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CHAPTER 6

Polemos and Agon

Alex Thomson

Agonist political theorists stress not only the irreducibility but the centrality of conflict to democratic politics. This sets them apart from pluralist or deliberative democrats who may acknowledge the impossibility of eliminating disputes, but whose efforts are directed towards institutions and processes which would foster co-operation and reconciliation rather than sustain antagonism. To an agonist, this is to commit one of two possible errors. Either it entails taking a weaker position, which may leave us exposed to the violent opposition of those who do not recognize the common space within which we offer to negotiate; or it deploys that sleight of hand whereby the most violent position, which seeks to extirpate its opponents from the political field, masquerades as the most peaceful. In contrast, agonist thinkers aim to remap our understanding of democracy in such a way that conflict becomes not that which politics seeks to eliminate but its very principle.

Agonists are neither terrorists nor nihilists. They are not interested in violence for its own sake, nor in the purging fire which dominates the revolutionary tradition. Indeed, the problems that the agonists confront are recognizable as those which have preoccupied both liberal theorists and their opponents in recent decades: tensions arising from competing demands for cultural recognition within the liberal state; questions of legitimation raised by declining political participation; the justification and universality of liberal principles. Standing on the banks of what they portray as the mainstream of contemporary Western political thought, they seek to revitalize rather than overthrow the democratic tradition. But

because they diagnose a complicity between liberal political thought and the problems facing modern democratic states, agonist positions polemicize against both the city and the academy. This lends a pre-eminently theoretical discussion the allure of urgency and opposition but opens it to the risk of conflating the two spheres and substituting debate within the academy for action within the city. My aim in the first part of this essay will be to identify those features which distinguish the agonist attempt to resolve these questions, and in particular to examine critically their call for something like a 'return' to politics.

Agonist arguments are, to use James Tully's (1995, 44) terms, 'non-authoritative in the sense that they did not develop along with the formation of contemporary constitutional societies and their language of self-understanding'. Like many counter-movements in the history of Western political theory, their position is articulated as a reinterpretation of the democratic tradition, signalled by the anachronistic lexicon deriving from the Greek term *agōn*. Although I acknowledge that to some extent there is merely a family resemblance between those theorists who have invoked this vocabulary, that shared rhetoric alone would be enough to justify the comparison. It points us towards common reference points in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt, as well as their concern to rearticulate the relationship between the theory, practice and language of political encounter.

In *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future* John Dunn (1979, 28) writes: 'If we are all democrats today, it is not a very cheerful fate to share. Today, in politics, "democracy" is the name for what we cannot have – yet cannot cease to want.' Dunn seeks to restore our sense that democracy can and should mean autonomy, self-rule. But in complex social systems our experience of politics is largely that of tacit assent, and the choice between alternative forms of rule by others. If this is indeed our fate, then the question posed by the agonists must be a genuine one. Their work can be sympathetically understood as an attempt to reshape the modern political imaginary and in particular to effect a break between our

understanding of democratic politics and its current domination by the horizon of the modern state. However, in my account of the agonist position, I will seek to show what I take to be the limits of this political re-imagining. In the remainder of my essay I will sketch an alternative position, which I associate with a vocabulary deriving not from *agōn* but from *polemos*. Agonist arguments rely on a rethinking of social theory which presents itself as a modest rejection of philosophy as metaphysics; I characterize in terms of *polemos* the deconstructive renewal of specifically philosophical, hence metaphysical, questioning deriving from the project of Martin Heidegger and exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida. *Contra* the agonists, I will argue for an aporetic disjunction between philosophical and political enquiry; drawing on Derrida's political writings I will offer a sketch of a philosophical indifference to politics which is neither a rejection of political engagement nor the replacement of politics by theory.

The Limits of Agonism

Precedent for identifying a distinctive agonist position might be drawn from Seyla Benhabib's 'Introduction' to a collection of essays entitled *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. She identifies 'a tension' between 'defenders of the proceduralist-deliberative model of democracy' and the 'the agonistic model of democratic politics' (Benhabib 1996, 7). The context is helpful for situating what is at stake. Broadly speaking, all the contributors to the volume seek to move beyond the narrowly conceived alternative of liberal or communitarian politics. Liberalism, represented in its pre-eminent modern form by the work of John Rawls, seeks to develop a rational legitimation of decision-making processes in which the best possible balance between competing interests can be achieved. The aim of the theorist is to help guide the political community towards those institutions and practices for which the greatest possible consent amongst citizens can be established, owing to their

identification with an ideal of public reason. Communitarian critics of this model emphasize the fragility of a merely theoretical ideal, suggesting that security and consensus can best be derived from the alignment of political process with the pre-political sentiments of a community considered as relatively homogeneous in culture. As the subtitle suggests, both deliberative and agonist theorists challenge the identification of politics with the state. Deliberative democrats seek to thicken the decision-making process by engaging wider forms of public discussion throughout civil society to consolidate, and where appropriate to challenge, the state. To give the position a minimal preliminary definition, an agonist opposes the institutional emphasis of this theory, and identifies democracy as a political principle that cannot be directly aligned with a particular regime. Democracy as self-rule becomes something more like an ethic, or what Sheldon Wolin (1996, 43) in his contribution calls 'a mode of being'; but this emphasis on democracy also suggests, as Richard Flathman (1998, 14) notes, a potential tension between agonists and more individualistic or voluntarist liberal thinkers.

In other words, agonists aim to redefine the relationship between democracy and politics. They share with many other critical analyses on both left and right a sense that modern democracy is not living up to its name. What makes their position distinctive is that it calls for a revitalization of modern democratic culture not in terms of the articulation of public goods which exceed partisan interests, but through a celebration of the continuous conflict of those interests. Agonists deny the possibility of a common good which can be distinguished from power relations within society, and claim that the attempt to articulate such a good must itself be interested. Because they deny the possibility or desirability of citizens being able to free themselves from their attachment to social groups subsidiary to the larger political community, or whose borders overflow those of the polis, they can only articulate a distinctive political virtue in terms of the value of political conflict itself.

A correlative of the agonist position is the demand to rethink the relationship between political theory and democratic practice. Insistence on the persistence of power relations implies a distrust of any attempt to objectively map those relations. Through a conflation of academic liberal political theory with the rhetoric of consensus in contemporary Western political discourse, agonists portray agonist arguments as a virtuous attempt to foster the kind of pluralism they advocate, grounded in practices rather than institutions. So in addition to calling for a rethinking of the relationship between politics and democracy, agonism demands a rethinking of the relationship between politics and its ground, reconceived not as theoretical, but as practical. The appeal of Nietzsche for agonists is that his major legacy to the twentieth century has been his challenge to the primacy of theory; the appeal of Arendt, her grounding of politics in action.

On this basis we can identify some exemplary claims. Bonnie Honig begins her *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* with the statement:

> I look to Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt to provide the contrasting alternative, a perspective from which agonistic conflict is celebrated and the identification or conflation of politics with administration is charged with closing down the agon, or with duplicitously participating in its contests while pretending to rise above them. (Honig 1993, 2)

For Chantal Mouffe (2000, 101, 103), the modern conception of '"politics" consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations', but agonistic pluralists acknowledge 'that, far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence'. William Connolly (2002, x) argues that agonistic democracy is a 'practice' that 'breaks with the democratic idealism of communitarianism through its refusal to equate concern for human dignity with a quest for rational consensus'. Agonism means safeguarding the space in which antagonistic social forces fail to subdue one another; it 'affirms the indispensability of identity to life, disturbs the dogmatization of identity, and folds care for the protean diversity of human life into the

strife and interdependence of identity/difference' (Connolly 2002, x).

We are now in a position to see how the two most characteristic strategies of agonist thinkers are linked. To understand justice as strife is to repudiate the attempt by theoretical reason to divine the harmonious order to which politics ought to approximate, or to seek to deduce political institutions on an axiomatic basis. Because agonists suspect descriptive approaches to politics of a normative bias, agonism requires something like a theoretical attack on theory. The tendency to distinguish contemporary democratic politics from something like a political ground or essence serves as both a polemical contestation of the positions they identify with the failures of modern politics and a problematically theoretical move designed to reverse the priority of theory over practice.

That the basic orientation of agonist thinking is towards a new ground for politics is evident in the work of both William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe. Connolly's pluralism is more explicitly grounded in an attempt to rethink ontology along contemporary Spinozist lines. Here the attack on metaphysics is an attack on transcendence in the name of immanence. Mouffe's position towards ontology is more ambiguous because it remains attached to the idea of critical social science rather than metaphysics. However the absent 'centre' and openness of the social functions as a ground equivalent to that of Connolly's ontology. This appeal to ontology, however tentative, is necessary to ensure that agonism advocates antagonism as such rather than any particular antagonism: when forms of speech are identified with forms of life the claim to describe the whole field still rests on the ability of one way of talking to articulate relations between all those ways, and thus the tentative establishment of a meta-language.

Agonism replaces the idea of a public good with 'politics' itself as an abstract value deprived of any content, except for the pragmatic virtues of pluralism and tolerance. Via this substitution, a minority group which identifies itself with politics itself can operate what we

might call an immanent critique of what passes for politics in ordinary language. The spectre of Carl Schmitt haunts the discourse on agonism insofar as the reinvigoration of politics promised by the agonist depends on a prior denunciation of the present appearance of politics as banal management. As Agnes Heller (1991, 331) has pointed out, the need for a concept of the political only arises 'once the birth of modern mass democracy finally rendered obsolete the equation of political class with political action'. Only then does 'the question concerning the character of "the political" appear on the agenda; for a criterion for determining which actions, phenomena and institutions are of political provenance and which are not, had to be found.' Heller's comments suggest that for all its appeal to tradition, agonism is distinctively 'modern'. This is equally apparent from its obsession with epistemology cast as the question of the foundations of politics and of political theory; the desire for a new ground echoes the desire for the unity of theory and practice characteristic of both the rationalist approach of the Kantian and the radical approach of the revolutionary.

In my account of the agonistic position I have stressed three elements that distinguish the agonist from the liberal, deliberative or communitarian democrat: their insistence on conflict; that conflict be understood not as a contingent feature of politics but as its constitutive and distinctive feature; and their epistemological concern to re-ground the theoretical discussion of politics. Because of the latter, their understanding of conflict cannot go all the way down: which is to suggest that they seek to induce theoretical agreement regarding the grounds on which they commend political conflict. It makes little difference whether that attempt to persuade is considered a matter of reason or rhetoric: if the former, theory still precedes politics and the model of justice which the agonist contests has not been overturned; if the latter, the emphasis on disagreement rather than consensus becomes merely a matter of preference. The most charitable reading would see agonism as a tactical attempt to challenge the discourse of liberalism from within, in keeping with Richard Rorty's

redescription of philosophy as persuasion; but even if the purported alliance of theoretical and political radicalism merely provides exoteric cover, the political valence of its rhetorical pose remains to be reckoned. Like Leo Strauss (1964, 1), the agonists imply that a political theory is 'the rightful queen of the social sciences, the sciences of man and human affairs'. But Strauss is perhaps more open about the limits of philosophy and the political role of persuasion.

Polemos against *Agōn*

I turn now to Heidegger and Derrida, in order to sketch an alternative position to that of agonism. Heidegger is of interest for two reasons. Firstly, because it is sometimes said that his thought lies behind much recent writing on the relationship between politics and philosophy, including that of the agonists. In particular, the ontic-ontological difference has been taken as the ur-form of the distinction between politics and the political. For example Mouffe directly identifies 'current practices of democratic politics' as 'located at the "ontic" level' and '"the political"' with 'the ontological dimension' (2005, 9). Secondly, the comparison is illuminating because Heidegger's understanding of *polemos* is specifically cast as a struggle with Nietzsche. To look at the tension between *agōn* and *polemos* is to tease out two interpretations of Nietzsche. I conclude with a discussion of Derrida because his work stands in a similar relationship to Heidegger as Heidegger's mature thought does to Nietzsche. Understood as part of his long confrontation with Heidegger, Derrida's own political writings offer the possibility of extending the specifically philosophical orientation which I identify with *polemos* rather than *agōn*, but raising anew the question of philosophy's constitutive and aporetic relationship to politics.

Heidegger distinguishes between ontic and ontological questions in *Being and Time*. An ontic enquiry concerns a particular type of beings and presumes an ontological decision as to

the mode of being of those beings. For example, the natural sciences take various aspects of nature as their object, relying on certain guiding assumptions which stabilize and regulate the enquiry. Heidegger is clear that the task of philosophy is that of fundamental ontology, or enquiry into being itself, a question which is both prior to, and unavailable from, any regional ontology. By contrast, Mouffe distinguishes something more like a transhistorical idea of politics as the conflictual mediation of social antagonism from any particular historical or ideological 'content' that might be confused with it. The distinction is necessary to any structural or functional analysis which seeks to suspend judgement as to what constitutes a 'proper' form of political activity. In this sense, Mouffe is post-structuralist in her advocacy of this methodological practice, along with its theoretical self-understanding, as in and of itself a political ideal.

In asking what makes a political event political, Mouffe departs from Heidegger's project; his focus would be rather on what makes it an event. In his work following *Being and Time*, the only philosophical question becomes why there 'are beings at all instead of nothing' (Heidegger 2000, 1). But even the early Heidegger demands a suspension of the 'ontic' sciences, and their 'ontological' underpinnings, in the name of philosophy reconceived as fundamental ontology:

> The question of Being aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type, and, in so doing, already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations. *Basically, all ontology, no matter how rich and firmly compacted a series of categories it has at its disposal, remains blind and perverted from its ownmost aim, if it has not first adequately clarified the meaning of Being, and conceived this clarification as its fundamental task*. (Heidegger 1962, 31 – Heidegger's emphasis)

To stress *polemos* rather than *agōn* is to reiterate Heidegger's own insistence that philosophy — that is enquiry after truth rather than rhetorical persuasion or a historical science — depends on thinking the ontological difference, that is the difference between Being and any

determinate beings. Stephen K. White (2000, 14) offers a succinct formulation of this position as a possible objection to ontologies such as those of Mouffe and Connolly: 'Ontology should refer only to the study of the question: What is being? And ontology is intrinsically concerned with a *true* answer to this single question.'

It is later in the development of Heidegger's thinking that the term *polemos*, which Heidegger translates as *Auseinandersetzung*, comes into play. The term will itself require translation. In the preamble to his careful and extensive study, Gregory Fried (Fried 2000, 16–19) distinguishes at least seven different senses in which aspects of Heidegger's own project can be helpfully identified with the term. Here I will largely be concerned with two. Firstly, with *polemos* as a term for the general strife of Being. As such it is that towards which Heidegger's thinking is directed, but also that which is covered up in both everyday life and in traditional metaphysical enquiry. But crucially, *polemos* is also a term for Heidegger's way of thinking, for that deconstruction by which the absent presence of the truth is experienced in thought (see also Van Roermund in this volume). So to compare *polemos* with *agōn* is to contrast not only two different objects, Being as the cosmic strife within which human existence and political life takes place as distinct from any of the manifold historical forms of human life, but two different manners of enquiry.

Heidegger clearly distinguishes the thinking of *polemos* from that of *agōn* in his lecture course on Parmenides and Anaximander, given in 1943. Like the agonists, he acknowledges an indebtedness to Nietzsche, but also his concern to move beyond what he sees as Nietzsche's position. Yet, as Ulriche Haase (2007) has emphasized, this is an engagement in which Nietzsche is not dismissed. Rather, Heidegger treats him as a strong precursor with whom a specific kind of encounter is required. The struggle to find a distance from Nietzsche is the struggle to renew thought itself: 'to understand Nietzsche as the end of metaphysics is the historical beginning of the future of Occidental thought' (Heidegger cited by Haase 2007,

23). So *polemos* is constituted in direct relation to the equation of metaphysics with nihilism, and Heidegger's endeavour to distinguish thinking from philosophy. Without engaging in a full exegesis of Heidegger's complex and at times treacherous relationship with Nietzsche, a brief discussion of this passage in relation to the lecture course as a whole will illustrate my claim that the thinkers of *agonism* have not made what Heidegger presents here as the decisive move beyond Nietzsche.

The context is Heidegger's concern to explore the idea of truth as conflictual in its essence, an idea which he attributes to Greek thinking, and which he claims has been covered over by subsequent thought (i.e. nihilism):

> we do not understand to what extent the essence of truth is, in itself, a conflict. If, however, in the primordial thinking of the Greeks the conflictual essence of truth was experienced, then it cannot astonish us to hear, in the dicta of this primordial thinking, precisely the word 'conflict'. The interpretation of the Greek world by Jacob Burckhardt and Nietzsche has taught us to recognise the 'agonal principle' and to see in the 'competitive match' an essential 'impulse' in the 'life' of this people. But we must then go on to ask where the principle of the 'agon' is grounded and whence the essence of 'life' and of man receives its determination so that it is 'agonal'. (Heidegger 1992, 18)

In going beyond Nietzsche, Heidegger pursues an enquiry into the grounds of agonism. In other words, both the mode of doing philosophy (*Auseinandersetzung*/*polemos*) and that which it seeks to uncover (*Auseinandersetzung*/*polemos*) exceed the anthropological and historical enquiry to which Nietzsche, Heidegger suggests, appeals. The result is to move the horizon to which our gaze is directed from the city governed by contest to the cosmic strife within which the city is itself located. Both the method and the results of the enquiry have political consequences.

Firstly, there is a challenge to the anthropocentric and anthropomorphic tendency of agonist thinking. In his lecture course on the pre-Socratic philosophers, Nietzsche had suggested that Heraclitus had identified justice with conflict on the basis of a metaphorical

transfer from his experience of Greek life:

> This is one of the most magnificent notions: strife as the continuous working out of a unified, lawful, reasonable justice, a notion that was produced from the deepest fundament of the Greek being […] From the gymnasium, musical competitions and political life Heraclitus becomes familiar with the paradigm of such strife. (Nietzsche 2001, 64)

Nietzsche's position here is that of the cultural historian, the sociological debunker of ideology or the thinker of human life in terms of language games: philosophy is the product and reflection of particular ways of living and perceiving the world. Knowing only himself and his society, man projects his own categories onto the world. Against this claim to have uncovered the ground of philosophical activity, Heidegger reasserts something like the ambiguity of Heraclitus's discovery, since there is no measure by which we might determine whether the city replicates cosmic justice or the vision of cosmic balance is simply the wishful projection of the citizen. In other words, the thinking of *polemos* refuses to decide whether the relationship between the philosopher and justice is one of blindness or insight, and whether the relationship between the city and justice is one of harmony, or hubris. The overcoming of metaphysics thus entails a problematic relationship to philosophy, in which the only true path for philosophy is a recursive destruction of its own history in order to uncover a more original way of thinking: more original in the sense of having a more profound relationship to the strife of Being, predicated on the need to overcome the contemporary technological world as the completion of metaphysics in nihilism.

In his own essay on Heidegger's understanding of *polemos*, Derrida (1993) suggests that one of the former's concerns in this period might have been to distinguish his understanding of conflict from the anthropological sense of war on which Schmitt's concept of the political is founded. For Schmitt (1976, 35), *polemos* is the fundamental possibility of the political entity, whose very existence is only properly given in the act of declaring war. For Heidegger, by contrast, *polemos* as Being must by its very nature exceed the city. This is

a point stressed by Heidegger several times in his lectures on Holderlin's *Der Ister*:

> The pre-political essence of the *polis*, that essence that first makes possible everything political in the originary and in the derivative sense, lies in its being the open site of that fitting-destining [*Schickung*] from out of which all human relations towards beings […] are determined. (Heidegger 1996, 82)

Indeed the fate of the city is something more like an effect of contending fortunes at the higher level: that is the chaotic unfolding of successive epochs of Being. If the city is that in which man finds his being, the city will only find its being within a larger struggle. To conceive of this struggle means taking seriously the possibility of the demise or dissolution of the city, and therefore removes the question of taking a stand for or against the city from the remit of philosophy.

If, for Schmitt, political theory is oriented towards a decision that exceeds the theoretical because it is a matter of practice (cf. Derrida 1997, 114), for Heidegger philosophy is oriented towards a decision that exceeds the practical because it exceeds the human. Decision for Heidegger is not to be thought in anthropological terms, as the choice made by an agent between two courses of action, nor as a process or activity of being, but as something more like the original division or setting adrift of being. Accordingly, the *Contributions to Philosophy* is rich in statements in which it becomes clear that the rewriting of history as the unfolding of being happens across and through the individual and the city, but cannot be identified with either. A 1953 clarification added to the *Introduction to Metaphysics* reminds us that 'de-cision here does not mean the judgement and choice of human beings, but rather a division in the aforementioned togetherness of Being, unconcealment, seeming and not-Being' (Heidegger 2000, 116). Derrida's reading of Heidegger is generous in the sense that we might postulate less philosophical reasons for the latter to wish to distinguish the struggle of being with the war in which Germany was currently engaged. In the *Contributions* Heidegger seems to sense the danger of identifying national and philosophical destiny, which is present not only in his work of the Rectorate period but remains visible whenever he links

philosophy to the German language.

A second consequence of Heidegger's identification of philosophy with enquiry into truth as the grounds of agonistic competition clarifies the problem of mapping the ontic-ontological difference onto the distinction between politics and the political. Greek thinking is 'primordial' in Heidegger's terms not because Greek philosophy knows a truth which modern thinking cannot recover, nor because Greek experience reveals the ground of their thought, as Nietzsche implies. Rather, primordial here indicates an experience of that which comes before the origin, but which remains withdrawn from thought. It is not a lost past but that which remains to come, and on which thinking remains able to draw, albeit not without a recursive movement in which destruction and recovery are inseparably conjoined. We might think of this as precisely the ambiguity of Heraclitus's thinking: the impossibility of determining the relationship between law and justice because of the withholding of justice as the ground of law. Justice functions as ground whether we consider it divine or human, transcendent or immanent. But it is inseparable from the laws through which it is manifest and from which it is absent. *Polemos* means thinking the complication of this relationship rather than its clarification.

To characterize as Heideggerean the recent tendency to distinguish 'politics' from the 'political', as Oliver Merchant (2007) does, is misleading. The thrust of Heidegger's work is to ground philosophical enquiry on the distinction between the ontic (which would include all human activity, political or otherwise) and the ontological (Being). This must entail a suspicion about the possibility of drawing Being into political argument and, thus, about the political availability of philosophy. The tracing of the difference between the ontic and the ontological (by which method alone Being can be brought into our reckoning) is in part the bringing to appearance of that which cannot be calculated or reckoned with. The possibility that such a tracing can give rise to a new or improved form of calculation must remain

radically in abeyance. Anything that could be a foundation would have been recuperated theoretically.

This radically aporetic account of the relationship between the enquiry of the philosopher and his or her activity as a citizen also directs us to suspect any attempt to reground politics in something which exceeds theoretical reason. The difference between Arendt and Derrida is illuminating on this point because it illustrates two divergent responses to Heidegger. Accepting the suspicion of theory, Arendt requires a new ground for politics, which she finds in action, maintaining the modern relationship between political theory and the history of freedom, but with history construed as the fortunate and unpredictable sequence of emancipatory beginnings. Derrida, who might be said to agree with Arendt insofar as he sees a free decision as being in excess of any rational calculation of ends, goes on to suspect any possible identification of such a decision. The possibility of free action for Arendt is demonstrated by reference to a series of key (but fleeting) examples. For Derrida, that possibility is precisely that which cannot be demonstrated. Once an action or event had been identified, providing an example to be imitated, access to political freedom would be blocked rather than opened. When Derrida insists on the impossibility of certain kinds of an event, of forgiveness, of decision, he is not arguing that they never happen, but that any kind of thinking which begins from the presumption of their existence will be less likely rather than more likely to cultivate them. Arendt's turn to philosophy of praxis might be contrasted with Derrida's own response to Heidegger. Rather than turn away, he seeks to continue to think philosophy as the deconstruction of metaphysics, and sustains the ontological orientation of Heidegger's work. Against Heidegger, Derrida insists on the history of political institutions and vocabularies not as the destruction of original truth but as a fortunate but unpredictable sequence of events which continue to shelter certain positive possibilities. In contrast to Arendt, our attention is turned not to founding acts but to the betrayal of such events in their

subsequent institutionalisation without which they would have no originary force.

This leads Derrida to a very different position from that of Heidegger. Take for example the implications of Derrida's (1999; Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000) work on the notion of hospitality, which is conceived as an interrogation of the political and conceptual grammar governing both the theory and practice of the relationship between the modern democratic state and the fact of immigration. As a duty, Derrida argues, the offering of hospitality ought to be unlimited. In practice, our capacity for offering hospitality is restricted, not only by the physical or practical considerations such as resources, but by the conceptual problem that identity depends on the maintenance of borders, and that therefore the identity on which my capacity to offer hospitality depends will always contravene the duty to offer hospitality. The real failure of states – now, as in history – to offer unlimited hospitality to refugees, asylum seekers or economic migrants stems from the restriction of certain kinds of goods to its own citizens. Hospitality can only be offered to the extent that one remains a host, that one commands and regulates a space of refuge. This argument implies but does not depend upon the inadequation of any act of hospitality to an ideal. But it goes further in showing the ideal of hospitality to be itself incoherent, pulled apart not so much by conflicting or aporetic duties but by the conceptual paradox involved in the single obligation to offer shelter. In practical terms, this suggests that the debate over immigration will be interminable because programmed into the modern ideal of democracy conceived as universal brotherhood. Derrida's work evokes this interminable conflict while refusing to assume the responsibility for setting limits to it in practice or in theory. As Derrida comments in *Rogues*:

> one will never actually be able to 'prove' that there is more democracy in granting or in refusing the right to vote to immigrants … nor that there is more or less democracy in a straight majority vote as opposed to proportional voting. (Derrida 2005, 36)

If there is a political principle in Derrida's work it is this: that the ability of the political community to cultivate its own affairs, to protect itself, the extent of its own self-governance,

depends on a constitutive relation with its outside. Absolute closure, like absolute openness, would be the dissolution of the political body. This places the political community always and immediately into contradiction with democracy, since the ground for political equality before the law, *isonomia* will always be restricted not only de facto (every city we know has walls) but de jure (to be a city it must have walls). The burden of the language of democracy in Derrida's work is to highlight this contradiction within our inherited conception of politics, which does not stem from a moral or religious insertion of equality into a conception of politics to which it is alien, but from the emergence of democracy as such. Derrida's insistence on a democracy 'to-come' is a reminder that what might be described as a tragic diremption of politics from democracy is also the opening of its possibility, and of all the contestations of power in the name of equality and freedom to which history attests.

This need not be understood as a radical replacement or rejection of the tradition, but more as the aspiration to renew the self-understanding of political philosophy. To this extent, Derrida can be seen as rejecting the Heideggerean problematic of the history of metaphysics as nihilism. For example, it is possible to give an account of Aristotle's thought which is very close to my presentation of Derrida's. In his work on Aristotle, Yack (1999, 288; cf. 1993) argues that political community is precisely that form of social organization which fosters possibilities of cooperation which go beyond those enabled within the family or clan, but that must necessarily enable new forms of distrust: 'as in a family business, these affinities raise expectations of disinterested behaviour and sympathy which tend to intensify distrust and turn disagreements about advantage into suspicion of betrayal.' For Yack's Aristotle, and I suggest for Derrida, the political difference between dissensus and consensus is merely a matter of rhetoric. Politics is required by, is the very experience of, the existence of a political community in which decisions are made on behalf of the whole, but in which there is disagreement about means and ends. Taken to extremes, both disagreement and agreement

threaten the destruction of politics: politics is the specific realm between identity (or pre-political community) and the destructive separation of the city into two factions. There can be no ground for either difference or unity as rhetorical strategies.

Franco Volpi (2007, 32) has argued that the rehabilitation of the question of 'praxis' in German political philosophy owes a great deal to those students of Heidegger who rejected his 'appropriation' of Aristotle's practical philosophy for ontological purposes. Via the example and inspiration of Hannah Arendt, of critical theory and of the French return to Nietzsche, this swerve away from the deconstruction of metaphysics towards a practical foundation of political thought might be seen as an exemplary forerunner of political agonism. My aim in this essay has simply been to distinguish those thinkers of praxis from that other thinking which might more properly be called deconstructive. On occasion Derrida calls this latter mode 'hauntological', the pun, in French at least, indicating the latter's continuity with, as well as its unsettling of, ontology a traditionally conceived. The consequences of pursuing such a deconstruction of ontology might be seen as something like a studied indifference to politics, because it requires us to see the fate of politics within a larger frame, in which something more like a cosmology may eclipse the possibility of the cosmopolitical. The practice of this philosophical indifference need not in itself be anti-political, as I have shown in relation to Derrida's thinking. Indeed it is an essential claim of deconstruction that such indifference is the necessary precondition for a thinking of politics which would be open to the future.

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