let me expand a little more on the protocols of the sort of reading I have in mind.

Spatial Grammars of Political Thought

I have already admitted that the subject matter of this book is a series of intellectual debates that are about how to theorize democracy. I would like to think
that this focus is not simply a symptom of a preference for abstract speculation over practices of engagement and investigation. I am concerned with identifying the precise forms of theoreticism that constitute different strands of political theory. I understand theoreticism to refer to an approach to theory in which the world of historical affairs is reduced to “a source book of illustrations, exempla, or signs.” So understood, theoreticism is characteristic of styles of theory that model themselves still on genres of universalizing philosophical reasoning. There are two variations of the theoreticist gesture in radical theories of democracy. Being able to recognize them helps us to distinguish the types of ethos that differentiate traditions of thought. In one variant, the ontological derivation of the proper meaning of the political provides a frame in which worldly events can be offered up for almost immediate diagnosis as approaching or diverging from a preferred model of democratic politics. I consider this variety of theoreticism in detail in part 2. In the other variant, which I consider at length in part 3, a series of stylized facts about economic life and social change are invoked to pry apart the terms that make up inherited conceptual frameworks of normative evaluation.

The first of these approaches has lent itself readily to application in spatial disciplines such as human geography, environmental studies, planning theory, and urban studies, not least because of a shared preference for developing ontological accounts of space and spatiality in those fields. However, I will argue that it is the latter variant of theoreticism that harbors, perhaps in spite of itself, a more ordinary account of the vocation of critique, one that opens out to a program of inquiry into how democratic politics emerges in the world. But to make this case requires the suspension of some received conventions of reading that define the practice of critical thinking in those spatial disciplines that have proved so receptive to ontologically inflected political theory.

Since the 1990s there has been a breakout of interest in geographical themes in political philosophy and political theory, evident in a series of debates in which concepts such as global justice, transnational democracy, or multilevel governance have been used to question the previously taken for granted spatial imaginaries of political science and international relations. The presuppositions of those fields have included a whole host of geographical assumptions: assumptions about the scale at which democratic politics should be organized, the degree to which democratic politics necessarily requires a territorialized state apparatus, and the congruence of territory and national community, as well as more abstract assumptions about the proximity between rulers and ruled. More often than not, these assumptions become visible when political thinkers seek to address the possibility of developing forms of democratic citizenship that are more responsive, more authentic, and more encompassing than the standard model of nationally institutionalized liberal-representative democracy. Arguments about whether democratic rule should be limited to electoral practices and representative mechanisms or extended to more participatory practices such as citizens’ juries or participatory
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budgeting often invoke a series of geographical tropes of locality, proximity, and face-to-face engagement. Likewise, debates about how to define the membership of a polity raise geographical questions about whether cultural criteria of shared belonging to a community should prevail or whether an ideal of including all those affected by decisions, irrespective of their location, can or should be instituted.

There is, no doubt, plenty of scope to interrogate the geographical vocabulary one finds in these different strands of political thought. Highly simplified understandings of globalization, migration, or borders often function as preconstructed reference points for normative or ontological reflections in these debates. It is common enough to confront such understandings with a combination of evidence of empirical complexity and the unsettling insights of relational spatial ontologies. It is a style of interrogation as admonishment, one that often depends on a rather simplistic distinction between metaphorical and material concepts of space. But my intention here is not to interrogate the geographical vocabulary one finds in different strands of political thought so much as to make sense of what the appeal to particular spatial grammars reveals about how theories of radical democracy imagine their own role in democratic life.

Matthew Sparke’s *In the Space of Theory* provides a more sophisticated model of geographical criticism than that offered by invocations of the metaphor/material distinction or gestures of ontological trumping. Through a detailed engagement with the geographical thinking implicit in the work of thinkers such as Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Timothy Mitchell, and James Tully, Sparke argues that too much contemporary social theory presents what he calls “anemic geographies.” By this he means that it tends to reduce the complexities of multiple spatial relationships to a singular, privileged spatial concept—metaphor. Sparke restores to view aspects of the issues addressed by these thinkers that are obscured by their preferred choice of spatial figure.

Sparke provides the most nuanced available model for a geographical reading of political thought. Nevertheless, there is a lingering sense in his approach of seeking to correct other people’s theories for not sharing in the correct understanding of spatial concepts. But one of the problems with the concepts associated with fields that claim expertise in theorizing about spatiality—concepts such the production of space, relational spatiality, flat ontologies, topological space, and assemblage—is that they tend to rely for their critical force on the idea that the ordinary usage of geographical ideas is inherently suspect. Usually this suspicion is grounded in the claim that ordinary usage presents geographical phenomena as natural, essential, or inevitable. I tend to think that this assumption about the essentially ideological work of ordinary spatial and temporal vocabularies is actually a projection of an unexamined investment in the aesthetics of defamiliarization that shapes so much radical spatial thought.

I therefore find myself unable to follow Sparke’s model very far, because I can-
not quite identify with the foundational assumptions of this way of thinking about the tasks of theory, which puts a premium on developing novel spatial ontologies. I am more interested in understanding what the recourse to spatial tropes reveals about the animating concerns of different theories. I prefer to read the spatial and temporal imaginaries of political theories with a lighter touch, by acknowledging with Sparke that theories make use of specific spatial figures but doing so in order to ask what it is that these figures enable theorists to do. Mustafa Dikeç similarly focuses on the uses of spatial figures in the works of Hannah Arendt, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Rancière. But I am less concerned than he is with thinking about how these spatial figures correlate with what he presents as the constitutive spatialization of the political. As I discuss in parts 1 and 2, I think the claim that the political has a privileged relation to particular spatial forms is the wrong move. I am, then, not primarily concerned with either criticizing or celebrating the spatial and temporal figures of political thought. I am more concerned with taking seriously the spatial grammar of different strands of political thought—and by that I mean paying attention to the actions being performed in the use of words and concepts.

The analysis I pursue in this book starts from the observation that the geographical terms in and through which political thinkers now often discuss issues of accountability, citizenship, membership, opposition, and participation serve as the medium for a recurrent methodological operation. Themes such as globalization, international migration, multiculturalism, or environmental change are the real-world referents against which theorists seek to disaggregate and decompose the different normative values covered by the term “democracy”: values that include autonomy, equality, freedom, legitimacy, solidarity, and sovereignty. By referring to “spatial grammar,” I am suggesting the need to cultivate a way of reading spatial and temporal figures in political thought with an eye to what is really at stake in their expression. Or, to put it another way, I aim to establish what spatial and temporal vocabularies are used to do in the course of developing arguments.

The reading of political thought that I undertake in this book therefore extends a principle of “charity” to the interpretation of the imaginary geographies of democratic theory. By this I mean that rather than presuming that there is a correct spatial ontology against which all other spatial grammars must be judged, we should be sensitive to the analytical problems that political thinkers might be trying to articulate when they have recourse to what, from the specialized perspective of spatial disciplines, appear to be rather simple understandings of globalization, the transnational, or deterritorialization. I therefore ask what problems in democratic theory are made visible through recourse to ideas, for example, of globalization and transnationalism or images of rupture and event. In particular, my argument is that rather than seeking to develop ontological accounts of the essence of either spatiality or the political, we should follow the path of analytical disaggregation pursued by thinkers working in the tradition of critical theory. If we do so, we might find resources for a geographically sensitive and normatively
attuned investigation of the ways in which political agency emerges from situated experiences of injustice that generate contentious practices of variable spatial extension and reach.

**For a Social Theory of Democracy**

The type of reading proposed in the previous section—one that attends to the grammars of political thought—is directed by my sense that the primary task of a critical theory of democracy is to inform *inquiry*. I take it that democratic politics is one way of addressing “problematic situations,” to use John Dewey’s term. As a form of inquiry, democracy proceeds as a practice of making sense of what is at stake in such situations, as a step toward finding ways of engaging with them. This understanding should raise some suspicions about styles of theoretical reasoning that presume that the primary task of critique is to determine the essence of the political, the core ontological sense of democracy, or the prescriptively normative rules of public deliberation. In particular, it is an understanding that requires a suspicion toward the rarefied forms of philosophical reasoning evident in certain strands of radical democratic thought.

A defining feature of the fields of work that have become canonized as continental philosophy in the English-speaking academy since the 1990s is an explicit disavowal of empirical fields of social inquiry. The shift in attention from previous waves of Western Marxism or French theory—which were instrumental in transforming the research practices of both humanities and social sciences—to the more expansive-sounding idea of continental philosophy in fact involves a reassertion of a traditional form of philosophical authority. One theme that runs throughout this book is the deep suspicion of modern social science that characterizes various strands of radical political thought. As we will see in chapter 1, many discussions of the meaning of democracy or of the “specificity of the political” are framed by claims about the privileged relationships between political thought and philosophy. In securing this relationship, social research is often reduced to a mere empirical supplement to proper critical reflexivity. One of the features of theories of radical democracy inflected by poststructuralist ideas, as well of ontological renditions of the meaning of the political, is the refinement of a form of philosophical analysis that claims to stand over and above the social sciences.

In the reassertion of philosophical reasoning in contemporary radical thought, some theorists have supposed that philosophy, perhaps transposed into literary theory, can discern the continuing traces of metaphysics in seemingly positive fields of investigation. For its part, social inquiry is not allowed to reciprocate for the favor that philosophy supposedly does for the social sciences, that of recalling their own metaphysical commitments. The asymmetry immunizes a particular model of philosophical reasoning from any form of contextualization by social
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science procedures. The reassertion of the privileged relation between political theory and philosophical reasoning, over and above the claims of social inquiry, is particularly important for theorists who seek to specify the meaning of the political. Such theorists search for a nonreductive principle of autonomy that can define both the object and the vocation of political theory. And in this search, those eager to distance themselves from political science resist instrumental or utilitarian reasoning about politics, while those eager to distance themselves from the legacies of Marxism disavow the problem of determination. Either way, the foregrounding of the concept of the political is a defining characteristic of styles of political thought that hope to liberate themselves from any relationship of accountability to the explanatory and interpretative narratives characteristic of social inquiry.

The detection of traces of philosophical or theological concepts in modern social science and social theory should hardly come as a surprise. Modern social theory is formed in no small part by the translation of philosophical concerns into new genres of description, explanation, and interpretation. Herbert Marcuse once argued that it was Hegel who opened the way for philosophy to “devolve upon social theory,” a transformation that finds its consummation in the work of the Frankfurt School more broadly. Likewise, the history of structuralism in the twentieth century might well be interpreted as a sustained effort to carve out a distinctive space for social inquiry in between the natural sciences and the traditional humanities.

Finding traces of transcendental concepts from the Western philosophical canon in traditions of thought founded, for example, by Karl Marx or Max Weber is not particularly ruinous for social science. In fact, the claim that philosophical reasoning of a certain sort can continue to stand in judgment over the social sciences actually seems rather old-fashioned. It depends on a reduction of social inquiry to a more or less formal variety of “positivism”—a view that often characterizes both radical theories of political ontology and deliberative theories of democracy, although with somewhat different inflections. I prefer to think that the flourishing of cross-disciplinary social theory is an index of the capacity of various disciplines to think philosophically in more modest ways and in closer proximity to empirical concerns.

Jürgen Habermas once accused Jacques Derrida of reducing issues that could be usefully understood through either empirical investigation or theoretical argument to the level of the merely ontic, thereby reserving the task of fundamental reflection to the unreconstructed authority of the philosopher. Whether or not the charge sticks in the case of Derrida, it does stand as a warning against the frameworks of evaluation through which strains of so-called continental philosophy assert their own authority over and above more prosaic fields of social inquiry. What is lacking in assertive philosophical problematizations of political life is neatly captured by Simon Critchley’s consideration of the awkward relations between the thought of Habermas and of Derrida. He does not accept the
full force of Habermas’s accusation but he does affirm that Derrida’s theoretical categories “lack sufficient sociological mediation insofar as they are derived too directly from an engagement with tradition conceived in exclusively metaphysical or logocentric terms.” The point can be extended beyond the reference to Derrida’s work alone. It is particularly pertinent for the concept of the political in radical democratic theory, which often suffers from a chronically undersocialized view of human life.

Theoretical debates about the meaning of the political depend on a prior conceptual splitting of political life into two parts, one more fundamental and foundational (“the political”) than the other (“politics,” or perhaps “police”). One can find this splitting in the work of various thinkers, including Claude Lefort, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Sheldon Wolin. A sharp distinction between politics and the political underwrites the claim that the essence of political life can be properly apprehended only by a form of analysis that lays claim to the Western philosophical tradition while also disavowing the world of accepted meanings. At the same time, the specification of the significance of the political, with the strong emphasis on the definite article, is presumed to have unmediated purchase as a diagnostic tool for interpreting current affairs.

Strongly ontological interpretations of the concept of the political have come to sustain a variety of theoreticism of the sort already discussed, one in which a specific range of spatial practices are accorded a privileged status as proper expressions of the political. Both critical spatial theory and agonistic theories of democracy assume that genuine political energy always involves inaugural moments of transformation and that genuine critical activity always involves the exposure of contingency, the elaboration of uncertainty, or the affirmation of creativity. Both fields therefore sustain a restrictive spatialization of the political imagination, in which genuine political energy is only ever to be found off center, at the margins, at odds with the mainstream.

Political events such as the 2011 uprisings collectively known as the Arab Spring, protest activism from Spain to Greece to Turkey in the wake of the global financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent Eurozone debt crisis, and the proliferation of Occupy activism in cities across the world have inspired renewed attention to the importance of spatial practices for radical politics. Erik Swyngedouw provides a list of proper names that have, apparently, become “emblematic sites of insurrectional democratizing practices”: “Taksim Square, Tahrir Square, Red Square, Place de la Bastille, Assaha-al-Khadra, Syntagma Square, Green Square, Gdansk Shipyards, Tiananmen Square, Zuccotti Park, Paternoster Square, Puerta del Sol, Plaza de la Cataluña.” These are all sites, so the argument goes, for the irruption of properly political action, for insurgent events that challenge the stultifying consensus of our otherwise postpolitical age. Judith Butler has used some of these same events to outline a performative theory of political action, one that revolves around the idea that the primary agency of radical political change is the
manifestation of “bodies in public.” Butler argues that the collective assembly of bodies on the street manifests popular opposition to injustice.

The theoretical significance ascribed to the physical occupation of spaces in the analysis of contemporary activist politics reflects a particular structure of theoretical feeling, one in which the political is constituted by a distinctive spatial pattern: an excluded or marginalized figure is the point around which systems of power are temporarily closed and secured; in turn, this same figure is understood as the pivot around which those same systems might be pried open and remade. This structure of feeling is expressed in a conceptual vocabulary of constitutive outsides, hegemonic closures, suturings, or partitions of the sensible. The concern with exemplary spatial manifestations of political opposition therefore rests on a repeated image of change that characterizes discussions of the political: an instituted order is relatively stable across time but then is interrupted by insurgent, insurrectional, ruptural expressions of proper political action.

This pattern of spatialized concept formation supports a strongly hierarchical interpretation of the distinction between politics and the political. The political is always the more fundamental category, invested with all sorts of energies of creativity and disruption and vitality, whereas politics is consistently presented as, in the words of Roland Barthes, “the moment when the political changes into the same old story, the discourse of repetition.” The distinction between politics and the political certainly has different variations, as we will discover in part 2 of this book. But across its different forms, it sustains an image of how political change can and should take place, an image structured around spatialized contrasts of closure and openness, fixity and mobility, settlement and disruption. It is, in turn, an image that depends on a unexamined idea of time: political time consists of a kind of punctuated equilibrium, where moments of dramatic and wholesale transformation of entire fields of action interrupt periods of durable and predictable routine. This temporal imagination underwrites the privilege accorded to specific dimensions of physical space as the primal scenes of authentically “political” political action: spaces of demonstration, spaces of assembly, and spaces of confrontation. I will argue that the image of the spaces of democratic politics derived from the strongly ontological interpretation of the concept of the political is poorly suited to understanding the dynamics of political life because it only ever finds what it was already looking for (or its absence).

Locating Democracy in Critical Theory

This book seeks to contribute to a social theory of democracy, a project that would presume that the capacities for creative action and reflexivity often reserved for particular dramatic events undertaken by privileged historical agents are actually much more widely dispersed than assertively agonistic theories of democracy and
ontologies of the political seem able to acknowledge. My argument is structured around a division between two genres of political thought, one that theorizes political life in a strongly ontological register and one that seeks to elucidate plural rationalities of political action. This division characterizes social theory more generally. But it is particularly pertinent to the field of political theory because it cuts to the heart of the normative dimensions of democratic politics. One way of capturing the significance of the division between these two genres is by considering the fate of theories of justice in recent political thought.

Theories of justice, which have so dominated English-language political thought since the 1970s, are often considered to be irredeemably liberal and also tainted by association with universalizing and foundational forms of philosophical reasoning. Their concern with normative issues of justice is certainly at odds with the genres of ontological reasoning now favored by critical spatial theory. From the perspective of these approaches, the attention of political thought should be redirected to elaborating the ontological, even ontogenetic, conditions from which genuinely transformational political energies might be unleashed. Theories of the political are one expression of this suspicion toward normative theories. As I show in part 2, the ontologization of the political often involves an abandonment of any concern with theorizing rational action other than through heroic images of dramatic insurrection, hyper-reflexive decisionism, or ascetic knowingness.

In part 3 I argue that there is an alternative response to the critique of the alleged universalization and foundationalism of liberal theories of justice. Rather than abandoning a concern with the rationalities of action for deeper and deeper levels of ontological creativity, we might do well to follow the shift among critical theorists of democracy toward the conceptualization of injustice without prior reference to formulation of a universal principle of justice. I develop this proposal by drawing on a range of thinkers who share a broadly post-Habermasian understanding of critical theory as a theory of democratic justice. Following this path allows us to see that the critique of foundationalism does not restrict us to simple assertions of the necessity of contingency or condemn us to inhabit the paradoxical and ambivalent spaces that such assertions project for themselves. The key to the prioritization of injustice in critical theories of democracy lies in recognizing that the central conceptual and normative issue at stake is not a contrast between the universal and particular, or between necessity and contingency. Rather, the challenge is to reconstruct the confrontation between the claims of impartial universalism embedded in traditional political thought and the claims of inclusive universalism that animate critical theories of democracy. In working through this confrontation, analytical attention is reoriented toward identifying the plural rationalities of action through which political issues enter into the world as contested claims against injustice.

This book is organized into three parts. Part 1 is concerned with specifying what type of concept democracy is. I link the inherently evaluative qualities of de-
democracy as both idea and practice, on the one hand, and a geographical inflection of conceptualizations of the application, context, and emergence of democracy on the other. The chapters in part 2 discuss different versions of the conceptual splitting of the concept of the political and the significance of the resulting spatialization of political life in terms of routines and ruptures, stability and crisis. I seek to redeem the significance of the concept of the political from the strongly ontological interpretation to which it has been subordinated in influential currents of radical democratic theory. The chapters in part 3 are concerned with making sense of what critical theorists of democracy seek to do conceptually when they appeal to narratives of globalization, transnationalism, or other spatial figures to frame their accounts. The three parts of the book therefore inform each other. If part 3 offers a response to the limits of those approaches that are at the center of the discussion in part 2, then the theories and theorists discussed in part 3 are also presented as better able to develop the form of critical analysis that is elaborated in part 1. That is, they are better able to address a set of questions about how to pursue critical inquiry into the enactment of ordinarily normative concepts such as democracy.

PART 1: DEMOCRACY AND CRITIQUE

The background to the argument developed in this book is a set of debates among a range of left-liberal and post-Marxist thinkers from the 1970s onward, in which the concept of democracy became a central motif. Among other things, the heightened concern with democracy involved a more or less uneasy rapprochement with aspects of liberal thought often previously denigrated by radical traditions of political thought. From the 1990s onward, in the wake of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of actually existing socialisms, democracy retained its importance for radical thought, but under an atmosphere of increasing disenchantment. Democracy came to be defined in this conjuncture in more and more rarefied ways, as a fugitive or insurgent form whose appearance is confirmed by various newsworthy events that correspond to restrictive definitions of pure political virtue. In no small part, this belief in the rarity of genuine political action is an effect of the continued concern to secure the autonomy of the analysis of politics from both utilitarian and instrumental interpretations and from economically reductionist explanations.

It is in the context of these intellectual arguments that the first part of this book discusses what sort of concept democracy is. This is a necessary preliminary to appreciating what theories of democracy are actually about and, in particular, to appreciating the degree to which the differences between them are not open to straightforward reconciliation. I have already indicated that one aim of my argument in this book is to bring into view a contrast between an idea of critique that depends on the gestures of demystification and exposure and one that seeks
to elaborate the relationship between given facts and immanent norms. A recurring theme in radical thought is the notion that the ability to show that things could be different goes hand in hand with the imperative to change predominant understandings of what is of value. Herein lies the source of the possibility of authoritarianism that haunts radical thought, which has often found it difficult to fully acknowledge the dynamics of reflexive action through which social practice is ordinarily held together, mutates, and is transformed. A pivotal issue in assessing radical traditions of political thought is therefore the question of whether the practices of reflection and justification characteristic of intellectual analysis and the practices of justification and critique found in everyday life are imagined as being fundamentally discontinuous or imagined as running along a continuum of sorts. This issue is the central focus of the two chapters in part 1, “Democracy and Critique.” They are concerned not with pinning down the meaning of democracy but with establishing an understanding of the meaning of concepts that is adequate to democratic norms.

Chapter 1, “An Awareness of Politics,” discusses the understandings of power at work in different strands of democratic thought and how these understandings are related to distinctive pictures of the vocation of critique. One purpose of this chapter is to set out the terms for the more sustained engagement with action-theoretic styles of thought provided in part 3. Critical theorists do not suppose that power circulates in a realm of pure immanence or that the social field is shaped only by habitual entrainments or strategic pursuits of power. They assume that social life is shaped by things that matter to people and that matter differently to different people. In turn, they assume that there is no great discontinuity between critical practices of justification exemplified by theory and practices of reflection in everyday life. This is not necessarily a consoling assumption. It makes the question of what critical theory is actually good for all the more acute.

Chapter 2, “Criteria for Democratic Inquiry,” picks up on a theme introduced in chapter 1, namely the question of how to imagine the possibility that democratic norms developed in one situation can and should be applied to new situations and nonstandard cases. I take this to be the central conceptual question facing any effort to theorize democracy geographically in a postcolonial spirit. It is a theme that is central to so-called deliberative theories of democracy as well as agonistic approaches, both of which respond to the question of whether it is plausible and justifiable to derive an account of democracy from the experiences and traditions of particular places. Critical theory addresses this question through a recurring problematization of the relationships between the context-specific emergence of normative principles and the possible “context-transcendence” of those ideas. In debates about this relationship one often finds a guiding assumption that what is required is a strong philosophical account of how intercultural communication is even possible. There is a trace of the skeptical worry that the absence of such an account renders such communication dangerously provisional, if not wholly im-
possible. But the worry misconstrues pluralism as threatening to condemn us to relativism. The problem with this construal lies with the image of cultures, and the subjects that move through them, as closed off from one another. Merely arguing that borders and boundaries have now become porous does not challenge such an image. This argument only leaves in place a deeper assumption that cultures are originally singular, united, and enclosed. To more fully address these issues, chapter 2 outlines what I characterize, following Stanley Cavell and others, as an ordinary understanding of concept use and political judgment. This type of understanding informs a revised account of how democratic criteria are applied in the world, an account that orients us toward attending closely to the specific axes of contestation through which democratic politics emerges and expands.

PART 2: RATIONALITIES OF THE POLITICAL

In light of the account of the ordinary developed in part 1, in the three chapters in part 2 I consider the ways in which conceptualizations of the political have come to shape the ethos of critique in radical political thought. The concern with “the specificity of the political” is often shaped by a commitment to avoid reducing politics to the play of interests or to the determinisms of economistic reasoning, but also by a more widespread diagnosis of the modern world as shaped by overpowering tendencies toward the instrumentalization of all values. The unfortunate consequence of seeking to specify the political through a search for a principle of autonomy from other fields (fields of scholarly inquiry and/or fields of human practice) is the abandonment of any serious consideration of the relationships between different aspects of life. As a result, the political appears only as a break from or an interruption of the ordered routines of the social, the economic, or the technological.

My aim in part 2 is to discriminate between different interpretations of the concept of the political. My intention is to recover from beneath the weight of the ontological interpretation to which this concept is now most often subjected a more interesting concern with the rationalities of political action. In chapter 3, “The Ontological Need,” I focus on arguments that derive the specificity of the political from accounts of a fundamental division between two distinct ontological layers, the political and mere politics. Chapter 4, “The Scandal of Consent,” considers a distinctive post-Marxist lineage of thought about the political. It traces a fundamental cleavage within this tradition between more ontological inflections of the political (developed by thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière) and interpretations that open up the analysis of politics as a field of plural rationalities of action (developed in different ways by Stuart Hall and Partha Chatterjee). Chapter 5, “The Significance of Conflict,” considers how radical theories of agonistic democracy have sought to locate the sources of political life in general ontological accounts of human existence. It then offers an
alternative interpretation of how to think about conflict in human affairs, one that is consistent with the understanding of ordinary politics outlined in chapter 2.

Across these three chapters, my argument is not so much that the search for the specificity of the political is “misguided,” as Lois McNay has put it.34 It is, rather, that what is actually most interesting about the conceptual distinction between the political and politics gets misplaced when this distinction is interpreted in strongly ontological ways. In particular, what gets lost is a consideration of the ordinary dynamics of political action as elaborated in part 1. In part 2 I therefore seek to recover versions of the concept of the political that retain the focus on these dynamics, as a prelude to my fuller elaboration of this concern in part 3.

The difference in interpretations of the concept of the political that I seek to draw out is nicely captured by Agnew Heller.35 Heller once argued that exclusion is the defining gesture of uses of the concept of the political, an emphasis evident in approaches that define a whole range of activities normally thought of as politics as actually not properly political at all. The tendency to generate radical images of authentic politics is shared by a style of theorizing that ranges from the Right to the Left, from Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss through to Chantal Mouffe and Giorgio Agamben. The mythologization of the political over and against the banal concerns of daily existence is a recurring theme in discussions of the political. Heller suggests that this mythologization follows from a tendency to think of the political “as a certain ‘thing’ (a quality, a factor) that may be shared (or not) by other ‘things.”36 The scope of the concept is initially determined categorically and then applied normatively to evaluate specific formations of political life. And as I will show, the conceptual distinction between mere politics and the political is most often mapped vertically onto an image of layers of fundamental priority and secondary derivation.

In contrast to this way of conceptualizing the political, Heller suggests that the political “can be conceived of as a domain, for example, a sphere or a system, which endows whatever enters it, whenever it enters, with political nature; whatever leaves this domain ceases to be political, whenever it makes its exit.”37 This spatial image allows Heller to leave behind the “obsession with exclusion” that characterizes categorical specifications of the political. Thinking of the political in this way, as a domain, may offend the heightened sensitivities of spatial theorists attuned to casting doubt on the adequacy of spatial metaphors in other people’s theories. But to dwell too much on such matters distracts from the more significant issue. Heller’s point is that the political quality of phenomena does not lie in the “actual character of things” at all, and it is not best appreciated by assessing whether such things conform to a model of the essence of the properly political. The figure of the “domain,” into which things can enter or exit, therefore allows Heller to draw attention to the variable formation of those things taken to be political at particular times.

In part 2 I seek to redeem the concept of the political from overly ontological
interpretations by developing Heller’s suggestion of thinking of the political as a domain of action. Following this path allows us to acknowledge that theories of democratic politics might do well to focus on questions about the sources of and responses to “political evil.” In making this suggestion, I am following Paul Ricoeur’s account of “the paradox of the political.” Ricoeur provided one of the first treatments in post–World War II French thought of the conceptual splitting of politics. At its simplest, the paradox of the political turns on the idea that there is a tension between the notion of “the polity” as an ideal sphere of political rationality and the idea of “politics” as the concrete manifestation of this ideal.38 Stated like this, Ricoeur’s paradox looks much the same as other variations of the conceptual splitting of politics that I will consider. But Ricoeur was not simply concerned with distinguishing between an essence of politics and its empirical, or “ontic,” appearance. His account was written in the wake of political events of 1956, in particular the crushing of the Hungarian uprising by Warsaw Pact forces, a central event in reorienting the intellectual cultures and commitments of so-called Western Marxism and the New Left of the 1960s around issues of democracy. The lesson Ricoeur drew from these events was that asserting the autonomy of political action, its irreducibility to economic or social life, also requires an acknowledgment that political life is characterized by its own distinctive forms of evil: “politics fosters specific evils which are precisely political evils, evils of political power.”39 The paradox of political life that Ricoeur identifies lies here, in the relation between affirmations of the autonomy of political rationality as a good in itself and the perils of distinctive forms of evil that the enactment of politics always harbors.

In important respects, Ricoeur’s elaboration of the paradox of the political anticipates the problem that motivates later accounts of the political, including those of Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, and Pierre Rosanvallon. It also helps us see that what is perhaps most important about those accounts is not so much a particular ontological notion of antagonism, for example, or an existentialist vision of the necessarily empty place of power in democracy. Ricoeur’s account of the paradox of the political alerts us instead to the degree to which traditions of radical thought might be usefully evaluated according to the degree to which they are willing to engage with a resolutely “liberal” problem: that of imagining the shared exercise of power in light of the always present possibility of its abuse.40

PART 3: PHENOMENOLOGIES OF INJUSTICE

Ricoeur’s account of the paradox of the political offers a different perspective on debates between apparently consensual theories of deliberative democracy and self-consciously edgy theories of agonistic democracy. We might see both these traditions as attempts to find resolutions to the possibility of political evil that
comes with any affirmation of the autonomy of political rationality. Some theorists find resources for doing so in the ambivalent energies of human desire and repulsion, some in the fragile conventions of intersubjective interaction. The chapters in part 2 try to salvage the concept of the political from overly ontological interpretations that divide political life into two parts, prioritize one part (the properly political), and then spatialize this division into an image of stable and orderly routines occasionally being interrupted by sudden ruptures. Part 3 reconstructs the shared intellectual space of critical theories of democracy in light of the discussion of the ordinary understanding of political life in part 1, an understanding in which the eventful dimensions of life are not set off against ongoing rhythms of action but are folded into them and emerge from them.

Chapter 6, “Claims of the Affected,” reconstructs what is at stake in the concern among critical theorists of democracy with spatial topics such as transnational publics, migration, and immigration. I start by observing that the geographical turn in critical theory typically has a globalist inflection. This is evident in the renewed attention given to the “all affected interests” principle in theorizing new political geographies of belonging, citizenship, and responsibility. In light of the sort of charitable reading of the spatial grammar of political thought that I outlined earlier in this introduction, I argue that reconstruction of the idea of all-affectedness in critical theories of democracy actually requires a heightened appreciation for the situated contexts in which grievances and harms are generated, recognized, problematized, and acted upon. Chapter 7, “Subjects of Domination,” further develops the same theme, demonstrating how the reconfiguration of all-affectedness is associated with a focus on the specific experiences of harm from which emerge claims of injustice requiring democratic response. The chapter asks what it is that critical theorists of democracy are trying to do conceptually when they pick apart geographical figures. I argue that what emerges from this pattern of analysis is a clear sense that democratic politics emerges in response to the specifically political evil of domination—that is, from an experience of subjection to the arbitrary will of others. Domination is a long-standing theme in critical theory, of course, but part 3 considers how central “non-domination” as a primary political value has become to contemporary critical theories of democracy. Chapter 8, “The Sense of Injustice,” then draws into view how the conceptual reconstruction of ideas of all-affectedness and domination is related to a significant shift in critical theories of democracy, a conceptual shift to prioritizing injustice over ideal theories of justice. It is a move that, on the one hand, accords primacy to the sense of injustice that animates demands for justice but, on the other hand, makes public practices of acknowledgment, rationalization, and justification central to the meaning of injustice. The significance of giving priority to injustice lies in decisively reorienting critical analysis toward the assessment of the democratic qualities of public life.