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WHAT IS POLITICAL ONTOLOGY?

Review of: Oliver Marchart (2010) *Die politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 391 pp.

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Die politische Differenz is a much extended version of a book Oliver Marchart had already published in an English version in 2007.¹ But it has nearly doubled in size, and the scope of authors and texts he discusses has broadened. As far as I can see, the book in its current form is the best and most encompassing overview and discussion in German or English of a 'new political philosophy' or 'philosophy of the political' that despite its heterogeneity can be seen as a new paradigm of political thought. Marchart, an Austrian philosopher teaching in Switzerland and Germany, has already made a name for himself as a highly visible and politically engaged theorist who has published widely on political philosophy and cultural theory, but this book has quickly become a reference work for discussions concerning the political usage of Heidegger, the rediscovery of ontological themes in political philosophy, and debates surrounding authors from Lefort to Agamben.

In this book, Marchart promises to do two things, and both aims he fulfills admirably. He first sets out to carefully map the field of theories and positions that develop and employ a systematic distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' and that treat this distinction as an ontological one. Most of these theories can be identified as explicit or implicit versions of 'Left-Heideggerianism', and their main and common claim is that political philosophy should indeed proceed in an ontological fashion, even if the very understanding of ontology here diverges from the traditional sense. Marchart's second aim after this reconstruction is to systematically develop the theoretical and political implications of these positions and to defend his own version of such a philosophy of the political. It is here where he takes up sides (for Laclau and against Agamben, for example) and where he can display his own abilities as a strong systematic theorist with an acute sense for what one might call the politics of philosophy itself.

Political difference/ontological difference

In an impressive *tour d'horizon* Marchart first gives a short conceptual history of the 'politics'/'the political' distinction with its different strands that at first glance share nothing more than a 'family resemblance' (14). Interestingly, this distinction most often occurs where a certain crisis of politics is diagnosed and should therefore be seen as a conceptual tool of 'post-foundationalist' political thought aiming at the 'putting into question of metaphysical figures of founding and grounding' (16). Denying ultimate grounds for politics and society, however, does not mean denying the act of grounding or founding altogether. It allows for contingent, revisable, plural, or contested acts of grounding. It is exactly this kind of 'never-ending play between ground and non-ground (*Grund* und *Abgrund*)' (21) that Marchart sees developed in Heidegger's work. In a bold, perhaps somewhat brief interpretation that omits the vast differences between Heidegger's rather shifting positions on this, Marchart offers the following parallel or analogy. Just as Heidegger conceives of the ontological difference in terms of constitution, disclosure, non-identity, displacement, and absence, most theorists of the political conceive of politics in

the same way: particular 'beings' and the particular political phenomena are constituted by something with which it is not identical, which it tries to disclose and fulfill but can never fully embody, namely 'Being' or 'the political'. In other words, the ontological difference, i.e., the distinction between 'Being' and 'beings' (*Sein* and *Seiendem*), has the same structure as the political difference, i.e., the distinction between the 'political' and 'politics'.

Marchart finds variants of this in Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt, founders of the 'associative' and 'dissociative' paths of thinking of 'the political', respectively (35), and follows their trajectories. The most important conclusion from this discussion is that all these conceptions allow for radical contingency, even 'necessary contingency' (78), since they describe the very site of politics as a site of action, conflict and dynamism, where nothing (i.e. no ultimate ground) guarantees its stability. In these theories, therefore, the moment of the political is the moment of contingency.

Conceptions of 'the political'

In the second part of his book, Marchart discusses in detail several theories that obviously share the traits he has outlined. Jean-Luc Nancy is in a certain way the paradigmatic Left-Heideggerian thinker of the political, and the impact of the *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* he was co-directing with *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe* in Paris from 1980 to 1984 on the French discussion cannot be overestimated. It is Nancy who explicitly elaborates on the difference between 'politics' and 'the political' in terms of absence and absent grounds. His own conception of community was meant to answer to this groundlessness or radical difference, and Marchart, obviously in wide agreement, follows him here. But Nancy, in his view, also seems tempted by a certain 'philosophism' and a disregard for the concrete situations, circumstances and institutions in which political problems arise. This contributes to his tendency to 'depoliticize' the concept of the political that becomes so abstract that it is hard to apply to the more mundane questions of political action. Marchart also charges Nancy with 'underestimating the constitutive role of conflict and antago-

nism' (110, 115) which might be a direct expression of his attempt, following Heidegger, to start from a strong concept of community.

Claude Lefort, obviously working from a different philosophical background, can also be read as developing a comparable notion of the political. His insistence on the 'originary separation' or non-identity of society, and the necessity of explicit acts of instituting, is a variant of a political ontology that starts from an original lack or gap. His highly influential theory of democracy and critique of totalitarianism can then be read as an attempt to elucidate the very possibility of politics 'without banisters', to quote Arendt. For Lefort (as for Machiavelli), democracy is not the abolishment of conflict, but its institutionalization: 'in a democracy, the general absence of a positive (or common; MS) ground is not obscured, but institutionally recognized' (149), and this makes Lefort's theory paradigmatically post-foundationalist.

In the work of Alain Badiou, Marchart finds a fully developed post-foundationalist 'system' that explicitly aims not to be 'political philosophy' in the narrower sense. Badiou even turns the hierarchy of the two terms around. For him 'le politique' designates the dubious object of political philosophy: 'une politique', a particular politics of the state, and 'la politique', the true level of political experience and action. But despite these terminological differences from the other theories, Marchart can claim Badiou for the tradition of thought he is trying to reconstruct, because he advances some serious suggestions as to how to conceive of political events beyond the narrow confines of a state- or representation-centred perspective. It has to be open to the radical contingency of the political event and to be conscious of the fact that only in political acts are political subjects given. Marchart credits Badiou also for giving a clear-sighted account of the non-political, 'ethical' limits of politics, but notes that a 'religious, Christian flavour' (169) enters into the latter's vocabulary. Badiou's radical political ethics ultimately seems to fall prey to a certain 'ethicism' (173) that only accepts pure and rare acts and seems to leave out the more strategic, impure areas of political action. An analogous criticism is levelled against the writings of Jacques Rancière who seems to posit a certain 'emancipatory apriorism' (183), meaning that his very definition of 'real' politics as a claim to equality only leaves room for

a politics that is intrinsically emancipatory – or no politics at all.

Ernesto Laclau, then, obviously represents the conception Marchart himself feels closest to. Laclau not only systematically develops the non-foundational character of politics and society as the basis for his whole theory, he also offers a description of how attempts to bridge the gap between the two levels, or to make society fully present to itself, are necessarily incomplete *and* necessary. Politics structurally consists of the various attempts to create consistency and wholeness where there is none, and a philosophy of the political has the task to reveal the very logic of these attempts. For Marchart, Laclau's theory therefore is a paradigmatic political ontology because it first offers a picture of the social or political nature of everything that is made to appear in social life through acts of signification, and it offers an explanation of the nature of these processes in terms of power and hegemony. Within such a conception, 'being as being – objectivity as such' can be said to be 'intrinsically political' (218), and this is exactly what a political ontology will abstractly posit and will have to analyse in its concrete and contextual instances.

For many readers, the clearly Heidegger-inspired work of Giorgio Agamben also follows such a line, but here, in maybe the most polemical chapter of his book, Marchart quickly establishes his distance. Agamben's 'radically pessimist philosophy of history' (224), his negativism and not too subtle subsumption of various processes under a single logic, leads to 'theoretical extremism' (238) that gives away the very insights of an ontological problematization of politics.

Ontological politics?

It is against the background of these reconstructions that Marchart, in the third part of his book, tries to construct his own position within the field of theories, and argues for a political philosophy drawing the right consequences from the ontological perspective offered by a Left-Heideggerian theory of the political.² It should be clear that there can be no direct 'derivation' of a particular politics from such a theory. Starting from 'neces-

sary contingency' (78), many forms of politics are possible. But for Marchart, this doesn't mean that there are no guidelines or criteria for determining the content of a political position. Ruled out are first of all forms of politics that deny their ultimate groundlessness (like avant-gardism or fascism), or any politics legitimating itself in the name of some truth, or advancing the 'phantasm of "great Politics"' (248). Starting from radical contingency and political difference will not take the political itself as absolute and will therefore leave room for the 'unpolitical' (to use Roberto Esposito's term). It will also not try to completely subordinate politics to ethics (as Marchart claims late Derrida, and maybe the Levinasians and many others do). Marchart's formula for the set of conditions to be met is 'minimal politics' (289), meaning structural features that make an act political: that it implies a certain claim to hegemony or 'relative universalization' (304); that it includes strategic elements and a certain degree of organisation; that it involves collectivity and is a site of the emergence of acting subjects. Most importantly, it implies the awareness and acceptance of antagonism, partiality and conflict: 'Every action becomes politics, when it at least becomes touched by antagonism' (325).

It is on these grounds that Marchart tries to arrive at something he calls a 'democratic ethics' (329), or 'ethos', as we might call it.³ It is a set of value commitments, but not a freestanding morality in the strong sense, since it derives its values from a certain description of political processes. This ethics, then, is the articulation of a commitment to democracy as a social way of life that is built on the absence of ultimate foundations, because it is only democracy that can really live with and in groundlessness, or that is grounding itself, provisionally, temporarily, on this groundlessness. Democratic politics (as is its theory), is therefore, in a certain way, post-foundationalist (cf. 331), it is an always incomplete, always also failing project, characterized by an internal lack it doesn't deny. So there is a strong affinity between a post-foundationalist vision of political subjectivity and contingency of the social on the one hand, and democratic politics on the other, since both rest on a distrust of final grounds and ultimate identities. Further, both converge in a demand for the recognition of others that are never fully themselves. For Marchart, and this is terminologically no obvious choice given its conceptual history, 'solidarity' is the term for the basic democratic virtue that has to be re-enacted in everyday democratic

politics, and which implies the ‘recognition of the Other on the grounds of one’s own alienation’ (360) or non-identity. It is democracy, not as a goal to be attained but a horizon within which to live and struggle, that makes possible ‘consciousness for heterogeneity of one’s own identity and the fragility of one’s own foundations’ (363).

Political ontologies?

As this survey of the many themes Marchart covers should make clear, this is an impressive and comprehensive treatment of many complex issues. It can be considered a major achievement, first because Marchart can really show a systematic coherence and logic within a field of theories that might appear too heterogeneous to discuss under one frame. Secondly, he makes a strong case for the ‘ontological turn’ in political theory and political philosophy that has emerged as a major suggestion in recent years, and that has so far not been taken up sufficiently in the discussions in the German speaking world, and which in the Anglo-American debate often relies on briefer and less systematic treatments.⁴ Thirdly, he offers a compelling path through this field, showing how an engaged and critical political philosophy committed to ‘radical democracy’ can articulate itself within an ontological frame-work. He makes clear that arguing for a certain conception of democracy involves ontological commitments and is not just a *prise de position* or an empirical question. Carving out a space for political philosophy beyond the stale alternatives of ultra-abstract, merely formal or proceduralist philosophizing, and empiricist conceptions (or ‘applied’ political theory in political science), is no small feat, and neither is the rescuing of the ontological mode of thinking from the suspicion that it will always remain affirmative and conservative.

There are three related sets of questions that in my impression remain open and might provide further material for the debate on political ontology initiated so masterfully by Marchart. First, I remain unconvinced that the very reference to ontology really has the more or less coherent character Marchart is constructing, which is of course related to the *one* post-Heideggerian strand of the current discussion. Were one to include

more explicitly the many recent Deleuze-inspired (or even Neo-Spinozist or ‘New Materialist’) attempts to pluralize the very mode of ontological thinking, or the quickly growing literature on ‘social ontology’ and Neo-Hegelian political theory, we might arrive at an even more complex map upon which the very meaning of the term ‘ontology’ itself appears quite contested and ambiguous.⁵ The strong construction Marchart gives might then not be the only one on offer; there might be many versions of weaker, differently pluralized, differently historicized ontologies against which it would have to compete.

Second, we might want to learn more about the very moves and operations a political ontology suggests as a version of political philosophy, of course also vis-à-vis its more established forms. How does an ontological criticism of political liberalism look, and how, with reference to which form of evidence and argument, are ontological disputes within political philosophy settled? Even an outlook starting from contestation and contestability will have to convince and persuade, and one might be interested in the very ‘pragmatics’ and more piecemeal steps of arguing on this fundamental level.

Third, I’m unsure I want to follow Marchart in describing the relation between theory and practice, ontology and political action, as seamlessly as he seems to do. To point to the necessary interrelation between the two levels seems right, but one would like to hear more about the very constraints ontological structures place on political action and the kinds of considerations ‘real’ political subjects will have to be capable of in order not to be delusional about the nature of the political. In Marchart’s rendering of this problem, there is a tendency (also present in many of Laclau’s essays), to jump from the more abstract level to the practical field, as if political action indeed were nothing else than ‘applied political ontology’. Being philosophically right about contingency then seems to lead to exactly the kind of radical-but-pluralist democratic attitude we might expect from committed democrats. But this smells of exactly the kind of ‘philosophism’ Marchart is accusing so many other authors of, and might invite precisely that still strong suspicion of the ontological mode of argumentation. We might be inclined to say (and Marchart might not disagree) that, on a certain level, political ontology as a form of knowledge

leaves everything as it is, whereas political action will always try to prove this wrong. And this might be a gap that not even the most impressive theory will be able to bridge.

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¹ Marchart 2007.

² By focusing on this problem, I omit some interesting things Marchart has to say on the methodological question of political ontology as a first philosophy (245-282); a version of this can be found in an English article on Laclau (Marchart 2004).

³ For the debate on 'democratic ethos' see Connolly 1995, Bernstein 1998 and White 2009.

⁴ Crucial references for this discussion are Žižek 1999, White 2000 and Connolly 2009.

⁵ See the contributions in Strathausen 2009 and Coole and Frost 2010.