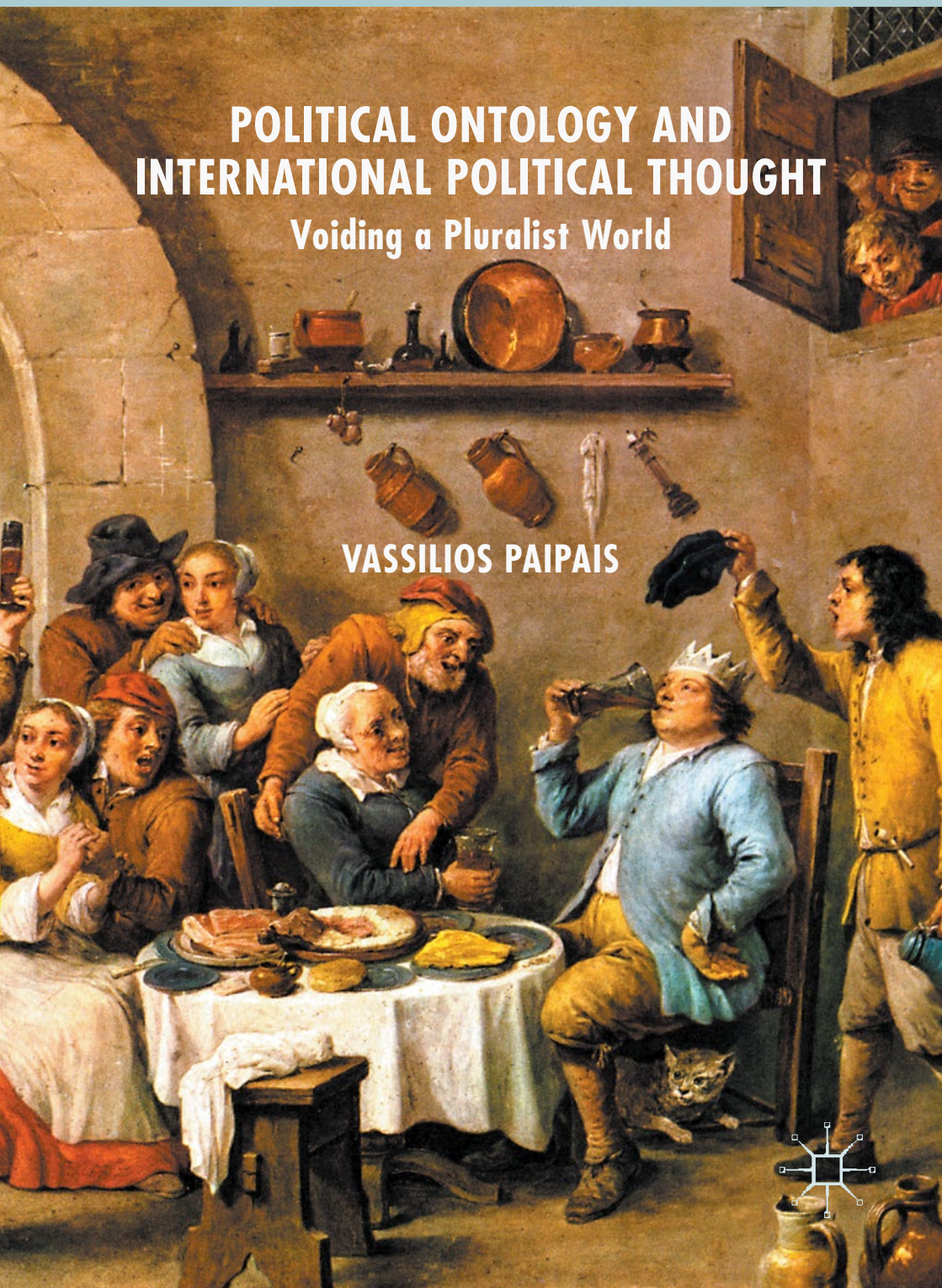
INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEORY

POLITICAL ONTOLOGY AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

Voiding a Pluralist World



VASSILIOS PAIPAIS

International Political Theory

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Prologue

We Are All Pluralists?

It is often remarked by policy pundits and scholars alike that we live in an era of instability, unpredictability and high uncertainty. Such a remark is not idly made as those who defend it do not usually wish to argue that there is no regularity, order or consistency in world affairs. They rather intend to emphasise that we no longer live, if we ever did, in an environment with fixed coordinates, indubitable truths and incontestable hierarchies. Again, it is not that any sense of order seems to be lacking or that legacies of the past have ceased casting their shadow over existing arrangements and the prospects of future alternatives. The sense of urgency and anxiety that such alarmist sentiments convey, rather, springs from the more disconcerting suspicion that there may be good reasons to believe that the search for ultimate or unshakable foundations upon which individual and collective projects can be built and justified is a futile exercise. Such a sense of futility and transitoriness is not a prerogative or a burden (depending on how one comports to it) of late modernity's so-called post-ideological subjects. It can be argued that it is rather a feeling of epochal *meaninglessness* that has been the characteristic cultural mood in the so-called Western world, at least since Nietzsche's announcement of the 'Death of God'.

And yet, God is not dead or rather, as Nietzsche would remark, we still have to wrestle with His shadows. The God of Judeo-Christian piety and religiosity, the God of philosophers, the God of Islamic fundamentalism or the gods of the neo-liberal market economy and the global culture of consumerism are not all of the same order and kind nor do they signify a

similar approach to the divine, the sacred or the taboo. They all, however, imply a certain understanding of the relationship between human subjectivity, the world and the divine (or, as some would say, the ineffable or the incomprehensible), and a certain explanation about how they all hang together. In modernity, ever since the Weberian diagnosis of the 'disenchantment of the world', we were invited to endure the predicament of a multiplicity of gods occupying the public terrain, although some gods had always had priority over others. The god of secularism and liberal neutrality, for example, has long enjoyed a central position in the public arena of modern democratic societies as the ultimate arbiter deciding which doctrines or worldviews were to be included in and which to be excluded from public discourse. Weberian polytheism in that sense was from the very beginning supplanted by an implicit prioritisation of liberal pluralism as the only legitimate form of tolerance, the exclusionary aspects of which were hardly recognised or were rather tacitly accepted as the necessary tribute liberty had to pay to political order and stability.

With the gradual erosion of humanist, liberal and socialist alike, confidence in the secular eschatology of progress in the aftermath of the twentieth-century horrors, such as the two world wars, the Jewish genocide, the Soviet Gulags and the disaster of the Maoist cultural revolution, as well as with the ignominious collapse of the applied experiment of collective emancipation in the face of Soviet Communism, pluralism assumed a new face. Postmodern relativism seemed to emerge as the order of the day, particularly in academic circles and as a cultural attitude in the developed West, coupled with a triumphalist revival of liberal soteriology within the public opinion and, especially, the foreign policy machine of the American superpower, by which I mean the reactivation of the most excessively interventionist elements of American exceptionalism and Wilsonian internationalism. It was almost as if Charles Bukowski's witty remark about how the problem with the world is that the intelligent people are full of doubts, while the stupid ones are full of confidence was made to describe the first decade of the post–Cold War era with its paradoxical admixture of erudite pessimism and liberal thoughtlessness. The two options on offer seemed to have been either to embrace the hegemonic universalism of aggressive liberalism and market capitalism or to resort to a particularistic critique of liberal, that is, Western, dominance from the fringes in the form of the various feminist, post-colonial and intersectional approaches to identity politics. Much as the latter were certainly welcomed as a long-overdue corrective to an excessively hybristic liberal universalism, they also

appeared to some as too prone to throw the baby out with the bath water. Universalism was a priori condemned as a cultural product of the liberal, androcentric West, whatever the latter may mean, while the only critical means of subversive resistance to Western, liberal, secular, patriarchical 'repressive tolerance' seemed to be the denunciation of politics as a discourse of universality. Grand claims about politics or radical visions of social transformation were met with suspicion, and a new politics of diversity became the hallmark of progressive concerns. Yet, it was one in which respect for difference and plurality was equated with an almost neurotic reproduction of the latest postmodern fad, usually assuming the form of impoverished or caricatured versions of French philosophical insights about the fluidity of identities, the death of the autonomous subject and the end of the grand narratives of liberal Eurocentric humanism.

The post-9/11 radicalisation of Islamic fundamentalism and the pronounced anti-elitist drive of Christian evangelical religiosity were seen by many as a backlash to this relativistic pluralist mood that has ceded strong claims to universality to a cynical liberal reason while branding any affective identification with and zealous commitment to a radical, or even a minimally non-mainstream, political cause as an expression of political irrationality and/or extremist adventurism. Amid this asphyxiating predicament, ontological claims about politics have made a comeback in international political thought, primarily among Left-radical circles, while the question of the role of faith and militancy in politics is being revisited with renewed emphasis as a means of breaking with the above-described blackmail. This new pluralism, expressed most emphatically by prominent scholars, such as William Connolly, David Campbell, Chantal Mouffe and Bonnie Honig, is openly embracing the necessity of ontological commitments in politics while reclaiming the old prerogative of political philosophy to make claims with universal relevance and applicability. Equally, among the ranks of the post-Heideggerian Left (Badiou, Laclau, Nancy, Rancière, Žižek), the primacy of ontology is openly recognised and promoted as a means of repoliticising sedimented political structures and democratic institutions, remobilising inert social forces as well as renewing political activism and practices of resistance to global capitalism.

The chief function of this book is to intervene in these debates in a critical manner by both affirming the significance of such an 'ontological turn' in international political theory and arguing for a version of political ontology that would at once achieve two things. It would be sufficiently reflexive to avoid a relapse into ideological forms of universalism that rely on

sanitised social ontologies (often bracketing inequalities, domination and asymmetries of power) *and* sufficiently formal (yet not abstract) to deflect the latest incarnations of historicism—as the discourse that pronounces on what totality is (usually a flattened-out, undifferentiated, univocal ensemble) from an internal, contextual, yet necessarily metalinguistic, and, therefore, ultimately self-contradictory point of enunciation—this time valorising openness, radical contingency, flux, becoming and complexity as the new ontological orthodoxies. If the former risk is often associated with liberal forms of pluralism, the latter is a constant temptation affecting even ontologically sophisticated approaches to pluralism, such as ironic liberalism, deliberative and dialogic cosmopolitanism, and agonistic pluralism. Part I provides a critical interrogation of the ontological assumptions that lie behind such depoliticising tendencies (yet, emphatically, not imperatives) detectable within liberal, post-liberal, dialogic and agonistic approaches to democratic pluralism. Depoliticisation, as it is understood in this book, is a technical term, and it refers to the tendency underlying the aforementioned approaches to pluralism to rely on foundationalist or anti-foundationalist understandings of ontology all the while sharing an approach to Being as an infinite yet closed totality, an existing and thus determinable, yet still undiscovered, sometimes inaccessible or unobservable, background multiplicity that is responsible for the plurality of actual and possible worlds.

This book, instead, argues for the formal necessity of a *political ontology*, an approach to ontology that builds on the Heideggerian difference between the ontic and the ontological as the formal non-ground, the void non-set necessary for the production of any world-set. Rather than sliding, however, into a mystical interpretation of Being as an abyssal, yet unfathomable, 'ground' of existence that some would identify as the late Heidegger's unfortunate slippage, this study employs as a supplement the hermeneutic tools of a Žižekian approach to Lacanian political theory. Žižek's transcendental ontology, especially his analysis of the Real and enjoyment as political categories as well as his insights into the role of desire and lack in the constitution of the various types of political subjectivity, will offer valuable resources for recalibrating Heidegger's fundamental ontology away from reductionist or obscurantist implications. The central insight defended in Part II is the transposition of Heidegger's ontological difference from the existential terrain to the register of the political, repackaged as the difference between politics and the political, as a means to reconceptualise the distinction between politics, that is, the

symbolic, ontic, institutional dimension of political life and the political, that is, the radically contingent, 'evental', ontological moment of both disruption and constitution of political order. While this relationship has often been conceptualised narrowly and one-sidedly, namely by merely envisaging the political operating as the constitutive exception to politics, the formal political ontology offered in Chap.5 insists on the necessity to envision both registers as lacking, penetrated by impotence, punctuated by the void that makes their operation possible but never complete. Political difference, then, will be shown to rest on this *double kenosis* of both politics and the political opening up the possibility of a political subjectivity that may incarnate (i.e. instantiate the embodied enactment of) truth as the impossible simultaneity of universality and difference.

The investigation of such an 'impossible possibility' will almost inevitably carry the analysis over into an engagement with recent post-Marxist approaches to envisaging a singular or concrete universality in a pluralist world. Consciously opposed to visions of pluralism as the proliferation and mutual accommodation of multiple particularities, thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben have recently dipped into theological/messianic conceptions of universalism, be it Judaic or Pauline, in order to reconstruct the relationship between truth and politics, philosophy and history away from both essentialist and historicist implications. Chapter 6 expands on the value of and challenges inherent in rehabilitating messianism, not as an apocalyptic, tradition-burdened theological discourse about the end of times nor as an antinomian negativism of 'democracy to come', but rather as an engaged phenomenology of affirmative nihilism, as perhaps Walter Benjamin had imagined it. Put in a more Pauline manner, it suggests a model of political militancy and activation as the incarnate enactment of a messianic tragicomic subjectivity that is simultaneously destructive and restorative. As such, it constitutes both an indictment/nullification of the worst excesses and obscene phantasmagorias of neo-liberal biopolitical violence and its productive regulation of insecurity, economic exploitation, social suffering, environmental degradation and gross material inequality as well as a materialist proclamation for the re-enchantment/restitution of this world as the true site of collective human engagement, creativity, play and fulfilment.

This book, then, concludes by making a bold argument in favour of revisiting the political relevance of theological virtues, such as hope, love and charity, as well as of theological ideas, such as redemption, incarnation, grace and beauty—equally discredited by secularist prejudices,

revolutionary eschatologies and religious dogmatism—without losing sight that it is chiefly by way of failure and loss, tragedy and destruction, fragility and powerlessness, rather than illusions of mastery and domination, that the possibility of genuine hope and redemption is born. Indeed, if the messianic is to remain politically relevant and sufficiently dangerous as a critical resource for social criticism and emancipation, it cannot deny its equivocality conjoining both hope and violence at its core. Yet, appropriately reconfigured through a nihilist ontology of the void that shuns the twin purist temptations of hybristic self-righteousness and self-debilitating relativism, messianic violence may once more regain its significance as a weak force providing imaginative resources for a reconceptualisation of the relationship between universality and difference, truth and politics, and community and pluralism.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Ontology and Depoliticisation in a Pluralist World

The origins of this book can be traced to my life-long fascination with a peculiar concept in political life that, while extensively analysed by (international) political theorists, has in my view rarely been satisfactorily tackled. I am referring to the concept of pluralism understood both as a philosophical thesis concerning its ontological status and as a normative ideal.[1] It is difficult to provide an adequate account of the problem as its basic structure is often obscure and elusive leading to it being frequently misspecified or glossed over, rather than addressed head-on. This, in turn, may explain the circular, and often misleading, manner with which it has been treated by political and social theorists alike, mainly due to the fact that its significance as one of the major issues of modern politics enjoys an almost ubiquitous, self-validating cultural status.[2] It is, however, not an issue that has gained prominence just recently. On the contrary, it is a problem that has been ineluctably entangled with another important question that has invariably occupied the minds of political thinkers, that is, 'what is politics?' The plurality of answers given to that question testifies to the intimate link between the ontological status of pluralism and the purpose of political philosophy. For instance, against Plato's (*Republic* 462a) assertion that there is no greater evil for a city 'than that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one,' Aristotle had emphasised in his *Politics* (1261a) that 'the polis consists of a certain multitude' and 'not only of a number of people, but of people of

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different kinds'. And where Plato's *Republic* had envisaged the abolition of individual property and the social control of human reproduction in the name of political unity, Aristotle (*Politics* 1261b) had protested that 'to make the polis too much of a unity is not a better policy'. In other words, the answer to the question 'what is politics?' seemed from the very beginning to have been closely associated with whether the ontological principle of reality is unity or difference and, accordingly, whether politics should be about restoring a lost unity (seeking reconciliation) or about cultivating the heterogeneity of opinions and attitudes (affirming disagreement) that make up political life.

This intimate relationship between the question of pluralism, the nature of politics and the role of political knowledge has resulted in a variety of ontological statements about the ground of reality, the *telos* of politics and the task of political philosophy. Since at least Machiavelli's ironic reversal of classical political theory (see Skinner 2000), it has practically become a commonplace to argue that the 'essence' of politics—whatever that may mean—is conflict and disagreement. In the aftermath of Max Weber's (2004) and Carl Schmitt's (1996) famous ruminations on the matter, we are routinely told that political life is about the antagonistic collision of different value systems—or, as liberal theory calls them, 'comprehensive doctrines'—while since Nietzsche's (2001) equally famous 'Death of God' aphorism, we have also been made aware that modern pluralism has an even deeper characteristic. It is not only that we tend to disagree about the multiplicity of values[3] and ways of life that make up what we recognise as politics (although this is, of course, contested as well), but that, even more so, we seem to disagree about how to interpret those values themselves, a phenomenon Weber (2003) described as 'disenchantment of the world' and Nietzsche (1968) as 'European nihilism' (see also Lassman 2011, pp. 144–5). This, however, is only half of the picture, for there are those who would think differently and be less quick to describe politics as an exercise in divisive disagreement. Without denying the conflictual element in politics, they would rather point to the venerable mission of political philosophy which, in this view, is to construct theories about how human beings can best live together in more or less harmonious communities where disagreements would not necessarily disappear but would, nevertheless, be appropriately suppressed or constitutionally tamed so as to prevent them from being detrimental to political unity or to, what has been traditionally called in this genre of political thinking, the goal of human happiness (*eudaimonia*).

The above rather schematic presentation seems to suggest an implicit, if rather rudimentary and perhaps misleading, dichotomy between, on the one hand, political practice that appears to be focusing on disagreement, dissension and, in general, contentious interaction, and political philosophy, on the other hand, that gives priority to reconciliation, social cohesion and political stability.[4] There are, of course, many blind spots to this story—even if it, for the sake of argument, were accepted in general terms—not least because it seems to be assuming a sharp distinction between political theory and practice that may be usual practice in theory (pun intended), but can hardly be encountered in actual political life. However, the most disconcerting part of that story is the presumption that political theory should be occupied with thinking politics as a reconciliatory activity or that political philosophy should be an intellectual activity mostly concerned with the achievement of the good life within bounded political communities.[5] Although the latter definition does not exclude the importance of creative tensions and invigorating internal conflicts in the production of the conditions that would secure the good life of individuals forming political communities,[6] the assumption shared is that political theory should be an activity of justification (Forst 2013; Herzog 1985), either of reconciliatory or contentious forms of politics or a mixture of both (see Honig and Stears 2011).

The problem, however—going back to the initial diagnosis by Nietzsche and Weber—is that in conditions of value pluralism, affecting our very ability to confer judgements even about the very principles that we hold dear or foundational to our ways of life, it is our very own justificatory exercises that are called into question or have become increasingly harder to defend. The main characteristic of this late-modern *Zeitgeist* is the loss or decline of our ability to commit ourselves to ultimate or authoritative frameworks of belief and action (see Taylor 1989, pp. 17–18). This predicament is sometimes described as the crisis of foundationalism or the collapse of metaphysical certainties in the collective imaginary of mostly Western societies, although in a largely globalised world it has become progressively difficult to defend a narrow, vertical containment of its effects.[7] The immediate casualty of this new cultural mood in political theory has been the loss of our ability to speak with certainty about what 'true' politics is about. Any utterance about the true nature of politics (is it about reconciliation and unity or about disagreement, contest and rivalry?) is met with suspicion and is summarily dismissed either as ideology—that is, as an ungroundable or

contestable assertion since we cannot have access to the 'true nature of things'—or as a covert exercise of power, or as the expression of our visceral and, therefore, arbitrary desires or whims.

For Nietzsche and Weber, this is in many ways the human predicament after the 'Death of God'. Human beings are not only motivated by myriads of values, ideas and beliefs. Rather, any access to the world of reality is already mediated by their desires, motives and value systems. Namely, there is no presuppositionless access to reality nor any objectionless value statement. Science, for Weber (2004), may presuppose that what is produced by scientific research is worth knowing, but it can never itself ground this presupposition. In similar terms, Carl Schmitt (1996) highlights the inevitable and irreducible moment of decision in politics. The political (as the extreme possibility of enmity) can have no other justification apart from the necessity of its appearance due to the ineradicable fact of pluralism. 'For the world of objective spirit', he had told the Kant Society in 1929, 'is a pluralistic world; pluralism of races and peoples, of religions and cultures, of languages and of legal systems' (Schmitt 1999, p. 204). And yet, if indeed our disenchanted predicament prevents us from talking authoritatively either about the nature of reality or the essence of politics or even the constitutive features of the human condition, what is the standpoint which historicist pronouncements, such as those proffered by Nietzsche, Weber or Schmitt, are uttered from?

The spectre of relativism that I am alluding to here would, of course, appear to those thinkers as a pseudo-problem, that is, one generated only if we pretend to be able to look at history as a totality from an external vantage point—and this is indeed the familiar charge Nietzsche (1997) levelled against the archetypical historicists of his time, that is, Leopold von Ranke and Heinrich von Trietschke. However, this vantage point need not be external, be it transcendent (God) or epistemological (reason). For instance, it can very well be a tacit anthropological assumption about what kind of beings human beings are (e.g. by nature evil or good, rapacious or sociable), or a 'self-grounded' philosophical-historical statement about the 'universal subject' of history (see, e.g. Lukács 1971) or a principled 'existential' assumption about what constitutes the human condition (e.g. enmity for Schmitt 1996; plurality for Arendt 1998). These are by no means similar or comparable justifications as they rely on different articulations of the meaning of 'objectivity' in history and the possibility of historical knowledge. And yet, generalising the historicist statement that abstract, detached, ahistorical thinking is either impossible or ideological,

or that specific historical contexts and traditions make us what we are, immediately involves us in a performative contradiction, even if our experience of these contexts is absolutely true on a visceral level. One might say that the fallacy committed here is that of isolating an existential feature of human beings out of the plurality of phenomenological manifestations of human action (e.g. either that human beings are aggressive or friendly, oppressed or free, condemned or redeemable, etc.) and turning it into an ontological statement about the human condition (e.g. enmity in Schmitt, plurality in Arendt, reification in Lukács, etc.).

This is exactly the point made by Leo Strauss (1996) in his critique of modern historicism—particularly in the case of Weberian objectivity and Schmittian decisionism—in which he insisted that basic ontological and anthropological issues are always at stake in political philosophy. In his seminal review of Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, Strauss showed not only how Schmitt remains within the liberal purview of the search for value neutrality as, for Strauss, his construction of the political proves to be liberalism with an 'opposite polarity' affirming conflict as a reversed neutral ground.[8] He also demonstrates how Schmitt's definition of the political cannot operate as a political ontology since it relies on implicit anthropological assumptions about the inherent dangerousness of human beings and the constitutive evilness of human nature without which it could not stand on its own (Strauss 1996, p. 95; see also Meier 1995, p. 57). Although Strauss' (1975, p. 5) critique is partly invalidated by the fact that he argues for an essentialist (and largely anachronistic) vision of political philosophy able to move from mere opinion to the 'knowledge of the nature of political things', his critique points to a pervading characteristic of historicist statements about the nature of the political. Every knowledge claim about the political that is trying to come to grips with the absence of a secure ground for the justification of politics tends to posit an implicit ontological neutral ground—be it anthropological, metaphysical or ideological—that excludes itself from the historical flux (even if it is only to affirm that there is no vantage point outside historical and social situatedness) and threatens to reduce its appreciation of the contingent nature of the political to a defence of an unconfessed ultimate ground.[9]

The background to this tendency is formed by what Claire Colebrook (2005), drawing on Heidegger, has described as the oscillation of modern philosophical discourse between the two dangers of anthropologism and anthropomorphism. Anthropologism denotes a particular under-

standing of subjectivity within modern philosophical discourse and relates to the idea of modernity as essentially representational. It has been a lesson of Immanuel Kant's 'Copernican turn' that because the world is taken as *given* and knowledge is received through the senses from without, it must be determined and delimited by the representational powers of the individual. The subject in Kant's case is no more the Cartesian thinking 'thing', a presupposed 'substance' that serves as the ground of secure knowledge. Kant (1998), instead, attempts to posit the subject as the transcendental condition of representation, rather than as a represented 'thing' that would invite back the very risk of dogmatic subjectivism. Kant's critical achievement, Colebrook (2005, p. 18) argues, consists in his insistence that the representing subject is not a worldly being but a representational *condition* of the world.[10] The subject is not itself a substance; rather, it is only through the synthesising power of the imagination that being is determined as substance. The problem here, for Colebrook, is that it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the possibility of representation without positing an individual being as a thinking substance that represents: 'Kant's self-legislating reason is continuously haunted by the problem of *spectrality*' (ibid.). Namely, every voice that exposes the reified images of representation and invokes reason's claim of self-origination is necessarily haunted by what it seeks to eradicate. Reason is incessantly scarred by its origination in heteronomy. The trace of representation always returns to impose itself as the authority that was previously rejected.

On the other hand, the risk of anthropomorphism represents the failure to acknowledge 'that if something is to be known it must be given, and must be given to some point of view (or finite site of receptivity)' (Colebrook 2005, pp. 210–11). The terms under which we begin to seek knowledge of the unconditioned lie already within the conditioned, the finite point of view from which we perceive the world as *given*. To locate the structures or conditions of thought as a 'logic' or a 'system' outside existence in the form of an external, transcendental absolute suffers from the illusion of ascribing thought's own position to being itself (ibid., p. 84). For this very reason, however, anthropomorphism should not be lightly dismissed as, for Heidegger, it constitutes the very possibility of philosophy: '[i]t is only from the anthropomorphic illusion of an already ordered or meaningful world that we can step back to recognise thought as an ordering power' (Heidegger cited in Colebrook 2005, p. 83). For our purposes, it suffices to note that the

terms of the relationship between philosophy and the world, ontology and politics, are marked by the antinomies of representational logic as set out by Kant:

> Any attempt to resist positing or representing a worldly ground for knowledge—by referring to a representational condition such as the subject, logic, language, structure or difference—can always be represented as one more thing within the world, a represented thing that grounds the represented world in general. (Colebrook 2005, p. 211)

The error here is to misrecognise Kant's lesson that the world is never immediately *given* to us but is only 'lived' through representation. If the realisation that any sense of autonomy, sovereign certainty and spatio-temporal identity is never self-present, never coterminous with itself is deceptively translated as an improved, perhaps more 'authentic', representation of the world, then the idols of modernity, the false images of representation and transparency, are simply smuggled back in to haunt our critical endeavours: 'Any demystification of a grounding substance, such as man or the subject, tends to result in the positing of yet one more ground: language, the unconscious, structure or difference' (Colebrook 2005, p. 250).

From Foundational to Political Ontology

If the above exposition provides a fair description of the paradoxes and inherent contestability involved in any ontological statement uttered from a finite point of view, the question then that arises is, how is it possible to deflect the illusion of an 'authentic' representation of the world without at the same time rejecting the valuable insight that the world is always seen from or given to an 'inside' viewpoint? How is it possible to reject the quest for a permanent ground from which the world can be known without discarding the condition of possibility for intelligibility itself, that is, our ability to relate meaningfully to the world as an 'object' available to our cognition?[11] Part of what might be creating the impasse or sense of a deadlock here is our understanding of the word 'world'. In our common sense experience, we perceive the world as something external to us, an empty space within which human beings and objects interact. Such a view of the world however might be rather limiting and self-contradictory as it understands the latter as an infinite totality containing an innumerable

amount of 'objects'; that is, totality is envisaged as the ultimate set of all sets. Putting the issue in those terms, however, might condemn us to a category mistake that may be avoided by resorting to the Heideggerian distinction between 'world' as an external realm of entities (observable or unobservable) or a variety of universes ('worlds'), on the one hand, and 'worlding' as a clearing (*Lichtung*) or disclosure of meanings and practices that make those worlds possible, on the other hand.[12]

The reason why the ontic actuality of multiple worlds and the condition that enables their emergence cannot be of the same order is rather nicely demonstrated in Sergei Prozorov's (2014a, b) recent elaboration of a full-blown nihilist ontology in his two-volume magnum opus, *Void Universalism* (see Paipais 2016 for a review). Prozorov's project purports to offer an enriched notion of ontology in world politics, one that reconceptualises the way it is traditionally understood in IR (International Relations) circles[13] in order to think through the problem of pluralism beyond the confines set by the oscillation between anthropologism and anthropomorphism as explained above. The main issue with the metatheoretical theorisation and employment of the concept of ontology in world politics, as Prozorov understands it, is that it is usually taken to mean the basic assumptions or unassailable presuppositions that foreground ontology as an in the last instance 'structure' or inaccessible philosophical 'wager', a view that, for Prozorov (2013, p. 105), would better go by the name of political anthropology, worldview or ideology.

Engaging creatively with Heidegger's fundamental ontology that informs the work of the philosophers he draws on, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, Prozorov builds on the Heideggerian distinction between the ontological and the ontic to propose an alternative conception of world politics as *nothingness*, that is, the necessarily inexistent 'object' that makes objects in the ontic world of politics possible. Prozorov (2014a, p. 9) also borrows from Badiou's set-theoretical ontology, 'because it deals with being *qua* being and not any particular classes of beings'. In a rehash of Russell's paradox, Prozorov explains that a conception of the world as the set of all sets would necessarily include all things and their negation, including the non-existence of itself, resulting in the absurdity of a power set that is far greater than the original: 'Since every world is a world of worlds, the international world may of course contain an infinite multiplicity of worlds, but the only thing that this or any other world cannot contain is everything' (Prozorov 2014a, pp. 20–21). Prozorov argues, instead,

for the *World* (with a capital 'W') as nothing, a void set that represents pure potentiality or else the quasi-transcendental (non-)ground that is the condition of possibility for anything existing in the ontic world. The latter is rendered by necessity *not-all there is*, that is, necessarily incomplete. Not because its entirety is inaccessible or potentially infinite, but because totality as infinity has no being.

Prozorov, then, convincingly demonstrates why ontology, instead of being a futile search for first principles or for the primordial traits of human nature, has to be thought as deriving from a *necessary nihil/void* that itself does not appear in the ontic world but is responsible for the production of myriads of worlds. If the impossibility of an ultimate foundation as the set of all sets were not necessary but contingent, that is, if an ultimate ground were ontologically possible but cognitively inaccessible, then one would be left with a position of agnostic relativism that would acknowledge the empirical fact of pluralism and the ungroundability of a positive ontology, but could never discard the possibility of a non-contingent (i.e. absolute) universal. For a number of post-Heideggerian thinkers who build, like Prozorov, on 'ontologies of lack' (see Tønder and Thomassen 2006), the social field exceeds totalisation, not because of its ontic multiplicity, but because it is structured around a fundamental (not foundational) lack, a *nothingness*, that is generative of multiple worlds and allows the play of differences in the ontic realm. For those thinkers (Badiou 2009; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Žižek 1999; Agamben 1998), the ultimate grounding of a social system is implausible, not because of its empirical complexity that escapes the cognitive capacities of any finite observer, but rather because there is an *ontological difference* between the ontic level of the processes of grounding and the ontological level as the void that makes these processes possible, yet necessarily incomplete.

In an earlier article on the question of foundationalism in IR theories, Marc Doucet (1999) made a similar point arguing that the nature of metatheoretical debates in the field reflects a foundationalist bias which is, ultimately, symptomatic of the eclipse of the political from those debates. This direct link drawn between foundationalism and depoliticisation was not peculiar to Doucet's critique but reflected the wider sensibility of a number of critical IR scholars. However, Doucet went a step further. He pointed at the stagnated status of metatheoretical reflection in IR which seemed paralysed between two mutually exclusive positions, foundationalism versus anti-foundationalism, generating a theoretical impasse. The claim here is linked to what is sometimes described by scholars in

the field (Smith 1995; Smith et al. 1996; Sjolander and Cox 1994) as the distinction between 'explanatory' and 'constitutive' theory. Whereas explanatory or, as Robert Cox (1981) labelled them, 'problem-solving' theories seem to be straightforwardly characterised as foundationalist, taking an independently existing world 'out there' to be an object of social scientific inquiry, constitutive or post-positivist theories usually come in two versions. Although both renditions subscribe to social constructionism—the idea that theory is always already implicated in the constitution of the world it seeks to explain—IR theorists tend to divide them into two categories that reflect similar developments in political theory between what has been called Habermasian Critical Theory and Foucauldian/Derridian post-structuralist thought. For instance, Smith (1995) seems to follow Hoffman and Rengger (1992) in dividing post-positivist theories into 'critical interpretative' (critical theory) and 'radical interpretative' (post-structuralist) strands. Typically, the former remains tied to a minimal foundationalism upon which an emancipatory project could still be grounded while the latter vehemently rejects any trace of foundationalism as a residue of Enlightenment's blackmail (see Devetak 1995) leading to marginalisation, exclusion and violence.

Doucet touched here on an extremely sensitive issue regarding the nature and legitimacy of metatheoretical arguments in IR, one that is inextricably linked to the ontological claims IR theorists make not only about their subject matter but also about the nature of theory itself and, if one accepts the interlacing of theory and practice, the normative underpinnings of political action as well.[14] In the aftermath of the post-positivist critique of mainstream IR, foundationalism—the claim that there are unshakeable grounds for judging between rival philosophical, epistemological or praxeological standpoints—is either discredited or becoming increasingly difficult to justify. Foundationalism may arguably be losing ground and credibility, yet the terrifying spectre of relativism or practical irrelevance that a complete surrender to anti-foundationalism would entail has enabled the development of a middle-ground accommodationism as a way of securing the possibility of knowledge or the ground for political action without falling back on dogmatic, uncritical or self-paralysing positions. The burgeoning literature on the evils of rigid paradigmatic thinking in the discipline as opposed to the merits of an eclectic or pluralist sensibility is a testament to the growing anxiety the retreat of foundations is prompting among theoretical circles and the pragmatic responses it generates.[15]

A relatively recent, widely discussed, attempt to advance this pragmatic pluralist mood calls for a strategy of bracketing foundationalist assumptions and embracing 'foundational prudence' (Monteiro and Ruby 2009). Since in the aftermath of the post-positivist critique we, as scholars, have lost the capacity to ascribe authoritative status to foundational metatheoretical statements, the argument goes, the best we can do is to get on with our research while isolating any debilitating Philosophy of Science debates that cannot be authoritatively decided. However, this move still rests on an agnostic attitude towards possibly existing absolute foundations, that is, it has not yet escaped the foundationalist mindset. In principle, it still allows for the possibility of any particular foundationalist claim being 'true' or 'real' in some deep ontological or axiomatic sense, even though that 'knowledge' is inaccessible to our cognitive capacities.[16] Even if we relied on the recent distinction proposed by Patomäki, Wight and Jackson (Patomäki and Wight 2000; Jackson 2010) between philosophical and scientific ontology—where the latter refers to a 'catalog of objects, processes and factors that a given line of scientific research expects to exist or has evidence for the existence of', and the latter pertains to the question of our 'hook-up to the world, how we as researchers are able to produce knowledge in the first place' (Jackson 2010, p. 28)—neither discourse escapes the foundationalist bind. Ontology is still read either as denoting worldly objects as ontic beings, an approach that from a Heideggerian point of view would rather be described as ontical or phenomenological (Heidegger 1996; Badiou 2009; Prozorov 2014a; Michel 2013),[17] or 'it supplants the question of being with the question of the knowledge of some beings by others, thereby slipping into the same ontical terrain, becoming indistinct from what we usually call "methodology"' (Prozorov 2013, p. 105).

What becomes gradually clear here is that the common feature of the conventional understanding of ontology in IR tends to conceptualise ontology as *presence*, as an ultimate ground of social reality or the social knowledge authorising our access to it. The paradoxical effect of such an understanding of ontology is that any rejection, bracketing or neutralisation of foundational claims is essentially ineffective as long as it labours under the foundationalist imaginary of ontology as an ultimate ground. This is why eliminating the quest for foundations or suspending their absolute claim while still residing in an ontic *Gestalt* about foundations may temporarily allay our pluralist anxieties but does not take us out of the vicious circle (see also Walker 2010). What is needed, instead,

is an alternative theorising of ontology that would build on the aporia of the impossibility and necessity of grounds without: (1) resurrecting the spectres of ultimate foundations that would revert us to a foundational ontology and (2) resulting in the embracement of a negative anti-foundationalism that would be both debilitating and self-defeating (still occupying a foundational ontological imaginary).

In his recent study of post-foundational political thought, Oliver Marchart (2007) puts forward a vision of political ontology that attempts to tackle the above aporia. Drawing on a host of post-Heideggerian thinkers, such as Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Ernesto Laclau, he relates the retreat of foundationalism in late modernity to the distinction, drawn by many prominent Anglo-American and continental thinkers, between politics and the political.[18] Marchart (2007, p. 14) notes that we should treat this distinction as symptomatic of the crisis of foundationalism in late modernity that enabled a reappreciation of the role of radical contingency (the political) in politics and questioned traditional grounds of political legitimacy. The post-foundationalist thinkers he examines, however, do not deny the inescapability of grounds altogether. Rather, their post-foundationalism only undermines the '*absolutisation* of notions such as totality, universality, essence and ground' (emphasis added). In that sense, these thinkers consciously set themselves apart from vulgar forms of anti-foundationalism or postmodern relativism which tend to regress to a mirror image of the same totalising gesture of foundationalism. Marchart's intuitive proposal here is that instead of resurrecting the spectres of foundationalism by assuming the absence of *any* ground, a more effective strategy would involve denying the existence of an *ultimate* ground. This move opens the conceptual space to think the possibility of many grounds but without regressing to some nihilistic postmodern caricature of pluralism according to which all solid foundations have melted into air and therefore meaning has lost its diacritic capacity. This conception of post-foundationalism does not deny the inescapability of grounds. It only works from within to undermine the fetishisation of any operation grounding the social, that is, its transformation into an ultimate ground or essence. Ultimately, this type of post-foundationalism does not seek to erase foundations, only to inaugurate an *ethos* of constant interrogation of metaphysical pretensions to foundations and contest their 'identitarian' status (Prozorov 2009, p. 220; Marchart 2007, p. 2; Nancy 2008, pp. 18–24). Foundations are still operative and their inescapability acknowledged, but what has been added is the recognition of their ontological status as *necessarily* contingent (Marchart 2007, p. 31).

As Marchart (2007, pp. 18–22) argues, the argument that the absence of an ultimate ground does not necessarily entail the elimination of the *process of grounding* can be traced back to Martin Heidegger's (1994, p. 29) conceptualisation of the ground as an abyss ('Der *Ab*-grund ist Ab-*grund*'), that is, as a ground without ground or a bottomless void. Heidegger does not understand the place of the absent ground as empty in the ordinary or commonsensical view of the term. The ground, for Heidegger, is necessarily abyssal which means it is the ontological *nothing* and not a simple ontic nullity. It is then precisely by remaining necessarily empty (since the ontological nothing cannot appear as such in the world), that is, by incessantly deferring its own fulfilment, that it remains always open, endlessly generating new possibilities of grounding. The two possibilities of grounding/degrounding and abyss, or, else, order/disorder and the void that operates as their condition of possibility, have to be differentiated in some way since it is this differentiation that permits the appearance of beings in the ontic world. Yet, the two cannot be separated neatly as they ceaselessly interpenetrate. In that way, Heidegger allows for both the non-identity of the two terms that is generative of the process of grounding and the inseparable mutual entanglement of ground and abyss that accounts for the paradoxical effect of the same process of grounding/degrounding on the ontic level.

The site of non-dialectical negativity in this Heideggerian formulation is the *difference* between the ontological and the ontic. To ask the grounding question, for Heidegger, is to think through the problem of grounding under conditions of an abyssal ground and, at the same time, to rethink *difference* from the perspective of the ontological question.[19] The play between being *qua* Being and beings should be thought not in terms of an ontic difference between the two but as the very happening (the unconcealment/concealment) of the difference between beings and being *as difference*. As a result, a space of freedom opens up whose very condition is the void, the emptiness, the very absence of an ontic ground:

> […] it is precisely because we cannot access the ontological level *directly* that—if we want to approach it at all—we will have necessarily to pass through the ontic level, in order to 'wave' at something which will always escape our grasp because of the irremediable gap between the ontological and the ontic, beingness and beings, the ground and what is grounded. (Marchart 2007, p. 24)

The assumption of a ground which is present in its absence and visible through the effects it produces eventually paves the way for the possibility of multiple grounds on the ontic level. In fact, the possibility for grounds in the plural is an effect of the impossibility of a present, singular ground (Nancy 2001). If this is true, then Marchart is right that the contingency arising out of this condition is not accidental but *necessary*. In modernity, the horizon of the experience of this uncertainty has expanded, although its reception has always been met with resistance. The experience of the paradoxical or the uncanny in early modern Europe, through the encounter with internal (Jews) or external (native Americans, Islam, Russia) others (see Todorov 1984; Neumman and Welsh 1991), had to be kept at bay[20] while, in the realm of philosophy, Cartesian subjectivity restored the threatened epistemological certainty in the domains of knowledge and science replacing earlier forms of reasoning such as medieval casuistry and Renaissance scepticism (see Toulmin 1992).

This rehabilitation of the idea of contingency does not subscribe to a linear conception of a progressive awareness of the pervasive role of radical uncertainty in politics—which would be equally teleological as the opposite discourse of certainty. And yet, it does imply that the potentially paradoxical nature of ground had always been perceived historically in different forms, such as the Machiavellian *Fortuna*, the relativism of Montaigne and the pre-Cartesian humanists, residual discourses like mysticism, astrology, alchemy, theology and rhetoric. Yet, as will be substantiated in Chap. 5, this claim does not assign a supra-historical quality to the experience of contingency. It only submits that while both the experience of contingency and its reflective enactment are subject to certain historico-empirical conditions, the historical itself is the ever-changing condition for the transcendental to emerge (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997; Badiou 2001; Žižek 1993). In this sense, positing this moment of necessary contingency does not succumb to a disabling historicism that pronounces the relativity of all concrete ontic political structures. Rather, it corresponds to the Nietzschean call for a consistent or thorough-going nihilist ontology that guards against the twin pitfalls of active and passive nihilism.[21] The latter two possibilities equally represent the failure of political thinking to move beyond the metaphysical grounding of the political. In contrast, the difference between the ontic and the ontological has to be maintained if one is to recognise both the plurality of contingent foundations that temporarily ground the social and the impossibility of a final metaphysical closure that sustains that plurality as its condition of possibility/impossibility.

This book explicitly advances a heterodox reading of ontology that rests on such a post-foundational Heideggerian strategy. Namely, it reads ontology not as the ground of Being nor as any 'in the last instance' material or unobservable structure that grounds a scientific discourse about politics. Rather, ontology is here understood as the formal non-ground (the void or abyssal ground) of a generative negativity that operates as the condition of possibility/impossibility for the constitution of worldly objects (see Hennig 2008; Prozorov 2014a; Abbott 2014).[22] More explicitly, in this book I draw a sharp philosophical distinction between conventional or foundational or positive or substance ontology[23] and *political ontology*. Political ontology is motivated by an understanding of foundations, not only as inherently contingent, but also as inescapably exigent exactly because of their ontologically contingent status. The political here serves as the radically contingent horizon of constitution of every particular shaping of the social, yet crucially the difference between politics and the political also operates as the non-contingent formal dimension that, as will be shown in Part II, regulates both the grounding of a (contingent) order and its (failed) transgression.

The Meaning of Depoliticisation in This Book: Žižek's Ideology Critique

The roots of such a reading of the political as the constitutive as well as dissolving principle of society can arguably be located in French philosophy's post-war dissatisfaction with orthodox Marxism and Stalinist totalitarianism. An entire generation of post-Heideggerian French philosophers, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to his student Claude Lefort, Paul Ricoeur and Jean-Luc Nancy (to name just a few), were critical of Marxist reductionist accounts that relegated the function of the political to the superstructure and of mainstream political science that compartmentalised parts of social reality into differentiated domains (the economic, the aesthetic, the juridical, the scientific, etc.) uninformed by the historical and political conditions that accounted for their constitution as separate levels of social reality (see Breckman 2013). Both accounts seemed to have been repressing the moment—which Lefort calls Machiavellian—through which social organisation becomes possible:

> The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured. It appears in the sense that the process whereby society is ordered

> and unified across its divisions becomes visible. It is obscured in the sense that the *locus* of politics (the *locus* in which parties compete and in which a general agency of power takes shape and is reproduced) becomes defined as particular, while the principle which generates the overall configuration is concealed. (Lefort 1988, p. 11)

Lefort's conception of the political (*le politique)* is best understood in contrast to what he describes as politics (*la politique)*. Lefort associates politics with such disciplines as political science or political sociology. The problem with such disciplines is their 'desire to be objective' (Lefort 1988, p. 12). Lefort sees in the social sciences a sharp separation between subject and object which then leads to the illusion of circumscribed spheres of knowledge whereby the economic, social, aesthetic and religious are viewed as distinct objects of analysis. In quite a Merleau-Pontyian manner, Lefort asserts that the distinction between subject and object leads social scientists to forgetting that they are a part of the 'flesh of the world', as are the distinctions they extract from it. An erroneous conception of politics, then, entirely misrecognises that it itself is a simulacrum of the political form that engenders it.

Lefort's debt to his teacher Maurice Merleau-Ponty is visible in his adaptation of the latter's language of the 'flesh' to refer to the body politic (see Steinmetz-Jenkins 2010, p. 141). In a Merleau-Pontyian fashion, Lefort argues that just as there is a perpetual deference within the body, analogously the body politic is subjected to a non-identity with itself. Society is never a self-immanent ensemble but a site transcendentally structured around what Lefort (2000, p. 226) calls its 'form' or '*dispositif symbolique*' whose function is to conceal the constitutive (ontological) dislocatory dimension of antagonism. What the sedimentation of social reality in politics—seen as a subsystem of the social—effects is a forgetting of origins, a forgetting of the contingent force of dislocation which stands at its foundation. Of course, the political as the transgressive moment of constitution of social order (the constitutive exception that founds any order but is exempt from it) is a familiar story that can be traced back to Schmitt's (2006) decisionism and his definition of sovereignty as the extra-legal act that founds a legal order without itself being a part of that order (see also Mouffe 1999; Derrida 1992). However valuable in alerting us to the elusive element that is the non-part of every constituted order, Schmitt's decisionism is nevertheless parasitic on the supplementary operation of another dimension that is hidden from view. In an obvious homology to Heidegger's ontological

difference, the simultaneously constitutive and transgressive operation of the political—the political as *constituent power* (see Schmitt 2008a; Negri 2009; Derrida 1992; Wenman 2013)—relies on a necessary gap between itself and the order it grounds/degrounds. This gap explains why the threat to every constituted order does not necessarily come from the outside as its constitutive exception but forms an internal limit in the constitution of every order, an inherent blockage that prevents the establishment of a harmonious order.[24]

This dual dimension of the indeterminacy that penetrates every social order (the fact that the dimension of its constitution, that is, the political, is in itself lacking) can better be theorised by resorting to the psychoanalytical insights furnished by contemporary Lacanian political theory (see Stavrakakis 1999; Fink 1995; Žižek 1999; Laclau 1990).[25] Two Lacanian concepts are of central importance here: (1) the conception of the subject as the 'vanishing mediator' in the foundation of the symbolic order of society preventing the subject's full identification with itself and (2) the dimension of the fundamental fantasy that sustains these always failing processes of identification by introducing the parameter of the lost *jouissance* (enjoyment) in the constitution of political subjectivities. In Žižek's (1989) Lacanian analysis, for instance, the concept of ideology is employed to describe the concealment of the inherent lack both in the subject's own self-constitution *and* the gap in the symbolic order which is what we understand as social reality. Both at the 'subjective' and the 'objective' level ideology operates as the fundamental fantasy that hides the violent, traumatic intervention of the Real—the surplus or remainder of radical negativity—at the kernel of subjectivity and social order. In fact, for the later Žižek (1993, 2002, 2007), it is the movement itself towards creating a consistent and harmonious subjectivity corresponding to a 'meaningful' social reality that produces the recalcitrant surplus of negativity which makes full subjective identification and social completeness impossible. At the same time, however, this impossibility—the structural lack at the heart of the 'big Other' (the symbolic order of society) or else the inherent gap in the realm of social signification—is exactly what enacts and structures the movement of desire that keeps everything going.[26] In other words, the lack of a pre-symbolic, real enjoyment which is always *posited* as something *lost*, as something that the subject has to sacrifice the moment it enters the domain of symbolisation (language), is performatively constructed and retroactively enacted through the prohibition of *jouissance*,[27] that is, it is paradoxically produced through the postulation of enjoyment as by definition impossible to attain.

This dialectics of impossibility ultimately permits a kind of engagement with fundamental socio-political categories such as the individual and the collective or the subject and object that may help us transcend these persistent dualisms crippling contemporary socio-political analysis (see also Zevnik 2016; Epstein 2011). Such a benefit is a direct offshoot of Lacan's insistence that both poles of the traditional dualism, the subjective and the objective, are in lack. On the 'subjective' side, the Lacanian notion of the subject, fundamentally barred from emerging in its absolute identity the moment it appears in the symbolic order—that is, the moment it emerges as the outcome of a process of subjectivation—reflects Lacan's struggle with the problem of representation and the threat of closure that accompanies it. Despite being heavily criticised for reproducing a Cartesian version of the subject with his structuralist formulations (Williams 2001), Lacan is actually providing the appropriate intellectual resources to confront the fundamental ambiguity surrounding processes of social representation and identification (see Stavrakakis 1999, pp. 36–9; Žižek 1999, pp. 306–7). His aphorism that every process of subjectivation has to necessarily fail does not argue for a residue of 'subjectivism' in social discourse, but designates a formal condition that both enables and disrupts hegemonic attempts towards social fullness. The Lacanian barred subject ($) is simultaneously the condition of possibility and impossibility of society emerging as a finished project and history meeting its dialectical *Aufhebung*.

Similar purposes, this time on the 'objective' side, are served by the Lacanian thesis that society itself is fissured by a constitutive lack in the symbolic order itself. In the words of Slavoj Žižek (1989, p. 122):

> The most radical dimension of Lacanian theory lies not in recognising ['that the Lacanian subject is divided, crossed-out, identical to a lack in a signifying chain'] but in realising that the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack.

The subject identifies with the Other but the Other is equally lacking, thereby rendering the desire to a stable identity, that is, the desire to cover up the constitutive gap in symbolic reality, ultimately unsustainable. Since the register of the Symbolic is unfit to offer a solution to the subject's frustration stemming from its unfulfilled desire for plenitude, Lacan stipulates that the subject resorts to a quasi-imaginary construction, the *objet petit a*, the disavowed 'object' of fantasy (Stavrakakis 1999, pp. 45–6). Fantasy

attempts to remedy the fundamental deficiency of the symbolic order and make bearable to the subject the always deferred mythological *jouissance* that is performatively introduced by the intrusion of the Symbolic. In this process, the *objet petit a* appears as the metaphor for the remainder of the lost *jouissance* which 'causes' the absent mythological subject of *jouissance* because it promises the restoration of the Other's fullness and the subject's successful identification with it. Or, at least, it accounts for the 'anomaly emerging at the intersection of [the] symbolic and the persisting real' (Stavrakakis 1999, p. 47).

It is then not enough for a political ontological approach to depoliticisation to simply point to the eclipse of the political from processes that attempt to naturalise, mystify or dehistoricise less than natural or else contingent social arrangements. Such an endeavour would only orient one's critical instruments towards unmasking the suppression of what Žižek (2005, p. 153) calls—following Lacan's 'formulae of sexuation'—the masculine logic of constitutive exception, the transgressive moment of the political, that is, the exception constituting and at once disrupting every particular order. It is also, however, important to account for the persistent drive to sustain the depoliticising urge by 'forgetting' that the difference between the Symbolic and the Real, politics and the political is internal to both terms of the equation and so the Real/political is no less split from within, incomplete, dependent on the Symbolic/politics for having any effect. The depoliticising urge to erase this double split is described by Žižek as the obscene superego supplement of ideology that is desperately trying to hide from itself the non-existence of its fantasised object by indulging in the fantasy of its transgression. This, for Žižek, is the predicament of the contemporary ideological subject in the era of the so-called end of ideologies, that is, an era where all 'markers of certainty' have dissolved and the subjects of ideology are aware that there is no big Other sustaining their fantasy (e.g. previous traditional grounds such as God, Reason, Science, etc.).[28] In this predicament, ideology as fundamental fantasy does not disappear but rather it assumes the form of an obscene supplement to the existing order that invites us to enjoy our transgressions while pretending that the symbolic order is still valid. For Žižek (2012, p. 971), the uncanniest ideological illusion consists

> not primarily in taking seriously the network of symbolic semblances which encircle the hard core of jouissance; at a more fundamental level, ideology is the cynical dismissal of these semblances as 'mere semblances' with regard to the Real of jouissance.

Since his early writings, Žižek (1989, 1993) has illustrated this point by resorting to Octave Mannoni's formula on the contradictory nature of belief: '*Je sais bien, mais quand-meme…*' ('I know very well, but nevertheless…'). Citing Peter Sloterdijk (1988), he argues that the dominant mode of functioning of ideology in contemporary societies is a cynical one. The cynical subject is aware of the distance between the ideological mask and social reality, but she nonetheless still insists upon the mask: 'one knows the falsehood very well, one is aware of the particular interest behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it' (Žižek 1989, p. 29). Žižek argues that cynical reason conceived in these terms proceeds too quickly, for it leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures social reality itself. The standard conception of the way fantasy works within ideology 'is that of a fantasy-scenario that obfuscates the true horror of a situation' (Žižek 1996, p. 78). In other words, the psychoanalytical conception of fantasy does not direct attention to an illusion masking the real state of things, but rather to an unconscious fantasy structuring our social reality itself by masking a traumatic social division—the Real in Lacanian terms—which cannot be symbolised (Žižek 1989, pp. 33, 45).

Any *critique of depoliticisation*—if it wants to maintain its critical edge—must then reject the dream of a politics without ideology (see Žižek 1994), namely, an absolutised notion of critique dismissive of the necessity of representation in politics or oblivious of the necessarily symbolic appearance of the political. Instead, what a political ontological critique of depoliticisation infused with Lacanian insights would expose is not only the absent ground in the constitution of society, but also the perverse necessity[29] of this grounding/degrounding exercise premised on the operation of enjoyment in the production of political subjectivities. Its purpose would be to render *visible* the constitutive role of political difference, that is, the paradoxical fact that society has no ultimate foundation and, yet, the dimension of ground does not disappear without a trace. Political ontology, as it is deployed in this book, emphasises both the impossibility and the necessity of articulating a critical metalanguage of thinking politically, a formal ontology of the political that at once 'signifies' the failure of attaining a pure metalinguistic position *and* acknowledges that uttering this failure cannot escape the frame of symbolisation. Or, as Yannis Stavrakakis (1999, p. 162, n. 8) has succinctly put it, it is one that enables 'a meta-linguistic negation of meta-language'.

Before offering a full articulation of the formal features of such a post-foundational ontology, Chaps. 2–4 analyse the symptoms of a foundational conception of ontology permeating contemporary international political thought in some of its liberal, post-liberal, dialogic and agonistic renditions. The claim here is not that ontology is perceived or treated across the board as a foundational exercise. Critical dialogic and agonistic ontologies emphatically deviate from essentialist or onto-theological readings of identity or totality as well as from Cartesian versions of thick subjectivity or abstract individualism that usually traverse liberal ontologies. However, I will argue that their critical impulse for the recognition of difference, plurality and disagreement in political life still rests on a conception of ontology that privileges difference as the virtuous pole of a reversed polarity. If then giving priority to identity over difference, or universality over particularity, or necessity over contingency is usually taken to be the means through which liberal pluralism produces depoliticisation, it will equally be shown how privileging the denigrated pole of the dichotomy does not cancel the displacement of politics but, in an uncanny dialectical reversal, it tends to reproduce the conditions of its re-emergence. As Žižek would remark, an *over-rapid historicisation*[30] of the terms of political discourse may not be less ideological than its counterpart hegemonic discourse of identitarian universalism and metaphysical closure.

What legitimises the critique of depoliticisation in those terms is not only the exposure of what renders necessary contingency and the irresolvable paradox of political difference *invisible*—the dimension on which post-structuralist critique in IR tends to reside (see Ashley 1988; George 1994; Campbell and Dillon 1993a, b; Walker 1993; Edkins 1999). It is equally imperative to register the failure to account for the power of *ideology's grip,* that is, to account for the necessity, apart from the contingency, of the process of grounding the political and to render this process problematised. Hopefully, this latter aspect will permit us to appreciate how—in a manner reminiscent of the operation of the fundamental fantasy in Lacanian psychoanalysis—even self-reflexive discourses in international political thought tend to surrender to the allure of obscene enjoyment, that is, hide from themselves their own inability to face up to the non-existence and the impossibility of their fantasised 'object' (toleration, communication, emancipation, cosmopolitan solidarity, critique as freedom, agonism, pluralisation, etc.), paradoxically exactly through practicing transgressive critique. As I show in Chaps. 2–4, this happens not as

a result of their lack of reflexivity, critical sensitivity or inattentiveness to plurality, difference, justice and/or equality. It is rather a consequence of an underspecified ontology that labours under the fantasy of various guises of foundationalism (either some political anthropology or ontology as an incontestable commitment or unexamined presupposition) or, its reversal, anti-foundationalism (the denial of all grounds still operating within a foundational imaginary). Indeed, as I show in Chap. 4, even in approaches where a pluralist agonistic ontology is operative, the vestiges of a fantasmatic desire for a privileged or pure point of enunciation undermine the critical force of such approaches and betray an emancipatory anxiety that shields those approaches from the traumatic core of their theoretical fantasy. In the vocabulary of this study, it will be highlighted how their theoretical interventions are possibly not melancholic or nihilistic enough, still clinging to some conjuration of first principles to purge the anxiety caused by the hole in the symbolic order, and the ghosts and spectres it produces.

Rehabilitating Messianism

Is there then any alternative to this seemingly suffocating predicament? Is there a way to transcend this metonymic process of the imposition of successive master signifiers, namely to interrupt the incessant repetition of the foundational-ontological machine, if the constitution of political subjectivity and social ordering as such are tragically bound up with the processes and libidinal investments that make us active and effective political agents? Is there a type of political subjectivity and a mode of political practice that 'embodies' the logic of political difference or, rather, a type of political thinking and action that finds the truth of politics, not in otherworldly detachment or critical distance from the various forms of actual politics (which would reinstate the ideological illusion of a purist politics free of ideology), but in 'incarnating' the indictment of their depoliticising tendencies without betraying their repoliticising potential? Chapter 6 takes up the investigation of such a possibility and the kind of political imaginary it authorises. Instead of seeking to obsessively dissimulate, perversely transgress or hysterically tarry with the unbridgeable chasm separating the subject from her fantasmatic object (the Lacanian *object petit a*), I side with contemporary Lacanian interventions in political theory arguing that such a repoliticising ontology would engage the ideological fantasy in a process of encircling the void that produces that (im)possibility, the redoubled gap between politics and the political.

In Lacanian parlance, this operation is described as the 'discourse of the analyst' traversing the fundamental fantasy, an effect achieved, not by harbouring the illusion that (the retrospectively enacted) desire can be eliminated or totally controlled, but by taking full responsibility for one's enjoyment. This, in turn, translates, not as the destructive Gnostic-like nullification of actual political worlds, but as the incessant paradoxical *unworking* of all forms of politics that create teleological meanings and seek ultimate foundations. Again, this unworking is not a method of nihilism that seeks to devalue and abstractly negate all historical values and ultimate goals (i.e. it constitutes neither a form of active nihilist ultra-politics nor a passive nihilist metapolitics), but it indicates the paradoxical mode of attachment to the messianic as the celebration of the eternal transience (*ewige Vergängnis*) of everything worldly in happiness (see Benjamin 2007a, pp. 312–3).

The structure of the above three sentences is deliberately correlatively conjunctive in order to suggest the transfiguration of political ontology at this stage into a form of *theopolitical meontology*[31] whereby the messianic is not anymore falsely construed as a form of millenarian apocalypticism that offers an indictment of worldly politics *in toto* nor as a destructive political force whose secularised incarnations in the various forms of political messianisms reproduce the structure of teleology and the sovereign logic of violence in modern politics. Messianism in this book bears none of these linear teleological resonances traditionally associated with Christian theistic discourses or millenarian revolutionary violence, neither should it be, for the same reason, construed as having only confessional relevance despite it being a strictly Judeo-Christian narrative. Instead, Chap. 6 argues for a rehabilitation of messianic nihilism as a call for a new redemptive politics of creative tension between messianic meontology and kenotic incarnation, radical innovation and agonistic augmentation, therapeutic love and eschatological expectation. On this account, theopolitical meontology authorises a phenomenology of the political beyond the predicament of tragic subjectivity whereby depoliticisation takes the various forms of submission to or transgressive detachment from the Other's *jouissance*. Rather, it gestures towards the repoliticising possibilities inherent in the formal structure of political difference itself. Exactly because the limit of the Symbolic (i.e. of language and knowledge) is surfacing within the symbolic order of language and knowledge, I will demonstrate how theopolitical (or messianic) meontology emerges as the extimate 'embodiment' of political difference. Theopolitical (me-)ontol-

ogy understood in this way authorises a kind of critique that eludes both the reification of oppressive and unjust structures of power as well as that of phenomenally radical forms of critique that idolise fluidity, contingency and mobility without necessarily uncoupling their own complicity in the perpetuation of those structures.

Notes

1. These two aspects are, of course, not unrelated. Any empirical observation about the so-called fact of pluralism is, in many ways, inevitably entangled with judgements about whether it is a good or a bad thing, that is, a phenomenon that needs to be restrained or promoted, as well as intimately linked to the historical conditions that made its recognition as an important 'problem' in political theory possible. For a useful discussion, see Williams (2003).
2. Richard Flathman (2005) has vividly expressed the banality, but also the pervasive cultural impact, of the pluralist mood by noting that almost every modern political theorist seems to be a pluralist.
3. It is not always clear what philosophers and political theorists mean when they refer to values. Despite the lack of conceptual clarity, however, what seems to be a standard distinction is the one between values as embodied in goods or ends and values as procedural rules or first principles (see Mason 2015). For discussions on value pluralism in political theory, see Berlin (2001, 2002), Williams (2005), Geuss (2008), Gray (2000, 2007), Galston (2002), Bellamy (1999) and White (2002).
4. In fact, political theorists such as Hannah Arendt have argued that this artificial dichotomy is at the roots of the crisis of political philosophy (see also Morgenthau 1971). For Arendt, traditional philosophy from Plato to Marx is characterised by the search for the origin and the true nature of being while disregarding the heterogeneity of everyday phenomena in favour of their alleged essence. Political philosophy, for Arendt, comes to a depoliticising closure whenever it dissolves the constitutive—albeit conflict-ridden—bind between theoretical knowledge and human practice, and the inextricable link between action, and human thinking and talking (Arendt 1968, 2005).
5. See here Michael Freeden's (2013) recent book that, as a reaction to a depoliticising tradition in political theory, consciously develops a theory of *political thinking* as political activity that encompasses

both tendencies, conflictual and reconciliatory. For a precursor to this argument, see the work of Kari Palonen (2006, 2014) who, of course, builds and critically expands on the work of the German *Begrieffsgeshichte* historian, Reinhard Koselleck, and the Cambridge School historian of political thought, Quentin Skinner.

6. The positive value of conflict for the rejuvenation of political life can be traced back to Machiavelli's *Discourses* where he develops the idea that internal strife contributes to the vitality of the republic. See here the emphasis on internal strife and agonistic coexistence in the imaginary of republican and agonistic democratic theorists such as Skinner (1998), Pettit (1997), Viroli (2002), Vatter (2014), Mouffe (1993, 2005), Honig (1993, 2009) Tully (1995) and Connolly (2005).
7. As any projection of European nihilism to non-Western societies might strike as too presumptuous and Eurocentric, so too it would be equally reificatory to deny the horizontal 'hybridical' effects of cultural interaction (see e.g. Tickner and Blaney 2013; Bhambra 2007; Hobson 2012).
8. For Strauss (1996, p. 105), Schmitt's 'affirmation of fighting as such, wholly irrespective of what is being fought for' remains inextricably linked to the liberal neutralisation of values: 'in other words, he who affirms the political as such comports himself neutrally towards all groupings into friends and enemies'. Strauss (1953, p. 46) extends a similar criticism to what he diagnoses as Weber's equally formalistic historicism: Weber's 'theoretical attitude implies equal respect for all causes, but such respect is possible only for him who is not devoted to any cause'. My purpose here is not to condone Strauss' implied, rather controversial—and largely misleading— reading of the origins of modern liberalism in Hobbes but to employ his critique of historicism as symptomatic of the objections historicist ontologies may be subjected to. I thank Nick Rengger for bringing this point to my attention.
9. This tendency is primarily evident in the Marxist and post-Marxist critiques of ideology, from the epistemological version of Marx (1967; Marx and Engels 1974), who posited an untenable distinction between historical materialism and ideology (see Mannheim 1991), to the historicist versions of Lukács (1971) and Gramsci (1986) up to Althusser's (1979, 1994) structuralist variant (see Barrett 1991; Eagleton 1991; Larrain 1979; Lichtheim 1967). The main issue always remained the legitimacy of the ground of

enunciation for making any valid distinction between critique/science/knowledge, on the one hand, and ideology, on the other hand, or whether, instead, any attempt to step outside of ideology is ideological *par excellence*. Michel Foucault (1980, p. 118), for instance, provides an oft-cited argument for rejecting the epistemological conception of ideology on three grounds: Firstly, because 'it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth'. Secondly, because 'the concept of ideology refers…to something of the order of a subject' and thirdly, because 'ideology stands in secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant etc'. For a view that is critical of both the epistemological view of ideology critique and Foucault's historicism, see Žižek (1994). The challenge Žižek responds to, which is also the central preoccupation of this study, is how to construct a metalanguage of critique that is more effective in addressing the twin traps of reification and historicism (for similar ambitions in IR, see Levine 2012; Hamati-Ataya 2014).

10. For a similar argument claiming that Kant is the inventor of the idea of the pure subject as the pre-volitional, pre-reflective void of the world that makes the construction of subjectivity and meaning possible, see Žižek (1993, 1999).
11. I am well aware that the same problem as it is set out here can be addressed from a variety of perspectives. For example, one can go down the 'beyond objectivism and relativism' hermeneutic route of Richard Bernstein (2011) or the 'integral pluralist' one of Fred Dallmayr (2010), or the 'heuristic transcendental/reflective judgement' direction Tracy Strong (2012a) synthesises from Weber, Nietzsche and Arendt or the Heideggerian/Wittgensteinian path of Stephen Mulhall (2003), Lee Braver (2012), and John Gunnell (2014). However, although I share affinities with these perspectives, for reasons that I hope will become clear in this chapter and in Chap. 5, my preferences for addressing the issue of how philosophy (critique), ontology (being) and politics (action) interrelate lie with a Heidegger-inspired political-cum-formal ontology of the void informed by Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytically-inclined transcendental ontology.
12. The contradictions generated here by conflating the two registers were previously outlined in Kant's (1998) idea of the 'antinomies of pure reason' elaborated in the *First Critique* (see Žižek 1993,

p. 54). The mathematical antinomies arise when the necessary categories of pure reason are applied to the Universe as a Whole (the totality of phenomena which as an ontological category can never be given to our finite intuition or act as a 'bottom level' ground or substance) and the dynamical antinomies that emerge when we apply the same categories to objects which do not belong to the phenomenal-ontic order at all (God, free will).

13. The turn to ontology in IR is not a new phenomenon but it is, nevertheless, relatively recent. The investigation of the nature of the international and the essence of politics originated in a dissatisfaction with the narrow way international politics were theorised in mainstream circles. Critical thinkers with a philosophical mindset, such as RBJ Walker (2009), Jens Bartelson (2009), Alex Wendt (2015), Nicholas Onuf (2013), Patrick Jackson (2010) and Colin Wight (2006) among others, have over the last at least 25 years offered us sustained engagements with metatheoretical issues pertaining to an interrogation of the ontological and epistemological foundations of world politics. They do not always agree with each other on the definition, scope, meaning and usage of the word 'ontology' but they all recognise that such an exploration is almost unavoidable in our current late—or postmodern predicament characterised by the crisis of foundationalism and the challenge presented by the ensuing nihilism. For pioneering approaches to ontology that are close to the post-Heideggerian take developed here, see Dillon (1996) and Odysseos (2007). For a recent reiteration in IR Philosophy of Science debates, see Michel (2012, 2013).
14. One may rightfully claim here that these three types of foundationalist claims, that is, ontological, epistemic and axiological, are analytically distinct and do not necessarily amount to the same thing. That said, I would argue that all three kinds of foundationalism are necessarily interrelated and can be discussed as part of an inescapably political process, the symbolic ordering of society. Laying out the contours of such a political ontology will be the concern of Chap. 5.
15. For examples entirely indicative of what is becoming a growing metatheoretical consensus, see David Lake (2011); on eclecticism, see Sil and Katzenstein (2010); and on pragmatism, see 'Symposium: Kratochwil's "Tartu Lecture" and Its Critics' (2007) and the 'Special Issue: Pragmatism in International Relations' (2002).

16. In that sense, it is not a coincidence but actually a symptom of that specific understanding of foundations, not as necessarily contingent, but as cognitively inaccessible, that some of the participants in the *International Theory* debate on the possibility of a post-foundationalist IR ended up accusing each other of hidden or unconscious foundationalism. See, for example, how Patrick Jackson's (2009, p. 462) critique of Monteiro and Ruby is that the latter's promise of 'foundational prudence' is favourably skewed towards scientific realism and their reply (Monteiro and Ruby 2009, p. 502) that Jackson's criticisms rest on unacknowledged philosophical foundationalism privileging social constructivism.
17. Indeed, Heidegger's (1996) distinction between the ontic and the ontological furnishes the insight that prior to the study of particular worldly beings in their phenomenal predicates and the study of the conditions of our cognitive access to these beings, there exists a level of investigation that addresses these entities solely in the aspect of their being *qua* being bracketed off from their particular predicates.
18. See, for instance, Schmitt (1996); Wolin (2004); Arendt (1968); Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1997); Lefort (1986, 1988); Mouffe (2005); Edkins (1999); Stavrakakis (1999); Beardsworth (1996); Žižek (1999); Badiou (2007).
19. Heidegger famously claims that Western philosophical thought since Plato is marked by its inability to understand the word 'being'. In his' Letter on Humanism', Heidegger (1993, p. 226) avers that the definitive characteristic of metaphysical or onto-theological thinking is that it 'does not think the difference' between Being and beings and that metaphysics 'does not ask about the truth of Being itself'.
20. In his fascinating book, *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov provides an account of the twin assimilatory strategies of conquest and conversion that accompanied the European encounter with absolute difference in the Americas. For similar analyses, see Pagden (1993), Connolly (1991) and Venn (2000).
21. While active nihilism attains 'its maximum relative force […] as a violent force of *destruction*' its opposite is 'weary nihilism that no longer *attacks*: its most famous form: Buddhism as *passive* nihilism' (Nietzsche 1968, p. 18). Both forms of nihilism are for Nietzsche codependent expressions of the same life-denying ascetic ideal:

'one kind of mortification (the one that takes the path of surplus excitement) is regulated or moderated by another kind. The 'will to Nothingness' is combined with the 'narcoticisation' of will—exciting stimulant combines with sedating tranquilizer' (Zupančič 2003, p. 67).

22. The full elaboration of this claim will be the main task of Chap. 5.
23. These terms will be employed interchangeably throughout this study. Prozorov (2013, p. 105) offers a useful intimation of what is wrong with such a notion of ontology citing Bruno Bosteels: 'the original Aristotelian sense of ontology as 'first philosophy', a science of 'being qua being' frequently gives way to a rather more loose understanding of ontology in terms of 'the basic presuppositions behind a given politico-philosophical stance, the bedrock of fundamental assumptions and unshakable commitments', which might better be described as 'political anthropology' or even 'ideology"'.
24. For similar critiques of Schmitt's unity-oriented, *katechontic* conception of the political and his invocation of the external enemy in order to eliminate the enemy from within (threatening anarchy, division and social chaos), see Frye (1966); Strathausen (2009) and Prozorov (2012).
25. The pertinence and value of psychoanalysis for political and social theory has not been uncontested (see Gellner 2003; Frosh and Baraitser 2008; Bellamy 1993; Badiou 2009). Yet, in recent years a systematic attention has been given to those elements in Lacan's thought that may serve as the theoretical underpinning of a socio-political analysis of ideological processes (Žižek 1989; Stavrakakis 1999; Glynos 2000; Edkins 1999; Epstein 2011; Tomšič and Zevnik 2015; Zevnik 2016).
26. In that sense, desire, that is, the desire to capture the Real, to achieve the full enjoyment of some pre-symbolic fullness is never a pre-volitional 'ground' or a biological drive, but always the effect of the signifier, what Lacan calls the name-of-the Father, the imposition of a social order that is based on the prohibition of the forbidden Thing, the mother. Desire is very important for any socio-political analysis based on Lacanian grounds as it is exactly because the full satisfaction of desire is ultimately unattainable that the promise of its realisation becomes necessary. It is what later gives full weight to the promise for the imaginary elimination of

the lack in the symbolic Other by recapturing the lost Real, a process which in Lacan bears the name of fundamental fantasy (see Stavrakakis 1999, p. 45).

27. *Jouissance* is a quite complex term and enjoys a rather ambiguous status in Lacan's thought. According to Stavrakakis (1999, p. 150), it has to be first and foremost clearly differentiated from the concept of the 'pleasure principle' which should rather be imagined as a socially sanctioned pleasure operating at the level of the imaginary. *Jouissance* instead can be felt only through suffering as some sort of painful enjoyment gained from the feeling that desire is denied its ultimate satisfaction. In this respect, *jouissance* is real exactly because it is impossible and unattainable which, in turn, stages the unending movement of desire. The important insight to be captured here is that while the lack in the symbolic has to be somehow represented through the postulation of a pre-symbolic 'something' that 'something' is in no way 'something lacking' as such a notion would simply take us back to the same incompleteness, only now displaced at a higher level and so on *ad infinitum* (see Fink 1995, pp. 29–30). Instead, what gets 'signified' and encircled here is the impossibility but also the necessity of naming the interplay of closure and incompleteness of the Symbolic. This aporia is what the Real stands for, yet it is an act of power, an act of exclusion staged in the Symbolic that retroactively produces the fullness we attribute to what was excluded, to that unknown possibility. This act of 'symbolic castration' in Lacanese is the one that introduces the idea of the lost *jouissance*, the need to recapture a fullness which is desired exactly because it is staged as *lost/sacrificed* (see Žižek 2002; Stavrakakis 1999).
28. According to Žižek (2002), therefore, this kind of post-ideological ideology does not depend on the fact that in their praxis human beings *do not know it* (that they act in benefit of certain power groups) *but they do it*—as Marx would have it. It rather depends on the fact that *they know it perfectly well, but they act as if they did not know.*
29. The use of term perversion here is quite technical and refers to one of the four basic psychoanalytical diagnoses of the various modes of relating to one's *jouissance* and the big Other (the other three are psychosis and the two forms of neurosis: obsession and hysteria). The subject of perversion, for Žižek, does not try to hide from

itself the non-existence of the big Other, but nevertheless sustains the Other's *jouissance* by transgressing it. The pervert identifies directly with the obscene superego supplement that sustains social order by exposing the ideological text and realising that the moral law upon which it rests actually *needs* transgression: 'The pervert is thus the 'inherent transgressor' *par excellence*' (Žižek 1999, p. 248). The lesson here is that the pervert reinforces the law because he needs it to be in place in order to extract enjoyment from its violation. Hence the aphorism: 'Perversion is not subversion' (Žižek 1999, p. 247).

30. For Žižek (1989, pp. 49–50) this move—which seems the very opposite of eternalisation—is the shrewdest ideological reversal.
31. The analysis here is inspired by the recent revival of the philosophical approaches to St Paul's legacy by thinkers like Stanislas Breton (2011), Alain Badiou (2003), Jacob Taubes (2004), Giorgio Agamben (2005) and Slavoj Žižek (2003a, 2010). In 1 Cor. 7, Paul of Tarsus describes the messianic way of the cross as that which hollows, renders inoperative the given order of things in a way that is 'meontological', that is, *not* (*me*) a method of self-grounding identity. Full elaboration of this claim will have to await Chap. 6.

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PART I

A Phenomenology of Depoliticisation in Theorising a Pluralist World

CHAPTER 2

Depoliticisation in Liberal and Post-liberal Ontologies

My first task in this chapter is to demonstrate how the dominant (Rawlsian) liberal approach to negotiating tolerance, pluralism and cultural diversity in a globalised world remains entrapped in a conventional ontology of the ultimate ground that undermines the legitimacy of its prescriptive proceduralism. It is this tacit reliance on a foundationalist logic that seems to compromise its commitment to the primary liberal value of tolerance and neutrality towards various definitions of the good. I will then explore why some nuanced liberal, as well as post-liberal, attempts to mediate between abstract universalism and pure particularism fail to produce a conception of pluralism that would escape the fixity of foundationalism or the self-defeatism and reversed groundedness of historicism. To this end, I will assess claims for some form of reconciliation between the (at any rate, caricatured) extremes of an assimilative cosmopolitanism and a parochial communitarianism and investigate to what extent and for what reason they ultimately fall short of delivering their promise. In particular, I will examine John Rawls' preoccupation with the 'fact of pluralism' on the international level in his *Law of Peoples*, Michael Walzer's articulation of a thin universalism in his *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Richard Rorty's postmodern liberal defence of an anti-foundationalist human rights culture and, finally, Martha Nussbaum's and Alasdair McIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism as two imaginative—one liberalism-friendly (Nussbaum) and the other post-liberal (McIntyre)—responses to the limitations of liberal tolerance.

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Undoubtedly, it should be admitted in advance that the aforementioned approaches constitute diverse or even antithetical (especially McIntyre's, given his avowed opposition to liberalism) ways of dealing with the question of pluralism and the accommodation of difference in a global world, even within a broadly construed family of liberal responses to pluralism. What, however, they do share in common is their disaffection with moral claims that succumb too easily either to a self-righteous ethnocentrism or a complacent and uncritical conventionalism. Indeed, in their effort to articulate a persuasive conciliation between the two extreme postulates of liberal cosmopolitanism and conventional communitarianism, these approaches are set on negotiating a rearticulation of the relationship between the universal and the particular. Put in Hegelian terms, it can be argued that their moral discourse represents an attempt to articulate the meaning and scope of true universality in an *ethically* diverse world. Given the fact of manifold diversity, these accounts seek to offer a version of universality that would avoid assimilating or suppressing its particular contents, without at the same time denouncing the necessary functions performed by the universal. In so doing, however, they either rest on a conception of universality as a neutral container of accommodation of particularistic claims, or expose the partiality of abstract universality without acknowledging the violence of their own particularistic discourse. Eventually, the logic of an ultimate ground that permeates their normative justifications is responsible for the unresolved tension between universality and particularity in their accounts of world order. Two strategies are employed here: On the one hand, Rawls, Walzer and Nussbaum subscribe to an abstract notion of universality that threatens to expose their difference-sensitive proposals as another exclusionary hegemonic particularity. On the other hand, Rorty's 'ironic liberalism' and McIntyre's retrieval of Aristotelian virtue rely on unargued assumptions that reveal their open defence of particularism to be an equally exclusionary gesture of universalism.

The classical statement that liberalism can be envisaged as a culture-free set of principles devisable, intelligible and applicable anywhere and everywhere, though being responsive to local variations in circumstances, is that of early Rawls. In his *Theory of Justice*, he concludes that to envision society from the remarkably irenic perspective of the original position, from which liberal principles are to be derived, is

> to see it sub *specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view. The perspective of

> eternity is not a perspective from a certain place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world. And having done so, they can, whatever their generation, bring together in one scheme, all individual perspectives and arrive together at regulative principles that can be affirmed by everyone as he lives by them, each from his own standpoint. (Rawls 1971, p. 587)

The stronger version of that view that allows no concessions for a difference-friendly liberalism is Brian Barry's culture-free egalitarian liberalism. Barry rejects the need for an appeal to culture and strongly opposes the argument that liberal values cannot lie beyond internal or consensual reasoning. In Barry's (2001, p. 284) words, we can defend moral universalism, not because this is the way liberals do things, but because 'this is the way things ought to be done everywhere: we do things that way here, not because it is part of our culture, but because it is the right thing to do'. Barry's approach makes no serious attempt to engage with difference and cultural diversity, and expounds an unproblematic view of universality as abstract neutrality. On the opposite extreme, cultural relativists deny any possibility of adopting a common measure to apply ethical judgement across diverse political communities and argue that value standards are internal to the social and historical contexts from which they originate (see Herskovits 1973; Matilal 1989; Renteln 1990).

As such, these antithetical views set the absolute standards which conciliatory projects are trying to escape from. Both later Rawls (1993, 1999) and Walzer (1994), for example, were trying to either begin or engage with cultural diversity and then articulate ways to avoid the Scylla of ethnocentrism (for Rawls) and the Charybdis of cultural relativism (for Walzer). While their approaches are certainly less ethnocentric or complacent, their argumentation is often based on premises that tend to either engage with an already compromised idea of otherness or employ a concept of culture that is deeply misleading as it usually rests on what Seyla Benhabib (1995) has labelled a 'poor man's sociology'—that is, a holistic, monolithic notion of culture that is no less a reification than liberalism's ethnocentrism—and tends to produce depoliticisation in the form of a 'culturalization of politics' (Brown 2006, p. 19) whereby an amorphous, essentialised conception of culture is mobilised to explain politics as a consequence of 'culture'. This tendency is not a result of poor reasoning, but rather an effect of a foundational ontology that, despite claims to

the contrary, rests on unacknowledged anthropological or metaphysical first principles that are far from neutral or all-inclusive. In what follows, I am going to substantiate this claim in detail by examining four cases that attempt to transcend or mediate, in different ways, between the extremes of liberal cosmopolitanism and communitarianism: Rawls' non-metaphysical liberalism, Walzer's thick and thin morality, Rorty's anti-foundationalist humanitarianism and, finally, Nussbaum's and McIntyre's virtue ethics revival.

Rawls' Realist Utopia: The Limits of Liberal Pluralism

At least since Locke's famous defence of property rights, the liberal tradition identified justice with providing a justification for the prevailing social and economic inequalities. In that way, differences would not be denied but accounted for by being part of a discourse that legitimises them. On the international level, a theory of international justice is expected to perform the same function, that is, provide a set of principles to adequately justify international inequality without sacrificing diversity. John Rawls' (1999) *The Law of Peoples* is exactly an attempt to articulate a liberal framework of international justice within a pluralist world comprising societies that hold different comprehensive doctrines of the good. Rawls is not primarily concerned with outlining the conditions for global justice as with determining a 'reasonable' political conception of justice purged from any metaphysical pretensions that he derived from his earlier work *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 1993). The idea of a political, as opposed to a metaphysical, conception of justice reflects Rawls' effort to engage with this fact of inevitable plurality and move away from a more comprehensive doctrine of liberal tolerance he advocated in his previous work and for which he had been heavily criticised (see Gray 2000; Galston 2002). His aim is to create the conditions for an overlapping consensus among participants of an inclusive international order consisting of both liberal and non-liberal societies. To this end, the primary issue he seeks to address is 'should liberal societies tolerate and cooperate with non-liberal societies that are not just according to political liberalism and, if so, how far should toleration and cooperation extend?' (Freedman 2003: 45).

Belonging to an intellectual tradition harking back to Plato, Rawls distinguishes between ideal and non-ideal theory. His aim is to write 'ideal theory' as opposed to 'non-ideal theory' and, in doing so, to generate

what he calls in the *Law of Peoples* a 'realistic utopia', an account of the world which is utopian in so far as it is offered as a normative framework of justice that does not reflect existing political relations, yet realistic enough to the extent that 'it depicts an achievable social world that combines political right and justice for all liberal and decent peoples in a Society of Peoples' (Rawls 1999, p. 6; see also Brown 2002a). In the first part of *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls (1999, p. 5) maintains that liberal societies have no obligation to accept totalitarian regimes as 'members in good standing of a reasonable society of peoples'. Yet, he is quick to recognise that cultural pluralism is an inexorable fact of life among societies as it is among individuals in a free society and that this diversity will express itself in a variety of political forms (Beitz 2000, p. 671). He, therefore, sets out to construct a framework of toleration between liberal and non-liberal regimes that would be sufficiently inclusive to take into account the plurality of comprehensive ideas of the good enjoyed by different societies. The underlying intuition is that not all regimes can reasonably conform to liberal standards of social justice and, similarly, not all non-liberal regimes can be presumed to be tyrannies or dictatorships. His vision of 'a reasonable society of peoples' includes both liberal democracies and non-liberal, yet 'well-ordered' societies, which, nevertheless, conform to his criteria of decency. According to Rawls (1999, pp. 64–67) a 'decent hierarchical society' satisfies three conditions: that society does not have aggressive aims in foreign policy, that it respects basic human rights and that its government is based on a system of consultation. To give an example of the latter, Rawls describes a hypothetical society, 'Kazanistan', in which Islam is the comprehensive doctrine and the political machinery of the state is run exclusively by Muslims. However, Kazanistan's foreign policy is non-aggressive and law-abiding, there is a decent consultation hierarchy, and human rights are respected including freedom of religion. This is, of course, not a liberal society since—to start with—there is no fair equality of opportunity. Nonetheless it is, according to Rawls, a decent society that should be tolerated by liberals to the extent that it conforms to principles that can be the object of an 'overlapping consensus' amongst 'reasonable societies' that subscribe to a political, not metaphysical, conception of justice (Rawls 1993, 1999).

Though Rawls recognises the inevitable existence of non-liberal societies in a global world and makes a conscious effort to expand his definition of liberal pluralism by giving ever-increasing prominence to a vision of tolerance that resists a comprehensive or universal doctrine of liberal-

ism, there is considerable ground to question the success of his efforts. Granted, Rawls deliberately seeks to distance himself from the 'universalist' Enlightenment roots of liberal tolerance and simultaneously allow space for the presence of difference in its particularity. The crucial question, however, remains, to what extent he succeeds in avoiding an assimilative treatment of difference. For the conditionality of 'decency' may still be interpreted as a form of assimilative universalism in disguise since 'decent hierarchical societies' are required to conform to a 'political conception of justice' which rests on a liberalism-friendly definition of 'reasonableness'. In fact, it is exactly because liberalism is employed as a procedural framework of coexistence—a form of neutral universality—that its criteria of toleration may still encompass a threshold of procedural universalism that some non-liberal societies would find at least questionable, if not oppressive. Rawls' more inclusive version of liberal tolerance rests on the distinction he draws between rationality and reasonableness. Liberal peoples—the subject of the first part of his *Law of Peoples* (1999)—have three characteristics, all of which are postulated as axiomatic: 'a reasonably just constitutional democratic government that serves their fundamental interests; citizens united by what Mill called "common sympathies"; and finally, a moral nature', interpreted as a commitment to reasonableness (ibid., p. 23). This latter requirement, 'a firm attachment to a political (moral) conception of right and justice' (ibid., p. 24), is essential, because liberal peoples are both rational and reasonable. They are rational in so far as they engage in instrumental reasoning in order to pursue their interests, but this pursuit is constrained by their sense of what is reasonable.

Setting aside Rawls' already assimilative understanding of individuals as utility-maximisers, I will focus on his notion of 'reasonableness' through which he attempts to mediate between the universal and the particular, self and other. Rawls' understanding of reasonable doctrines and people make him vulnerable to the critique that he presupposes what should be an object of demonstration (committing the fallacy of *petitio principii*). As Bhikhu Parekh (in Lukes 2003, p. 33) aptly puts it in his article 'Superior People: The Narrowness of Liberalism from Mill to Rawls', Rawlsian liberalism's treatment of diversity is still tied to the Millian legacy which

> linked diversity to individuality and choice, and valued the former only in so far as it was grounded in the individualist conception of man. This ruled out several forms of diversity. It ruled out traditional and customary ways of life, as well as those centred on the community. It also ruled out ethni-

> cally grounded ways of life, as well as those limited to a 'narrow mental orbit' or 'not in tune' with the dominant trend of the age. Although it may not entirely rule them out, Millian liberalism also takes a low view of ways of life that stress contentment and weak ambition rather than a go-getting character, or are centred on religion, or place little value on worldly success and material abundance. As one would expect, Millian liberalism cherishes not diversity per se but *liberal* diversity, that is, diversity confined within the narrow limits of the individualist model of human excellence.

Parekh seems to be critical of what he perceives as liberalism's cultural bias and limited scope.[1] He identifies this version of liberalism as 'the deep imprint of an age in which the liberal way of life and thought exercised unchallenged intellectual and political hegemony over its defeated rivals' and he, instead, advocates a 'more broad-based liberalism' that would 'reassess its Millian commitment to a single mode of human excellence and evolve a view of the world in which different ways of life, including the non-liberal, can converse as equals and enrich both individual and collective existence'. It is hard for Rawls to deflect Parekh's criticism that his notion of reasonableness seems to be confined to those that are already liberal or at least liberalism-friendly. This becomes quite clear in a well-known passage in which Rawls (1993, p. 60) expounds on reasonableness:

> Thus, it is not in general unreasonable to affirm any one of a number of reasonable comprehensive doctrines…Others who affirm doctrines different from ours are, we grant, reasonable also, and certainly not unreasonable. Since there are many reasonable doctrines, the idea of the reasonable does not require us, or others, to believe any specific reasonable doctrine, though we may do so. When we take a step beyond recognising the reasonableness of a doctrine and affirm our belief in it, we are not being unreasonable.

In this passage, Rawls seems to lump together an overlapping consensus of both reasonable doctrines and peoples that appears to take for granted what has to be appropriately demonstrated. A *doctrine* that can be said to be reasonable, that is, justifiable by convincing or adequate reasons, even if not acceptable to all, presupposes the existence of *people* that can be reasonable, that is, disposed to behave cooperatively within certain justifiable constraints. It, thus, seems that Rawls' reasonableness can serve as a measure of accommodating diversity only by constructing an already mediated difference that is appropriately attuned to the values of public reason. People may share different comprehensive doctrines but, to the

extent that they participate in the liberal culture of public reason, they are taken to be capable of detaching themselves from these doctrines. This idea of public reason is based on a specific 'system of post-conventional morality' (Benhabib 1992, p. 42) that privileges self-reflexivity and impartiality. Peaceful coexistence between agents of different cultural values is possible on the basis of their ability to decentre themselves and question their own beliefs. Ultimately, impartiality and stability are elevated to the status of the only acceptable public values, while comprehensive conceptions of the good life are considered mere aesthetic preferences or tastes on which there can be no rational agreement. At the end of the day, Rawls' difference-friendly universalism already restricts the ability of non-liberal societies to be included in his supposedly neutral conception of public reason. Ultimately, Rawls' aspiration for a non-metaphysical political liberalism is revealed to be an unacknowledged species of 'political metaphysics' (see Adams 1999) that rests on liberal ontological assumptions about human beings (as free and equal) and the good life (as only possible among reasonable people) promoting a restrictive model of 'reasonable pluralism'.

Walzer's Thin and Thick Morality: The Limits of Liberal Communitarianism

If Rawls' justification of liberal pluralism rests on a problematic accommodation of social, cultural and political diversity as it tends to smuggle in assumptions and conceptions that would be deeply controversial for many, even 'reasonable' moral, religious and philosophical doctrines held by different communities, Michael Walzer's liberalism builds on a vision of pluralism that takes the moral value of recognised political communities as its starting point. Walzer's influential defence of the rights of political communities is grounded on the centrality of the state as a manifestation of community. In his *Spheres of Justice*, early Walzer claimed that 'the primary good that we distribute to one another is membership in some human community' (Walzer 1983, p. 31) and that 'a given society is just if its substantive life is lived in a certain way, that is, in a way faithful to the shared understanding of its members' (ibid., p. 313). These statements, taken out of context, may hint towards a kind of cultural relativism that fetishises community and treats it as an unalterable given. However, Walzer seems to be subscribing to a more sophisticated line of thought that takes communities to be valuable because they provide individuals

with the context for living a meaningful life. On this understanding, states are important or even indispensable for providing the structure of individual flourishing, but do not have rights in any but a derivative sense (see Jones 1999, p. 207).

In this respect, Walzer does not endorse an ethnic version of the community or a mystification of the state. Neither does he necessarily attribute an intrinsic value to the community as a transhistorical or metaphysical entity. On the contrary, in keeping with the liberal element in his theoretical scheme, Walzer (1977, p. 54) is at pains to present state rights as the collective manifestation of individual rights. In that sense, Walzer's approach does not perceive state sovereignty as a constitutive norm of international society, but rather suggests a connection between individuals and states which makes states worthy of respect because they provide collectively for the purposes of individuals (Vincent 1986, p. 115). Indeed, the fact that he insists that the rights of states to territorial integrity and political sovereignty 'derive ultimately from the rights of individuals' (Walzer 1977, p. 53) is an explicit recognition that he tends to resort to universalist justifications 'when he can find no other defence' (Cochran 1999, p. 55). However, although his primary focus remains the political community, rather than the state as such, he ends up providing a defence of statism which rests on the assumption that individual rights are best realised through participation in the common life of a community (Barry 1999). Theoretically, the rights of political communities and the rights of states do not conflate, but Walzer (1977, p. 54) asserts that most states do 'stand guard over the community of their citizens, at least to some degree', thus linking the moral standing of any state to the protection of the life and liberties of its citizens.

Walzer's particularism (1987) is evident in his advocacy of the view that interpretation and social criticism is always a product of a particular existing morality. Indeed, for Walzer, interpretive social criticism is perhaps best understood not as a species of philosophy, but rather as 'one of the more important by-products of a larger activity—let us call it the activity of cultural elaboration and affirmation,' which is the work of 'priests and prophets' and 'poets,' among others, but not of philosophers (ibid., p. 40). Philosophy, he argues, is mostly useless in a moral argument: it can, perhaps, articulate 'a kind of minimal and universal code' (ibid., p. 24), a morality for 'strangers' (ibid., pp. 14–16), especially applicable as a 'law of nations' (ibid., pp. 93, 79); but these universal principles do not constitute a 'livable morality' (ibid., p. 25), 'a dense moral culture within which

[people] can feel some sense of belonging' (ibid., p. 16). 'It is as if we were to take a hotel room … as the ideal model of a human home' (ibid., pp. 14–15). Walzer is a critic of philosophy in the name of the 'moral comfort' of 'home' or community.

This kind of argumentation is particularly vulnerable to the charge of conservativism and relativism, and so Walzer, being acutely aware of such a criticism, retorts that what we mostly share is the commonality of a 'home' and that our moral and cultural traditions are not univocal and homogenous (ibid., pp. 21–23). He is ready to accept the fact that an individual is both socially constituted and capable of self-reflection upon her socialisation. However, as Molly Cochran (1999, p. 59) insightfully observes, in times of crisis Walzer asserts the parochial priority of the self's affiliation to her community. Under those terms, it is not so easy for Walzer to escape the conservative implications of his argument. Interpretation within the limits of a particular tradition remains a contest between the critic and the apologist concerning the meaning of this authoritative tradition. Their dispute takes the form of claims to orthodoxy and charges of heresy, rather than appeals to what is perhaps reasonable or just. Walzer (1987, pp. 20–21) argues that the existing moral world 'is authoritative for us because it is only by virtue of its existence that we exist as the moral beings we are'. However, it is for exactly the same reason that the community becomes a moral enclave in which individuals are isolated in a game that treats disagreements as a struggle for which justice will be the reigning prejudice of the day, since there is no principled way of ending the disagreement. Thus, since there seems to be no foundations for social criticism, we potentially revert to relativism and incommensurability.

Conscious of relativistic implications, in a later development of his thought Walzer (1994) addressed the issue of whether his moral theory amounts to a conservative acceptance of the status quo, prohibiting any ethical judgment on the affairs of other communities. In his *Thick and Thin*: *Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Walzer elaborates the argument he first put forward in 'Nation and Universe' (1990) where he entertained the possibility of a 'reiterative universalism'. This kind of universalism would transcend the unproductive dichotomy between the particular and the universal by being particularist in focus, but spreading its pluralising effects outwards (1990, p. 513). Similarly, in *Thick and Thin* he argues in favour of a minimal morality based on a thin universalism 'qualified by its fit with our thick, particularist moral understandings' (Cochran 1999, p. 66). Walzer's central thesis is that morality has a dual

form. On the one hand, there is a 'thin' set of values, universal in validity but minimal in content, which acts as a cross-cultural constraint on what can legitimately be done to people. On the other hand, there are culturally specific 'thick' moralities, separate and particular families of doctrines, which in normal conditions constitute the substance of our moral discussions and decisions.

Thin morality can be understood by everyone, but it contains only the barest minimum standards of decent behaviour: the principle of self-determination, non-aggression and the moral significance of 'tribalism' by which he means the moral value of politically organised communities (Walzer 1994, pp. 1–19). The relevance of this thin moral code only comes to the fore in times of crisis or breakdown. It is what enables us to express international solidarity and support struggles against tyranny and oppression wherever they occur, or oppose genocides, mass atrocities and ethnic cleansing as morally reprehensible. But, Walzer argues, it would be a mistake to regard thin values as being in some way the grounds of morality. Rather, we are primordially immersed in our thick languages, each society being human in its own way. We can, however, recognise each other as human across societies, and thus we find within each thick language the same thin values emerging to express our common humanity. Where things go wrong, we can legitimately intervene in other societies to uphold the minimalist code, but we can never justify imposing our maximalist ideas upon others.

This priority of thickness over thinness means that the model of moral debate which Walzer envisions is not that of working out how to apply single, universal, eternally valid principles to particular contexts. And yet, thin morality does provide a limit to what can count as just, and a basis for a minimal critical perspective on other countries. Walzer realises that the construction of a thin morality presupposes the reconciliation between the universal and the particular point of view. Yet, despite his moderation, he finds himself entangled in a quite conventional understanding of the relationship between the two poles. In his view, the thinner our moral commonalities, the more shared and thus less contested our common conception of universality will be. However, his thin universalism may be seen as resting on a liberal ontology that can compromise his carefully constructed pluralism. To start with, his minimal moral standards are vested in a language of rights that cannot be *a priori* presumed to be cross-culturally translatable as it looks like they are 'derived from good, old-fashioned, liberal values of tolerance and space for self-determination' (Cochran 1999,

pp. 72–3). In other words, it seems that, in Walzer's blurry distinction between minimal and maximal moral values, pluralism resembles an act of imposition of good old American liberal values that may not rest on strong foundational claims but, nonetheless, still rely on arbitrary ontological commitments presented as universally valid. Can his thin morality operate as the lowest common denominator of existing thick moralities when, to raise the obvious objection, a number of thick moral codes are not ready to agree on whether they consider life and liberty paramount rights? If not, and since Walzer does not make any explicit anti-foundationalist claims, how can he successfully deflect the criticism that he is defending a culturally specific 'thinness' that potentially limits the scope and appeal of his pluralism? As in Rawls' case, Walzer's project seems to be limited by liberalism's inability to envisage a framework of tolerance and pluralism that may seriously accommodate even the detractors of liberal ontology. Yet again, the outcome is a depoliticised pluralism that fails to accommodate difference despite its professed opposition to abstract universalism.

Rorty's Pragmatism: Towards an Anti-foundational Liberalism?

A fair description of the impasse described so far would be that both Rawls' and Walzer's pluralist projects to resist 'the transhistorical universalism of judgment in moral cosmopolitanism without falling into the relativism of "bounded" judgment in communitarianism' (Hutchings 1999, p. 47) were found wanting mainly on the grounds of their adherence to a foundationalist liberal ontology that taints their conception of universality with the mark of liberal particularism. Despite their genuine efforts to distance themselves from a foundationalist version of liberalism that takes the primacy of liberal universalism for granted, their hidden liberal ontology compromises the sincerity and efficacy of their pluralism as it retains traces of a hegemonic liberal universalism. Richard Rorty shares the liberal commitment to tolerance and diversity, but he thinks that strategies to promote liberal values have suffered from an unproductive attachment to a foundationalist conception of liberalism. Deriding Rawls' political conception of liberalism for not being anti-foundationalist enough, Rorty draws on the wealth of the American pragmatist tradition which he marries with the latest insights of continental postmodernism, to construct a 'post-metaphysical' liberalism that he dubs 'postmodern bourgeois liberalism' (Rorty 1991, pp. 198–9).

Pragmatism enables Rorty to articulate a vision of liberalism that incorporates the virtues of pragmatist epistemology: anti-representationalism, fallibilism and the priority of democracy over philosophy (see Bellamy 2002, p. 489). From anti-representationalism, we learn to bear in mind that justifications for pluralism operate within international regimes of truth that privilege some forms of knowledge—'our' knowledge—over others and that the accepted veracity of both the justifications and the regime depend upon the degree of shared meaning within a community. Fallibilism teaches us that we should be open to the possibilities of revising our beliefs once we realise the malleability of our nature. Finally, the priority of democracy over philosophy calls for the creation of transnational 'fluid' moral communities in a constant effort to include others into our 'we group', while simultaneously recognising the fallibility of our position and inviting other people to criticise or validate it. Rorty is inspired by pragmatism in offering a defence of liberal values such as human rights, tolerance, morality and innate human dignity, without the metaphysical baggage associated with the belief in universal human reason or the transcultural validity of universal morality. His bold anti-foundationalism fully embraces the postmodern mood of the absence of any Archimedean vantage point or any standard external to a particular set of local standards with which to make moral and political judgments (Rorty 1991, p. 207). But, he adds, this should generate no unease of the Walzerian sort about applying our concepts and categories to other societies. In fact, Rorty's main point is that we should stop grounding human rights on a common human rationality and celebrate them for what they are, that is, historically contingent products of a specific civilisation which flourished under conditions of relative security and sympathy. Freed from the bonds of reification we can, then, defend our moral intuitions as 'liberal ironists': ironists in the sense that we recognise the contingency of our convictions and liberals in sharing a common 'loathing for cruelty' (Rorty 1989, p. 190).[2]

Rorty provides here an anti-foundationalist defence of human rights by employing a language of rights devoid of its philosophical foundations. His pragmatist epistemology leads him to 'describe' rights as 'generalizations' which 'summarize our culturally influenced intuitions about the right thing to do in various situations' (Rorty 1998, p. 171). From that he argues that it would be prescriptively unproductive to promote rights in any ontologically grounded sense of the term. Instead we should be promoting the 'human rights culture' as our own culture demonstrating its superiority to other cultures without an appeal to a transcendent princi-

ple. Rorty (1989, p. 192) makes clear that it is not his intention to diminish the rhetorical strength of an appeal to 'human solidarity' as part of the contingent political and moral vocabulary of the secularised democratic societies of the West, except only to dissociate it from its 'philosophical presuppositions'.

The problem, of course, that arises from this unconditional endorsement of moral relativism is that, by promoting a certain account of what it is to be human, advocates of the human rights regime seem unable to show why their perspective should be embraced by people who share a different conception of the good life. But, if this is true, what should we do with the Islamic extremists or oppressive governments like the North Korean regime? How should we respond to people who show total disrespect for the value of human life or have an entirely opposite conception of the good compared to our liberal convictions? Rorty's anti-foundationalism rests on the proposition that there is no external, non-relative final vocabulary to adjudicate between competing moral claims. Rorty claims that it would be completely futile to think of these people as irrational or inhuman because their definition of being human does not include their fellow humans outside their own moral community. Their behaviour becomes comprehensible only if we think of them as 'deprived' of the conditions—security and sympathy—that have allowed 'us' to create a culture in which rights make sense (Rorty 1989, p. 180).

While he admits that this kind of disillusioned thinking provides no assurance, Rorty can find no better alternative to moral cosmopolitanism than to recourse to what he refers to as 'sentimental education'. According to Rorty, the alternative between the acceptance of communitarian moral closure and the consequent amorality of the international sphere is the development of feelings of identification with others. All 'we' can do is to promote an enlarged sense of human solidarity by concentrating 'our energies in manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education' (Rorty 1989, p. 176). He believes that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (e.g. in novels or ethnography) rather than philosophical or religious treatises are more effective contributions to moral progress (Rorty 1989, p. 192). Coupled with Rorty's anti-essentialist interpretation of ethnocentrism, sentimental education becomes a systematic effort to enlarge the boundaries of 'our' community by trying to expand the moral relevance of a common moral vocabulary which emphasises solidarity to human humiliation and suffering. Rorty (1989, p. 198) concludes that what 'takes the curse off' his ethnocentrism is the

ever-expanding logic of the liberal 'we-group' to encompass the whole of humanity in a common moral vocabulary: 'it is the ethnocentrism of a "we" ("we liberals") which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an even larger and more variegated *ethnos*. It is the "we" of the people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism.' Rorty has ingeniously turned the idea of a context-transcending acculturation into a principle of political organisation.

In reaction to this last point, Norman Geras (1995, p. 77) soundly doubts the logical validity of ironic liberalism by pointing to the problem of scale: 'if the force of any "we", any sense of moral community, must depend on the contrast with a human "they", then you can make "we" larger, but you cannot make it large enough to get rid of the aforesaid ethnocentric curse.' On a pragmatological level, Geras (1995, p. 101) questions the fact that humans think the way Rorty would like them to think. For once, if human rights are defensible only as part of our tradition, 'it is part of the same broad tradition to be able to offer some reasons in favor of what you support apart from that you support it'. Of course, Rorty does not deny that people believe in the meaning of their actions, but only that such a meaning need not be transcendentally validated. To the charge that his ironic relativism is psychologically unsustainable, Rorty (1989, p. 92) responds by demanding from us a moral courage to see hope, not being derived from faith to a transcendent Truth or divine revelation, but by 'sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world…will not be destroyed'. Such reflection will not produce a *reason* to care about suffering, but only a 'heightened awareness of the possibility of suffering' (Rorty 1989, p. 93). By reducing the notion of moral obligation to a mere invention Rorty calls us to confront the abyss in order to discover a demythologised and, thus in his view, more convincing humanism.

And yet, how unproblematic or convincing is Rorty's accommodation of relativism and indifference to deep metaphysical commitments? While it is easy for him to dismiss the charge of relativism as irrelevant, his theoretical framework stumbles upon an apparent paradox in postmodern pragmatism which threatens its viability *in toto*. The questions that arise are whether a principled indifference to the ontological validity of comprehensive doctrines can sustain a sensible ethics of engagement with difference immune to the caustic action of its methods which dissolve existential attachments to metaphysical claims about essential entities, like God or Reason, by a sleight of hand. Does universal irony express hope for a growing solidarity between communities that disagree over contested

standards of coexistence or is it the sign of hopelessness that such disagreement can be overcome? Moreover, is his redescription of liberal tolerance, with its emphasis on contingency and the need to overcome ethnocentrism through an embracement of difference, an honest engagement with particularity? Or is it a skilful reassertion of liberal cultural hegemony, this time without the embarrassment and the guilt conferred by the 'dark' side of the exercise of liberal reason in sites of colonial exploitation? Once we realise that our moral intuitions only make sense within the boundaries of a functioning ethical community, perhaps we can defend human rights for what they are, namely a cultural product of our historically contingent tradition. However, one could effectively argue that expanding the limits of 'our' own community to encompass the 'other' through the vocabulary of sentimental education is either a poor response to global injustice or a kind of overt, unabashed neo-imperialism, this time vested with an appropriate late-modern concern for human suffering. An ironic liberalism that has abolished its metaphysical foundations retaining, nevertheless, strong, non-contingent commitments may perhaps succeed in getting rid of a disturbing tone of self-righteousness. Indeed, Rorty's effort to articulate an anti-foundationalist defence of liberalism may seem promising for demonstrating that 'it is possible to work with notions of identity and difference without losing faith in the institutions of liberalism' (Brown 1994, p. 235). Yet, it does not desist from treating the 'other' as the object of liberal enlightenment, 're-education' and emancipation.

To that extent, and despite his anti-foundationalist fervour, Rorty fails to escape the confines of the foundationalist imagination, only because it seems that he has not so much overcome modernity's dichotomies than perhaps reversed their polarity valuing relativism over absolutism, contingency over necessity and 'localism' over essentialist or rights-based universalism. His is, then, not so much a post-foundational, but rather an anti-foundational liberalism which has simply provided a reassuring 'redescription' of the problem, yet is unable to escape the binary conceptuality of philosophical modernity. In this respect, it is no accident that Rorty's anti-foundationalism regresses to a mirror image of the foundationalism he so abhors. Geras (1995, p. 89), for example, maintains that what lurks behind Rorty's recognition of human suffering as a common feeling humans are capable of experiencing is a kind of disguised or 'resurrected' foundationalism. Rorty would dismiss this criticism by noting that to ask 'if solidarity is real' is to play the game of the metaphysician and that there is no non-relative, non-circular way of defending ironic liberal-

ism. However, Geras' criticism cannot be readily dismissed. Rorty denies that there is any 'common human nature' and, yet, takes the peculiarly human pain of humiliation to be common to all human beings and the basis for his idea that cruelty is the worst thing we can do. Like previous liberals, when confronted with the limit of his ironic defence of liberalism, Rorty resorts to dubious anthropological assumptions that rest on a foundational liberal ontology. His 'redescription', then, looks more like an operation that covers up the traces of his liberal ontology, while his post-modern liberal utopia is reserved for those who can accept the terms of his post-traditional anthropology and retain an ironic distance from their most intimate beliefs, values and ideas. If Rawls and Walzer had trouble articulating a convincing non-exclusive pluralism, Rorty's ironic 'inclusivity' seems to ironically overlook rather than recognise difference.

Neo-Aristotelianism: Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and Alasdair McIntyre's Rationality of Traditions

Both Rawls' liberal cosmopolitanism and Walzer's liberal communitarianism share a disquiet with aspects of liberal thinking that imposed a unifying conception of pluralism based on Enlightenment reason and universal criteria of inclusion. Both have, however, failed to dissociate themselves from a latent foundationalism sustaining their implicit liberal ontologies. Rorty's project of 'redescription' has managed to locate the roots of liberalism's compromised pluralism, but has failed to overcome liberalism's ontological aversion to difference. His anti-foundationalism, though stripped of the vestiges of transcendentalism, seems to have more to do with the exclusion of those who are not part of 'our ironic liberal democratic culture' than with expanding the scope of liberal pluralism. Rorty's failure to escape the paradoxical logic of foundationalism may have to do with the fact the he remains tied to a post-Nieztschean conception of the retreat of foundations in late modernity whereby holding fast to absolute grounds has become impossible. It seems that Rorty has heard the news about the 'Death of God' but has skipped the part where Nietzsche (2001, p. 109) warns us that we still have to fight with His shadows. Unlike Rorty's attempt to deflect metaphysical foundationalism, neo-Aristotelians employ a qualified form of conventionalism that, rather than being utterly dismissive of foundations, seeks to ground an inclusive ontology on immanent, as opposed to transcendent(al), criteria of moral judgement.

The neo-Aristotelian aversion to the transcendental validation of moral claims is closely connected with an alternative understanding of the task of moral philosophy. Elizabeth Anscombe's (1958) scathing critique of the two dominant strands of modern moral philosophy—deontology and utilitarianism—is a familiar story. Both modes of moral justification, she argued, sought a foundation for morality in legalistic notions such as 'obligation' but, in the absence of a divine lawgiver in our post-religious societies, any notion of moral obligation makes no sense. Hence, the only route left to provide a foundation for ethics can be found in the idea of virtue, understood independently from obligation as part of human flourishing (see Crisp and Slote 1997, pp. 2–4). A virtue ethics approach would attempt to drive attention away from establishing abstract criteria of moral judgement in response to ethical dilemmas whereby an agent is required to apply either a set of maxims or calculate the consequences of her actions. Instead, a virtuous human being would already have the moral capacity to behave appropriately in every given situation because of the sort of person she has become through developing the appropriate moral and intellectual virtues acquired through habituation in appropriate social contexts. Morality is, therefore, immanent in certain types of character and conduct arising in particular communities. Consequently, for neo-Aristotelians, there is nothing morally superior or perfectionist about the term 'community'; it simply depicts an existing way of life.

One of the leading neo-Aristotelian approaches sharing the above rejection of normative communitarianism, but without losing sight of an attainable ideal form of social existence, is Martha Nussbaum's (2000a) human capabilities approach. Indeed, in articulating her view, Nussbaum steers a course between, on the one hand, a thick, perfectionist and paternalistic notion of the good, which liberal pluralists abhor, and, on the other hand, a thin liberal foundational good, which does little or no justice to the particular material, conventional and empirical realities underpinning human life. In other words, she tries to forge a middle path between pluralism and monism, universalism and particularism, and between the stability of values and the fact of social contingency. Despite the recognition of value pluralism, this vision of Aristotelianism insists that we humans share a common moral quest to live well and flourish according to the kind of species that we are. Her response to the modernist dilemma between the universal and particular is the idea of a 'thick, vague' conception of both human beings and the good. The good is thick and applies cross-culturally, but it is also vague, consequently allowing plurality and difference. There is, therefore,

for Nussbaum an illusory tension between liberal freedom and the perfectionist values of human well-being (Nussbaum 1990, pp. 238–9). The search for a thick foundation that can be shared by all humanity escapes any metaphysical grounding. Instead, it is realised immanently through actual practices oriented towards the *telos* of human flourishing.

The main idea here is that a 'sphere of experience' or 'grounding experience'—relating to one's bodily needs, death, the upbringing of children or practical reason, and so forth—is universal. Nussbaum's primary target is the relativist objection that it is impossible to reach a universal account of moral attitudes towards particular ethical dilemmas. Through making an ethical choice or deciding which ethical principle or virtue is fundamental in shaping her moral judgment, every particular agent is bound by the cultural context to which she belongs. Therefore, no cross-cultural principle of moral evaluation is ever reachable. Yet, Nussbaum argues, everyone has an interest in well-being to the extent that one is part of the human species. Thus, while agreeing that a view from nowhere is nonsensical, she nevertheless believes that it is possible to establish criteria of human flourishing based on actual human experiences shared broadly (covering humanity in general), but also deeply, in so far as they address very basic requirements of human functioning. As she characteristically writes:

> Everyone has *some* attitude, and corresponding behaviour, towards her own death; her bodily appetites and their management; her property and its use; the distribution of social goods; telling the truth; being kind to others; cultivating a sense of play and delight, and so on. No matter where one lives one cannot escape these questions, so long as one is living a human life. (Nussbaum 1993, p. 247)

For Nussbaum, therefore, cross-cultural comparison is not something that is precluded by the particularistic nature of our social experiences. Human life, as it is lived in communal contexts, may still provide the starting point for identifying a 'family of experiences, clustering around certain focuses' (Nussbaum 1993, p. 265) that form a basis for a single objective account of the human good or human flourishing, without an appeal to local or communal traditions. The upshot of this approach is that despite the awareness and sensitivity to local conventional beliefs and value systems 'different sets of arrangements are always commensurable because they necessarily relate to the same list of spheres of human experience' (Brown 2000, p. 89). From this premise, Nussbaum goes on to argue for

the necessity of identifying a basic set of functional capabilities without which our lives on earth would be less than human. Building on both Marxian insights of what is to be 'truly human' and the Kantian notion of the inviolability and dignity of the person (Nussbaum 2000a, p. 73), Nussbaum is convinced that we can reach an agreement on both a certain account of human capabilities, rooted in our common human experiences beneath which life would not be recognised as human, and 'a somewhat higher threshold' (Nussbaum and Glover 1995, p. 81) of functional capabilities that would secure a life worth being called a good human life.

At first glance, these are fairly noble ambitions pointing to the direction of a potential overcoming of the universal/particular divide by appealing to non-arbitrary 'inductive universalism', that is, to a universalism that is firmly grounded on actual human experiences. However, this position in itself and, most importantly, as it is pursued by Nussbaum, is fraught with difficulties and ambiguities. To start with, how can any effort to construct an idea of what it is to be human or what constitutes a *good* life evade the mediation of a cultural understanding of what human flourishing, or even human suffering, may be? In other words, if, like Nussbaum, we maintain that there are universal 'grounding experiences', then the question still arises—indeed, from within the neo-Aristotelian framework itself—as to whether any of these experiences can be apprehended and evaluated free of particular cultural or conventional mediations. Even if it was practically possible to identify principles that different cultures would unequivocally agree on, we would still be confronted with the objection that certain attitudes or interpretations of what it is to be truly human could be seen as contestable or unacceptable since there is no unmediated notion of 'humanity' or any privileged access to some notion of pristine human experiences. Furthermore, given the immediacy of the whole exercise, nobody could rule out the possibility that we may end up with an extremely parochial consensus that would fail to satisfy Nussbaum's liberal sentiments.

To be fair, Nussbaum is aware of these objections in her early writings (Nussbaum 1993, p. 252), but in later formulations of her approach she seems to fall back to an 'increasingly explicit liberal agenda' (Brown 2002b, p. 209). As the first threshold of capabilities she identifies seems too vague to avert the danger of reverting to potentially conservative, parochial or uninteresting positions, Nussbaum decides to shift from an anthropological view that, principally, denies endorsing any particular way of life towards a second threshold of functional capabilities that seem to

narrow down the appropriate conception of a good human life. As Brown (ibid.) insightfully remarks: 'what begins as a general proposition which sets out quite plausibly the basis for a discussion becomes a specific set of propositions that closes down certain kinds of argument by ruling them out in advance.' Quite revealingly, Nussbaum brings Rawls into the equation by claiming that her list of functional capabilities can be the object of an 'overlapping consensus' in a similar way that Rawls' 'primary goods' serve as the basis of a reasonable agreement among the participants of a cross-cultural dialogue (Nussbaum 2000a, b). Rawls, however, was conscious of the impossibility of developing a consensual framework of justice without relying on a mediating concept that would perform the reconciliation on the basis of an explicit deontology—achieved, for Rawls, through the concept of 'public reason'. As we saw, this makes his argument perhaps less sensitive to difference but, nonetheless, a lot more internally consistent. Nussbaum's overlapping consensus requirement, on the other hand, based on an 'evaluative predicament' as to what constitutes human life worthwhile, foregrounds the possibility of a real-world consensus premised on an already predetermined idea of what this consensus might look like (see Antony 2000; Arneson 2000). To this extent, her 'essentialism' is already conditioned by a culturally specific understanding of what constitutes a good human life and, consequently, fails to justify the conditions for a cross-cultural conversation based on an empirical consensus beyond preconditions and 'provisional fixed points'.

To be fair, Nussbaum's fundamental difficulty in justifying her human capabilities approach lies not in defending a form of essentialism, but, rather, in attempting to identify a thick conception of the human good grounded on supposedly 'unmediated' criteria like practical reason, sociability or human dignity. Firstly, it is not at all certain that Aristotle would agree with her. There are, for instance, other more negative approaches on Aristotle that express discomfort with any effort to discover some kind of universal foundation or universal good in his work (Vincent 2004, p. 182). These approaches either stress Aristotle's awareness of contingency, variety and difference cautioning against teleological interpretations that have him arguing for a rich universal ideal of human flourishing (Yack 1993) or remain faithful to the idea of an identifiable human good but, contrary to Nussbaum, reject any reliance on non-particularistic experiences emphasising instead concrete conventional contingencies. This latter view is strongly exemplified in the work of Alasdair McIntyre (1981, 1988).

McIntyre's (1981, p. 2) famous 'disquieting suggestion' is that morality only subsists within traditions or particular conventions and that we moderns have lost the context for meaningful moral choices. We literally live 'after virtue' which, for McIntyre, means that we are deprived of the ability to talk across different moral languages. The present condition of moral discourse is one where we are unable to find rational criteria that would adjudicate between rival traditions. What we do possess is what McIntyre calls 'simulacra of morals', by which he means fragments of moral and conceptual schemes from past traditions all lacking context. As a result, our moral disagreements are interminable, since the premises offered by each side in moral debates are conceptually incommensurable. Rival positions often presuppose 'the existence of impersonal criteria—the existence, independently of the preferences of the speaker or hearer' (McIntyre 1981, p. 9)—of purportedly objective standards. However, these standards seem to appeal to sources from a variety of historical origins: Marx for liberation, Aristotle for justice, Kant for universalisability or Locke for rights. This heterogeneity of philosophical mentors indicates that terms that were once part of our inherited moral discourses, like virtue, justice and duty, are now being used out of their original context in which they had meaning. Consequently, we are left with no rational common measure to resolve our moral disputes which threaten to throw us back to moral dark ages.

How did it come to this? McIntyre thinks that this breakdown in moral discourse resulted from the effects of what he perhaps clumsily calls the 'Enlightenment project'. As he sees it, the Enlightenment's Cartesian prejudice of the autonomous self, coupled with the decline of the teleological outlook on human nature that Aristotle and Aquinas held, led to the rise and acceptability of emotivism, namely the belief that morality can be seen as the expression of individual emotion. For McIntyre, this is a symptom of a society in crisis, a modern pathology that indicates the paralysis of modern culture. As R. Scott Smith (2003, p. 52) observes, for McIntyre the most disturbing effect of emotivism is a linguistic one, for it entails that 'all moral judgments are nothing but expression of preference, expressions of attitude and feeling' (McIntyre 1981, p. 12). If nominalist[3] emotivism is the modern predicament, then there seems to be no non-relative way to adjudicate between moral traditions and all our evaluative arguments are and always must be interminable. McIntyre's strategy is to expose emotivism's arbitrariness as a rupture in the continuity of moral discourse that has led to the loss of moral knowledge. Eventually, the

source of our moral beliefs and ultimate principles cannot be merely an expression of preferences that would collapse into the infinite regression of relativism. The source of these beliefs, he thinks, is not emotivism but a tradition that predates it: 'moral judgments are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices' (McIntyre 1981, p. 60). His corrective to emotivism is to propose Aristotle over Nietzsche. Since Enlightenment has failed to provide us with standards for reaching objective moral truths, instead of endorsing the Nietzschean position that all claims to objectivity are just expressions of a will to power, we may decide that Aristotelianism should never have been rejected in the first place.

Setting aside for a moment his disputable view of Nietzsche as the culmination of the Enlightenment spirit, there is no doubt that the alternative hypothesis McIntyre proposes in his *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) goes to the heart of modern nihilism. If universal moral values lack in 'objectivity' because they appear as fragments of lost lived traditions, the only way moral truths, rationality and even knowledge can be redeemed is by envisaging them not as tradition-independent but rather as dependent on the use of language within a tradition and a corresponding way of life (see also McIntyre 1999). McIntyre's hero in this book is Aquinas who is praised for being able to provide a rational reconstruction of two traditions, Aristotelian philosophy and Augustinian theology, from within. Since there are no neutral idioms or external vantage points from which one can criticise traditions, language learning is a task akin to an anthropologist who submerges herself into a culture in order to learn its social practices, both verbal and non-verbal (McIntyre 1990, p. 43). For McIntyre, one has to become like a child all over again, learn the corresponding parts of the culture and master its language as a second first language. Such learners 'are able to conjecture in it, judge in it, imagine in it and argue in it, just as those whose first language it is' (McIntyre 1991, p. 619). Aquinas becomes McIntyre's exemplary case exactly for his ability, having learned both languages of the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions, to synthesise them into one superior tradition (McIntyre 1990, p. 114).

Obviously, McIntyre's invitation to social critics to learn an alien tradition as a second first language is his proposed solution to the relativist dilemma that denies the possibility of a rational debate between, and rational choice among, rival traditions. Only a bilingual person can discern the rational superiority of the epistemic resources of one tradition over

another as she has internal access to the linguistic conventions of both. However, if we assume that such learning is possible how do we avoid the conclusion that we presuppose something apart from language that enables such learning and understanding to take place, something like a *universal* human capacity? In other words, even if McIntyre's scheme promises the possibility of assessing whether one tradition is more rational than another, it remains highly unclear, as it did for Nussbaum's controversial claim that immediate access to human experience is possible, how an adult can come to understand an utterly alien language as a 'second first language' if 'preconceptual interests do not operate in sustained forms in independence of theory-informed presuppositions' (Roque 1991, p. 616).

McIntyre responds to this criticism by insisting, not unlike Rorty, that the very possibility of making the relativist challenge presupposes that the one making it stands within a tradition. He staunchly denies that he ever intended to attribute to humans *qua* humans a universal language-learning capacity: 'it would have been absurd for me to have postulated, and I did not postulate and do not believe in the existence of, any universal capacity for either translation or intercultural understanding, let alone an innate capacity' (McIntyre 1991, p. 619). However, even if we accept his preliminary assertion that language and the world are internally related as a basis for discussion, we have to decide what to make of this statement in itself: either it is a particular claim made true by how McIntyre's community uses its language or else it is a particular claim that is premised on the kind of privileged access that he has already ruled out. If, on the one hand, we concede the first case and agree with McIntyre that his seemingly 'universal' claims are part of the grammar of a particular community, one might, then, retort, 'so what?' These claims would simply be trivial, uninteresting points with no resonance to the experiences of other communities and no pretensions to be so. If, on the other hand, one looks closer at McIntyre's treatment of Aquinas, one might reach a different conclusion. Aquinas would possibly never agree with McIntyre that it is by learning to talk and behave like an Aristotelian and Augustinian that he synthesised rationally superior aspects of the two traditions. He would argue that truth is a matter of correspondence and, when something is true, it corresponds to the way 'things really are', apart from language. Most likely, McIntyre would retort that despite what Aquinas *thought* he was doing at the time, nonetheless he was making those claims within his linguistic community. But, if Aquinas could be chastised for thinking that something could belong to an unconstructed realm outside language, then we come to appreciate

McIntyre's arguments for what they really are: bold claims to have captured the *truth* of the matter even apart from language (see Smith 2003, pp. 202–3) as if such a universal ground were possible.

Paradoxically, any extra-linguistic statement about the impossibility of extra-linguisticality runs the danger of reinstituting a context-transcending ontology that compromises its context-sensitive credentials. Indeed, McIntyre's post-Wittgensteinian strategy to defend the rationality of traditions as incommensurable linguistic games reveals the modernist anxiety that still permeates his imaginary. Thus, while he is inviting us to escape the dilemmas of emotivism, he paradoxically operates within its presuppositions. The linguistic turn clearly does not belong to the Aristotelian tradition he wants to defend. On the contrary, it is considered to be one of Enlightenment's legacies in epistemology and metaphysics. What an appeal to moral traditions through the use of a post-Wittgensteinian critique of extra-linguistic thin or thick foundations really entails is that we are always inside language and cannot get outside to an unreconstructed reality which is—if we substitute consciousness for language—the lesson of Kant and Hegel. One of Kant's major insights was that we cannot inspect or know things in themselves, for they are indeterminate. There is no relationship between the mind and things in themselves. Anything *in itself* is external to an act of cognition since it has not been shaped by the mind's contact (Kant 1998). Hegel's corrective can be summed up in his insight that to save the legitimacy of Reason we must agree that what the subject perceives as the *thing-in-itself* is posited by the subject itself as the presupposition of its own activity (Hegel 1977). Yet, epistemic access to a hierarchically pre-ordered realm is exactly what Aristotle and Aquinas presupposed and was traditionally considered to be at the very core of virtue ethics. In a way, therefore, McIntyre is not entirely breaking with two of the postulates of the 'Enlightenment project', which is Kantian formalism and suspicion towards unmediated foundations. Perhaps, as Smith (2003, p. 219) remarks, attempts to secure moral knowledge by reconstructing Aristotle's and Aquinas' insights in their own linguistic framework are bound to fail if they do not straightforwardly endorse metaphysical, epistemological or moral realism.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to scrutinise a variety of nuanced liberal and post-liberal approaches to the fact of pluralism. Their common feature is that they refuse a facile endorsement of liberal universalism or a sur-

render to some form of relativistic particularism that denies engagement with the other. They were then selected in order to demonstrate how even 'hard' cases that seek either to defend the liberal values of tolerance, pluralism and the recognition of difference from a variety of ontological perspectives or suggest a post-liberal ontology for the accommodation of difference fail to move beyond the foundationalist implications of their respective ontologies.

In particular, Rawls' notion of reasonableness and Walzer's soft foundationalism seem to recognise the problem of engaging with a world that does not exclusively consist of liberal societies, but their offered solution to the issue of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding relies on exclusions that go unrecognised and unconfessed. Rawls' builds his pluralism on the idea of an overlapping consensus and employs the concept of public reason as the necessary framework of consensus-building. His idea of a reasonable society of states, however, seems like an invitation to participate in an already predetermined, non-negotiable framework of coexistence. Walzer, on the other hand, moves from a particularist starting point outwards to a version of thin morality that expresses aversion for fundamental violations of the rights of life and liberty. His weak foundationalism, however, dissimulates the ontological status of his minimal morality which, eventually, leaves his project exposed to criticisms that reproach it as an espousal of good old liberal values.

Rorty's anti-foundationalism attempts to break with the sterile defence of liberal foundations and argues for a pragmatic turn to practical politics and story-telling rather than philosophy. Expressing dissatisfaction, however, with unresolved epistemological dilemmas, does not necessarily mean that the latter can be readily abolished. Rorty's defence of ironic liberalism and the politics of sentimentality can hardly avoid resurrecting the phantom of a latent foundationalism. If this is so, the innocence of his ethnocentrism can no longer be sustained. Finally, neo-Aristotelianism calls for a return to a form of 'communitarianism' that would avoid ascribing a normative status to the community. Nussbaum's capabilities approach appeals to an ideal form of human flourishing based on a list of recognisable human capabilities, but when it comes to specifying her essentialism she resorts to a list of liberalism-friendly values that may not unambiguously be recognised as universal traits of human nature unless refracted through liberal lenses. McIntyre, on the other hand, denies the possibility of a cross-cultural understanding under the conditions of moral confusion brought about by modern emotivism. He insists on the deep rationality

of traditions as a way of setting up a sincere dialogue between literally untranslatable moral schemes. However, his reliance on the linguistic base of community undermines his absolute disavowal of emotivism. Eventually, his particularism cannot avoid but appeal to an extra-linguistic authority which hopelessly resembles the liberal move of neutralisation he vehemently renounces.

Notes

1. For similar critiques of Rawls' truncated pluralism and limited engagement with difference from within a broader liberal tradition, see Taylor (1994), Fish (1999), Gray (2000) and Galston (2002).
2. Rorty distinctively participates in that liberal tradition, described by Judith Shklar (1989) as the 'liberalism of fear', for which the reduction of cruelty and suffering is the primary concern.
3. The argument that modernity has developed on a nominalist track is well documented in Gillespie (2009); see also Bain (2016). The medieval debate between realists and nominalists is seen by many as the beginning of the modern sensibility that puts emphasis on things *created* by human reason rather than naturally participating in a given (divine) order. The central idea here is that universals (such as 'humanity', 'morality' etc.) are simply names (*nomina*) expressing convenient entities rather than universal essences. McIntyre's argument joins the chorus of critics who identify in nominalism's victory the roots of modern nihilism (see, for example, Milbank 2006; Cunningham 2002).

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CHAPTER 3

Depoliticisation in Critical Dialogic Ontologies

In the previous chapter, I explored the persistence of a foundationalist imaginary ingrained in liberal and post-liberal ontologies in their confrontation with the 'fact of pluralism'. Liberal pluralism, as exemplified in a range of approaches spanning from Rawls' political liberalism and Walzer's thin morality all the way through Rorty's ironic liberalism and Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian rendition of liberal communitarianism, has been shown to subscribe to a version of ontology that fails to engage substantially with difference and diversity despite its pretensions to the contrary, while even McIntyre's post-liberal particularism did not fare any better. Granted, sophisticated liberal pluralists are well aware of the deadlock in defending a naive universalism or a parochial ethnocentrism and strive to offer legitimate accounts of the 'fact' of global diversity without suppressing difference or imposing a hegemonic universal. Yet, their efforts falter to the extent that their pluralism rests either on tacit, a priori posited, anthropological assumptions about the capacity of individuals to distance themselves from their deep-seated beliefs and 'comprehensive doctrines' in the public sphere or on a hidden, or rather unacknowledged, foundational treatment of universality always already hegemonised by liberal particularity.

In this chapter, I examine a range of approaches to global pluralism that are critical to liberalism's treatment of universality as the minimal neutral container of undisputed values, either abstractly or contextually validated.

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In what follows, I scrutinise dialogic forms of critical cosmopolitanism that share the liberal ambition of a genuine engagement with difference, but strive to make the ontological and ethical terms of such a dialogic interaction with alterity even more inclusive. Indeed, in many ways not unlike liberal cosmopolitanism, the central issue for these approaches remains the accommodation of difference within an all-inclusive and ever-expanding community of interlocutors that cultivates a cosmopolitanism of intercommunal understanding and solidarity, several notches higher than what English School pluralists would describe as the ethics of coexistence (see Brown 1988). The vehicle through which these approaches offer their critique of liberal universalism is a critical understanding of language that they owe to the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy, critical sociology and existential phenomenology. Both Andrew Linklater's dialogic cosmopolitan project and Richard Shapcott's philosophical hermeneutics examined in this chapter borrow their philosophical vigour from the two philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer who have spearheaded and capitalised on the linguistic turn. As well as offering a detailed interrogation of Linklater's and Shapcott's versions of critical dialogic pluralism, it is equally imperative that the philosophical background to their approaches be adequately addressed. In this way, their distinct differences from the mainstream liberal pluralist project will be sufficiently recognised and highlighted.[1]

Habermasian Pluralism and Andrew Linklater's Dialogic Cosmopolitanism

As we have already noted, in her treatment of the question of representation in Western philosophy, Claire Colebrook (2005) explains why Enlightenment's precious legacy, the philosophy of consciousness, posed a challenge to philosophical thinking that is yet to be effectively tackled ever since Kierkegaard's critique of Kantian phenomenology. While the Kantian post-metaphysical subject may have been initially posited as nothing other than the possibility for the *thinking* of things, it became increasingly difficult to avoid taking the transcendental condition of representation as itself a thing to be represented. This, in turn, invited Cartesianism from the back door since the procedural logic of representation was perceived as emanating from a foundational centre *within* the world, that is, the subject as an entity within the world that does the representing. The insurmountable puzzles into which the philosophy of

consciousness found itself entangled invited the possibility of thinking of a process, structure, logic, difference or language that would not drive back the human being as the determining ground of representation. Two prominent philosophers that seemed to have emblematically embodied this gradual dissatisfaction with the limitations of post-Kantian philosophy are Jürgen Habermas with his communicative theory of action and Hans-Georg Gadamer with his hermeneutical phenomenology. Both Gadamer and Habermas resist the philosophical primacy of Cartesian subjectivity and consciousness. Their respective philosophical projects are penetrated, instead, by a post-Cartesian emphasis on language, communication and dialogue.

In late critical theory, as exemplified by Habermas' work (1990, 2000), language is consciously employed as an ally in post-metaphysical theorising. From that perspective, Habermas appears in many ways as a paradoxical thinker. On the one hand, he can and does present himself as someone who is moving beyond old traditions and paradigms of philosophy and social theory concerned with the human subject and the philosophy of consciousness. On the other hand, he sees modernity and the Enlightenment as yet unfinished projects (Habermas 1996a), an attitude that places him in direct opposition to postmodernism. Habermas consciously envisages himself as negotiating a *via media* between, on the one hand, the more extravagant, optimistic, and 'universalist' claims of Enlightenment reason, and the more negative, pessimistic anti-foundationalism of postmodernism, on the other hand; or as articulating a more comprehensive, historically sensitive understanding of the relationship between universalism and particularism, identity and difference. Despite his open admiration for the achievements of Enlightenment, his philosophical disposition bears the marks of Adorno and Horkheimer's (1997) fundamental doubts over modernity and its destructive potential, their serious misgivings over the emphasis on the human subject and the 'philosophy of consciousness', and major doubts over the inevitability of human progress solely through scientific reason (Habermas 1987b).

However, in attacking the philosophy of the subject, Habermas is wary of resisting the embrace of an older foundationalism or the 'naive' foundational role attributed to philosophy by many neo-Kantian thinkers (Habermas 1987a, p. 298). For Habermas, it is now clear 'that philosophy has no business playing the part of the highest arbiter in matters of science and culture' (Habermas 1987a, pp. 308–9). At the same time, however, he does not wish to regress to a kind of postmodern total rejec-

tion of rationalist philosophy. For Habermas, the critique of older foundationalist arguments does not necessarily deliver us into the arms of an indiscriminate irrationalism. Philosophical thought may have lost its primacy, but can still act as 'stand-in interpreter' and 'guardian of rationality'. The function and significance of these universalistic elements in Habermasian thinking have attracted considerable controversy (Benhabib and Passerin d'Entrèves 1996). Habermas himself has deflected criticisms of foundationalism by giving a more fallibilistic twist to his arguments and defending a more modest account of reason embedded in ordinary human discourse and knowledge claims. Reason, in this respect, is understood as historically situated and premised ultimately in everyday processes of communication and understanding (Habermas 1979). For Habermas, this perspective allows philosophical critique to arbitrate between types of substantive reason and work constructively with different knowledge domains and interpretive communities. As he notes:

> Even in the most difficult processes of reaching an understanding, all parties appeal to the common reference point of possible consensus, even if this reference point is projected in each case from within their own contexts. For, although they may be interpreted in various ways and applied according to different criteria, concepts like truth, rationality, or justification play the *same* grammatical role in *every* linguistic community. (Habermas 1996b, pp. 417)

Habermas advocates that by examining what is presupposed in the existing conventions of reasonable communication, one can ascertain, extract and reflect on these basic grammatical reference points as legitimate, presupposed components of transcultural communication. There is an implicit egalitarian and non-repressive (or not dominance-oriented) ethics of communication advanced here that argues for the rational justifiability of basic norms of communication based on their rational acceptance by *all* participants in discourse (see Habermas 1990). We ought to be very careful with Habermas' move here. The validity of basic communicative norms is not premised solely on social conventions, but, conversely, on whether they could be justified in practical discourse: '[v]alid norms are *not* determined by conventions, but, at the same time, they are claimed to be the essential component *of* ordinary conventions' (Vincent 2004, p. 289). Habermas insists that norms are derived from examining what is implicit in intersubjective dialogue. However, any discussion and evalua-

tion of these norms would *also* have to proceed within the terms of rational intersubjective dialogue, or, an open process of discussion. It could not be derived from the monologic reflections of an isolated or solitary human subject. Real dialogue must, in turn, logically presuppose the validity of those very norms, which are themselves under discussion. What is necessarily affirmed here is that as soon as one enters upon any attempt to openly and rationally communicate—or engage in rational dialogue—one immediately presupposes, invokes and confirms the 'ethics of discourse' or 'valid ethical norms' implicit in dialogue. To communicate openly is to immediately confirm discourse ethics as the implicit transcendental condition for any attempt at rational communication.

It is this justification of the validity of discourse ethics that has been Habermas' main contribution in overcoming the limitations of liberal pluralism.[2] IR theorists, such as Andrew Linklater among others,[3] have seized on this aspect of Habermas' thought to advance a dialogic form of cosmopolitan pluralism. Linklater's dialogic cosmopolitanism (1992, 1998, 2005, 2007, 2011) is most characteristic on that front and will be the focus of this section for imaginatively combining Habermas' post-Marxist emphasis on communicative rationality and discourse ethics with attention to the work of a scholar that shares elective affinities with Habermas' critical sociology, Norbert Elias. Linklater's pluralism develops explicitly as a corrective to liberal interpretations of universality and recognition of difference that he sees lacking in a persuasive articulation of the relationship between the universal and the particular. Linklater's earlier work *The Transformation of Political Community* (1998) is an exploration of the possibility of open dialogue with the other and of support for post-Westphalian political communities in which new articulations of universality and difference may not only be thought and desired but also shown to be immanently possible as well. Consciously post-Marxist, his approach tends to focus on the emancipatory potential inherent in Habermas' discourse ethics and theory of historical development in order to identify the potential for modern states to transcend the state-centric logic of anarchy as depicted by IR realists. The key issue for this Habermas-inspired critical global sociology is how to accommodate the Enlightenment's inherent preoccupation with universalism with the imperative for the recognition of difference into a single theoretical perspective.[4] In a more profound sense, it is a question of how to strike the right balance between two features of the critical project of modernity: the ethos of critique and the spirit of cosmopolitanism (Devetak 1995, p. 35).

Linklater argues for a conception of cosmopolitanism that aspires to be equally critical of universalistic and particularistic forms of exclusion. He declares his commitment to the articulation of higher levels of universality and difference where the 'project of transformation' would strive to satisfy the three dimensions of an ever higher universalism, less unequal and more sensitive to otherness (Linklater 1998, p. 7). Thus, at a very important level, dialogic cosmopolitanism opposes communitarians and postmoderns of various types and hues who find flaws in either the normative or the empirical basis—and sometimes both—of universalism. In this respect, Linklater's 1998 book is an outstanding example of a defence of cosmopolitanism against these anti-universalist currents. Characteristically generous to the opposition, Linklater nevertheless expounds a Kantian conception of the relationship between the universal and the particular adapted to a multicultural global setting. This conception of the universal is derived from Kant by way of Marx and a tradition of social theory infused with a peculiarly modern time-consciousness. The present is understood to be weighted with the past and charged with the future, and social theory to be the meeting place of historical and utopian thought. The past is no longer viewed as exemplary, the future is hoped to be better, and the present is seen as the point of possible transition from past alienation to future emancipation. Thus, the theory of the present has somehow to fuse empirical-historical and political-emancipatory impulses each informing and limiting the other.

Recalling Walzer, Linklater uses the language of thick and thin to describe the ties that (might) bind different societies together, and he takes it that we would agree that membership of a common humanity is a thin type of bond. He, therefore, suggests a 'thin conception of cosmopolitanism with no fixed and final vision of the future' (Linklater 1998, pp. 48–9), and writes of a 'thinner notion of progress that refers to the expanding circle of human sympathy which ought to be the aim of those who identify with the liberal community' (Linklater 1998, p. 69). Linklater's support for thinness is most likely driven by his determination to resist critiques of his position from communitarians and postmodernists. The latter take the view that cosmopolitan universalism is a totalising project written in the image of particular, rather than universal, social and ethical formations. Linklater's response leaves no doubt of his universalism: of all the defences of subaltern voices on offer, cosmopolitan universalism has the best chance of making impartial inclusion in a global dialogic community a reality: 'A concern with the unjust systems of exclusion which restrict the

opportunities of subordinate groups is the key to this form of ethical universalism' (Linklater 1998, p. 48). Rather than being part of the problem, then, recognising ourselves in everyone else who occupies the 'thin skein of humanity' on the surface of the globe is the answer to the problem of exclusion and subordination (Dobson 2006, p. 169).

For Linklater, the dawn of this thin universalism is not an abstract utopian imperative or a theorem of ideal theory. It is, rather, the product of a complex sociological process that ushered in an era of 'post-metaphysical thinking' where the notions of universal equality and the respect of human difference are weaved together as immanent emancipatory possibilities open to articulation and realisation:

> The outcome of these developments is a thin conception of universality which defends the ideal that every human being has an equal right to participate in a dialogue to determine the principles of inclusion and exclusion which govern global politics. (Linklater 1998, p. 107)

The global public sphere is thus imagined as a dialogic or communication community where, in accordance with Habermas' philosophical scheme, 'norms cannot be valid unless they can command the consent of everyone whose interests stand to be affected by them' (Linklater 1998, p. 91).[5] The shape of this process—the 'procedures for authentic dialogue'—must, for Linklater, take place within the context of a *universal* communication community. These procedures, which draw heavily on Habermas' *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990),

> include the convention that no person and no moral position can be excluded from dialogue in advance, and the realisation that authentic dialogue requires a particular moral psychology…Cooperation in dialogue requires that agents are prepared to question their own truth claims, respect the claims of others and anticipate that all points of departure will be modified in the course of dialogue. What guides participants is a commitment to be moved by the force of the better argument. (Linklater 1998, p. 92)

Paradoxically, *pace* Linklater's claims to be offering an immanent argument, Hopgood (2000, p. 10) remarks that the above passage is offering 'a detailed scheme for resolving questions of inclusion and exclusion but only in the abstract'. Linklater seems to take for granted that his scheme is achievable to the extent that people with a particular moral psychology, able to question one's own truth claims, are bound to exist. In other

words, this way of proceeding simply assumes the very issue which it sets out to resolve, it presumes individuals that are at least minimally liberal, other-regarding and egalitarian in the first place.

> But what about the *real people*, people possessed of a vast array of prejudices, antagonisms, preferences, wants and desires, often embodied in highly legitimate social practices? What about people who mutilate themselves and others according to valued cultural norms, who sell their children into slavery or forced labour for the family interest, who favour infanticide of girls, or euthanasia and eugenics, who do not recognise other ethnic or racial groups as fully human at all? If we can require of them 'a particular moral psychology'—the mutual according of reciprocal respect—then they will eventually come (it is presumed) to see no rational basis for distinctions according to race, sex, language, religion, and so forth. If persons, universally, could treat each other like this in the first place, no book of the sort Linklater has written would be required. (Hopgood 2000, p. 10)

It, then, becomes obvious that what is really underlying Linklater's moral claim of basic equality is a particular liberalism-friendly anthropology where the enlightened individual cannot but choose the abstract principles that Linklater's discourse model validates from the outset. In this respect, there is a considerable amount of convergence between his project and Rawls' much more unabashedly liberal one in *Political Liberalism*. Linklater's pretension to be antithetical to abstraction remains a void rhetorical device, since actual people do not at all think or act like that. The following passage from Hopgood's critique reveals Linklater's proceduralism as a depoliticising move *par excellence*:

> What happens, for instance, if members of the communication community start arguing that exclusion on the basis of certain religions is rational? We would see immediately, of course, that 'rational' is not a thin, procedural, liberal term but a thick, substantive, republican one… This opens up a further issue: what happens to those who do not want to join this community, not because they have 'something to hide', but because intrinsic to theirs is the idea of not being like everybody else, including possibly not living like or with them? Domestic civil society logically entails an 'elsewhere' to which, in theory at least, the dissatisfied may move. For Linklater, whose concern is the international politics of inclusion and exclusion, civil society and citizenship are to be seen in 'transnational' terms. There is no 'elsewhere' in a universal communication community. (Hopgood 2000, p. 11)

Linklater (1996, p. 291), nonetheless, insists that the ethical universalism of his critical project does not display any inherent aversion to cultural diversity and difference nor does it tacitly imply a secret agenda of 'bringing aliens or outsiders within one homogeneous, moral association'. Instead, a globally validated discourse ethics remains faithful to procedural universalism and the possibility of an 'undistorted communication' that would lead to a cross-communal understanding through the force of the better argument. And yet, what remains unsaid, according to Shapcott (2001, p. 120), is that conversation oriented towards universalism is only achievable between subjects who have already reached a 'post-conventional' level of consciousness—that is, morally mature, reasonable beings able to be governed by the unforced force of the better argument—and, as such, discourse ethics imply 'an advocacy of a particular conception of agency'. Shapcott has convincingly shown how this particular type of agency privileges a culturally specific type of community which has traditionally been developed in the West citing Seyla Benhabib's reference to 'a secular, universalist reflexive culture in which debate, articulation and contention about value questions as well as conceptions of justice and the good have become a way of life' (Benhabib cf. Shapcott 2001, p. 121).[6]

Chris Brown (1994, p. 221) has equally questioned the capacity of Habermasian discourse ethics to embrace difference and points to the fact that the notion of an 'ideal speech situation'[7] relies uncritically on a Western view of rationality as a transcultural and transhistorical standard of judgment: 'To believe in the desirability of transparency [the idea that, in principle, human communication could be free from distortion] comes close to a commitment to the elimination of difference, to a denial that the Other could be accepted as the Other.' Pluralism in this sense is understood as a platform of coexistence under the unifying effect of a globalised, but still very Eurocentric, rationality, far from a genuine recognition of otherness (see Hobson 2012). In this respect, discourse ethics 'prescribes not only the procedure but also the content of dialogue, that is, of what are acceptable statements and topics, according to an already given definition of the moral realm, one which is constituted prior to the engagement with the other' (Shapcott 2001, p. 113). It seems, then, that in Linklater's dialogic cosmopolitanism the field of engagement with alterity is already compromised by latent ontological commitments that predetermine the framework of the conversation and distributes in advance roles, benchmarks and expectations: the thinness of our moral obligations rests on an assimilative conception of agency and an exclusionary understanding of

the legitimate topics of conversation, while our normative duties derive from a spuriously constructed sociological account of our 'nearness' or 'common humanity' tainted by vestiges of Eurocentrism. Capturing this slippage from anthropological assumptions to normative prescriptions, R.B.J Walker (1999, p. 155) has described Linklater's project as the latest edition of idealism 'except that this latest representative of the idealists has begun to temper his universalistic tendencies with an appropriately late-modern attention to difference and diversity' (see also Jahn 1998).

Gadamerian Hermeneutics and Richard Shapcott's Thin Cosmopolitanism

As noted already, Shapcott's critique of Linklater's project largely targets the latter's adaptation of Habermasian discourse ethics on a global scale. To ground his critique, Shapcott relies on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as an antidote to what he reads as Habermas' thin engagement with difference. His own version of thin cosmopolitanism aspires to introduce a *via media* between the unproblematic universalism of liberal cosmopolitanism, the slightly more nuanced universalism of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (he means Habermas) and the radical anti-universalism of post-structuralism. It would be impossible to appreciate Shapcott's project and assess his claim that Gadamer's hermeneutics presents an improvement on Habermas' dialogical ethics, if one is not first acquainted with Gadamer's basic ideas and contribution to the hermeneutic tradition.

The focal point of Gadamer's hermeneutics is the 'linguisticality' and 'dialogic' character of all human experience (Gadamer 1977). Like Habermas, he rejects the priority of the subject in favour of intersubjectivity as manifested in language. Indeed, Gadamer suggests that dialogue and linguisticality, *per se*, are regarded as the dominant aspect of human experience and 'translation' as the most apt term to describe what happens in virtually all human communication and dialogue. Gadamer, then, warmly endorses the passage from the epistemology of the subject to an ontology grounded in language as the horizon of being (Gadamer 2004, p. 383). Hermeneutics serves to reveal this ontological linguisticality for 'hermeneutics reaches into all the contexts that determine and condition the linguisticality of the human experience of the world' (Gadamer 1977, p. 19). In effect, for Gadamer, language (and dialogue) have now replaced thought in philosophy: 'Language is the fundamental mode of operation of our being-in-the-world and the all embracing form of the

constitution of the world' (Gadamer 1977, p. 3). Yet, one has to be mindful here. Gadamer is explicit that hermeneutics should not be seen as just another method for the human or social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaft*).[8] Hermeneutics does not arise from language as another posited exteriority, 'instead, it describes, from the medium of understanding, the unrestricted scope possessed by the hermeneutical perspective' (Gadamer 1977, p. 103). The fact, then, that language requires hermeneutics does not turn hermeneutics into another abstract, reified method of studying language objectively, scientifically or methodically since language itself is not just a tool or medium of communication, but rather the ontological horizon of our existence. Indeed, language is the *whole* process itself. Understanding language is not simply an activity of consciousness, it is 'itself a mode of the event of being' (Gadamer 1977, p. 50).

Building on Heidegger, Gadamer sees humans as 'thrown' in historical and linguistic terms. In effect, we are all temporal, finite, historically situated creatures having no way of stepping outside our historical finitude, and language inevitably reflects this predicament. However, the inevitable historicity of both language and knowing is not a harmful limitation. Historical awareness is no prohibition; rather, it creates the conditions for reconstructing the past as an *infinite* range of probabilities. In fact, this is the way Gadamer (1977, p. 9) understands our 'thrownness', namely as a fore-structure composed by prejudice, tradition and authority that gives substance to human experience. For Gadamer, it is 'our prejudices that constitute our being'. 'Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous'; they do not necessarily 'distort the truth'. In fact, Gadamer insists that he is restoring prejudice to 'its rightful place as a positive concept', a positive idea that 'was driven out of our linguistic usage by the French and the English Enlightenment':

> the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something. (Gadamer 1977, p. 9)

Our prejudices are not the antithesis of reason, since there is no stepping out of them. Instead, the idea of unaided reason is part of Enlightenment's 'prejudiced' conception of reason that one could stand outside prejudice.

Importantly though, for Gadamer, if, as it were, we cannot step outside our prejudices, tradition and culture and adopt a 'view from nowhere',

there is also no predetermined end point to any form of understanding through dialogue or conversation: 'every dialogue also has an inner infinity and no end. One breaks it off, either because it seems that enough has been said or because there is no more to say. But every such break has an intrinsic relation to the resumption of the dialogue' (Gadamer 1977, p. 67). More importantly, in a dialogue we depend on other interlocutors and one is required to open up to alternative interpretations and experiences, and to constantly revise and reassess its own views in a process of personal growth and development (*Bildung*). Gadamer describes this process as the 'fusion of horizons'.[9] It is a critical process of expanding one's field of vision by allowing other prejudices and traditions to enter one's world purview through dialogue. An important point to notice here is that, for Gadamer, no horizon is fixed or immutable. Interlocutors are taken to be aware of their historical finiteness and willingness to engage in dialogue by accepting the inevitability of some fusion and the unpredictable dynamics of the hermeneutical experience. In that sense, genuine dialogue is understood by Gadamer as a play where our present sense of our own self is unstable and mutable, even in danger of dissolving within it (Gadamer 1977, p. 51). To be enmeshed in the play of dialogue is 'an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a *loss* of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself' (Gadamer 1977, pp. 53–5, 92).

It should be emphasised here that, for Gadamer, these philosophical 'devices' of the hermeneutic circle—fusion of horizons, intersubjective play (as loss of self), negative experience and infinite possibilities for interpretation—are *universal* aspects of being human that do not directly authorise specific normative prescriptions, but do certainly underpin a certain ethical-political disposition or *ethos* that seems to be conveniently aligned to a certain kind of politics. It is clear, for example, that these hermeneutically derived universal aspects of human experience would not be conducive to either totalitarian or consumerist, post-democratic forms of politics in the twentieth century. It would be conducive, though, to a type of politics that would be non-absolutist; profoundly self-critical open-ended; receptive to alternative understandings; procedurally fair and egalitarian; post-conventional and one which facilitated and encouraged wide-ranging open discussion. There is, in other words, here an obvious bias for a particular view of universality, one that presupposes the capacity for self-distancing. This assumption of the players' ability to experience self-detachment may rest on different ontological premises than Rawls'

procedural veil of ignorance or Habermas' discourse ethics. At the same time, however, it generates the same requirement of justifiability, especially since it sanctions the universality of certain normative assumptions surrounding the conditions of dialogue.

Shapcott inherits the strength of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, especially with regard to a more profound engagement with difference. But, as will become evident, he also struggles with some of its limitations. To start with the positive, it is true that Gadamerian hermeneutics may assist towards addressing some of the serious shortcomings of Habermasian discourse ethics and, thus, contribute to a more consistently dialogic cosmopolitan pluralism. Philosophical hermeneutics, according to Shapcott (2001, p. 235), takes it that 'the capacity for cross-cultural understandings is real and accompanies the development of language itself'. As Shapcott (2002, p. 237) characteristically notes,

> the most significant difference between philosophical hermeneutics and discourse ethics in relation to agency is that where Habermas implies a post-conventional consciousness as a necessary prerequisite for a Socratic conversation, philosophical hermeneutics sees reason and understanding through dialogue as a capacity of *any* linguistically constituted agent.

In the philosophical hermeneutic account, then, 'the other is understood as a linguistically constituted agent from the start and, therefore, inherently capable of understanding and conversation' (Shapcott 2001, p. 167). The crux of this approach is the denial of any determinate understanding of the other prior to actual engagement. Conversation rests on the notion that 'understanding refers to the subject matter (*Die Sache*) of conversation, to what is said, not the sayer, the text, not the writer' (Shapcott 2001, p. 140).

Shapcott's approach can be seen as a refinement of Linklater's Habermas-inspired discourse ethics. As we have already noted, one of the main drawbacks of the Habermasian dialogic ethics is a display of relative insensitivity towards difference and plurality. Shapcott is trying to tackle this inadequacy by calling for a new model of dialogue that would abolish the limitations of discourse ethics and retain its strengths. To the extent that discourse ethics remains a barely disguised deontological theory of morality, it cannot escape relying on an inherent bias towards claims of universal moral validity, which in discourse ethics is manifested in the principle of Universalisation (U).[10] Even though discourse ethics does not

prescribe substantive moral standards in a dialogue, nevertheless its procedural logic is undermined by what Shapcott calls 'the overdetermination of the *telos* of conversation' that presupposes both a certain type of agency and the silent exclusion of certain topics of conversation.

Shapcott's aim is to show that discourse ethics, as propounded by Habermas and Linklater, is fundamentally attached to a certain understanding of human self-reflexivity that is inherently oriented towards the assimilation of the other. While ostensibly the other's equality and freedom is openly recognised, the *telos* of emancipation and the requirement of the post-conventional agency serve as constraints against the other's radical singularity. Shapcott's aim is to show that more than one type of self-reflexivity is possible and, especially, one that does not carry with it the predisposition of reducing difference to sameness. This is, admittedly, a difficult task since Shapcott is aware that, given the probable impossibility of arriving at an ultimate resolution of the self/other dialectics, the best one may be able to achieve is a more plausible approximation of the goal of doing justice to difference through pursuing an ever less assimilative version of discursive cosmopolitanism (Shapcott 2002, p. 223).

Shapcott attempts to resist the homogenisation performed by discourse ethics by appealing to the capacity for inclusion in a conversation between linguistically constituted agents. The central claim, here, is that there is another interpretation of universalism, one that is based on hermeneutical understanding. For Gadamer, Shapcott's philosophical hero, understanding is a fundamentally linguistic event. As we have already mentioned, following Heidegger's 'expressive view of language', Gadamer argues that we do not simply possess the instrument of language; rather, we are literally 'thrown' into language. Our understanding of the world is discursively constituted through our embeddedness in language and, for this reason, the possibility of communication is the most fundamental aspect of human situatedness. In that sense, understanding is perceived as inherently relational and involves 'the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes, not only our particularity, but also that of the other' (Gadamer 2004, p. 271), a process through which each participant in the dialogue is invited to occupy a shared perspective with her interlocutor without necessarily abandoning her own. Shapcott invokes this 'fusion of horizons' argument as a model of conversation that minimises assimilation since the focus of communication is not on reducing the other to the needs of my understanding by obtaining knowledge for instrumental or strategic pur-

poses, but, rather, a process of engaging in a search for truth with regard to the topic (*Sache*) of conversation.

Shapcott envisages this conversation as a process of question and answer, in a similar way to a Socratic dialogue, where one is not participating in the conversation with the sole purpose of imposing or affirming her own point of view, but with an open attitude, liable to transformation by the exchange of ideas and with the recognition that the other might equally possess part or whole of the truth on a certain subject matter. In other words, one has to be psychologically open to the possibility that she might learn something new from the communication. Arguably, this is transformative of both self and other, since each has to recognise the alterity of the other and embrace the uncertainty of engaging with difference without attachment to fanaticism or intransigence. Shapcott insists that this creates a realm of negotiation and rearticulation of the different meaning of things where the goal of conversation is not eradicating difference through consensus, but celebrating 'the other as other, and the self as other' (Shapcott 2002, p. 236). Shapcott concedes that both philosophical hermeneutics and discourse ethics coincide in attributing a high degree of recognition to the equality and integrity of the other. In acknowledging this, dialogue involves 'more than access to the other's self-understanding' (Shapcott 2002, p. 237).

However, Shapcott singles out philosophical hermeneutics for exhibiting greater sensitivity to difference, even though he openly concedes that a complete recognition of alterity can never be fully attained. If an important limitation of discourse ethics is that it conforms to a model of conversation that predetermines the other as an agent with the moral capacity to invoke and reflect on principles of universal applicability, Gadamerian hermeneutics imagines the human capacity of reasoning as a property of language. Since every agent, then, is linguistically constituted, the universality of reason is not premised on the exclusion of those who have not yet reached a certain level of post-conventional understanding, but it is equally shared by human beings regardless of their situatedness. Reason, at any rate, for Gadamer, is a 'prejudice of the Enlightenment' and hardly an exclusive capacity shared only by the 'emancipated' individuals who have managed to transcend the parochialism of their traditions. This, after all, is a historically conditioned conception of reason which rests on an unacknowledged debt to authority. Authority, tradition and reason, then, are revealed, not as diametrically opposed enemies, but as historically and temporally situated conditions 'in which critique, as a form of understand-

ing, takes place' (Shapcott 2002, p. 239). By denying the equation of the universality of reason with a vision of the reformed individual able to reflectively detach herself from her local beliefs and values, philosophical hermeneutics rejects the post-traditional bias ingrained in discourse ethics. Instead, it embraces a conception of reason as the capacity for reflection and change premised on an ontological given, our embeddedness in language. This, in turn, is assumed to open up the possibility for a more universal conversation since no 'thick' preconception of agency is required.

Furthermore, Shapcott argues that philosophical hermeneutics are less exclusive than Habermasian discourse ethics on the topics of conversation. Shapcott's claim, here, exhibits the right dose of philosophical humility. Philosophical hermeneutics does not rule out any of the purposes served by discourse ethics nor does it preclude that agreement upon universal standards of moral right is implausible. However, the emphasis is on an idea of dynamic inclusivity which is seen as the realisation of the idea of doing justice to wholly different perspectives. The possibility of disagreement always lurks at the back. While this is a possibility Shapcott does not naturally deny, he nevertheless opts to direct attention to 'the role of conversation in building community and solidarity' (Shapcott 2002, p. 241). Here, Shapcott is openly expressing his cosmopolitan preferences by appealing to an ever-expanding vision of intercommunal solidarity. The goal is the creation of a 'cosmopolitan communication community' where no one would be excluded in advance, and difference would be recognised through a non-assimilative form of dialogue. Shapcott is careful to note that such a community of conversation between more or less radically different agents is not biased towards agreement nor does it accept as possible the eradication of the tension between community and difference. Yet, he subscribes to a positive vision of the outcome of conversation based on its minimal assimilationist tendencies and the pragmatic character of the process. Differences will not possibly be overcome, but it is likely that they will be worked out in a spirit of solidarity.

These are admittedly modest expectations. There are, however, several problems with regard to both the goal and the justification of Shapcott's thin cosmopolitanism. To begin with, it is not so certain that philosophical hermeneutics can avoid the assimilative moment altogether. Although Shapcott's (2001, p. 144) approach aspires to avoid assimilationism by gesturing towards our historical situatedness 'that always informs our understandings', Shapcott himself does not deny that philosophical hermeneutics and discourse ethics hold in common the argument that

'dialogue requires that agents are prepared to question their own truth claims, respect the claims of others and anticipate that all points of departure will be modified in the course of dialogue' (Linklater cf. Shapcott 2001, p. 169). Even if philosophical hermeneutics arguably refrains from determining universal principles of conversation prior to the dialogical engagement, the moment of assimilation occurs in the argument that '[r]easoned conversation is a property of all humans who possess language' (Shapcott 2001, p. 166).[11] Nevertheless, Shapcott goes at great lengths to stress that philosophical hermeneutics does not share the same interest in achieving a 'thick' kind of agreement and that it is rather oriented towards the much thinner goal of understanding. One, however, wonders whether even this rather modest goal does not previously require the affirmation of the post-conventional agency. Eventually, his argument does not fully escape a thin version of an 'arrested development' (see Inayatullah and Blaney 2004) type of argument that one also detects in Linklater's dialogism. The interlocutors are accepted as radically different without any preconditions as to the content of their claims, but solidarity is still envisaged as the *telos* of a learning process, not dissimilar to the one described by Habermas and Linklater.

That said, the significant differences between the two perspectives are not cancelled, yet they are potentially undermined by the complacency with which the end result of dialogic interaction is prefigured. This is not necessarily avoidable or, for that matter, contemptible since the declared purpose of Shapcott's investigation is the creation of ever more inclusive discursive communities. However, Shapcott's cosmopolitan aspirations do not necessarily follow from his ontological givens, since our common embeddedness in language does not guarantee that interaction will lead to tolerance rather than introversion, further entrenchment of differences, or even open hostility. If this is true, Shapcott's commitment to a non-assimilative model of conversation serves only to dissimulate the violence of his own discourse. To be fair, however, Shapcott (2002, p. 239) makes the sophisticated point that the Gadamerian account of conversation does not share the Habermasian conviction that 'the capacity for thinking universally and post-traditionally…is a product of all who possesses [*sic*] language'. In that sense, he claims, the qualities that characterise genuine dialogue cannot be confined to the 'enlightened' or 'post-conventional' individual. Shapcott insists that participants in a Gadamerian conversation are geared towards the much more inclusive purpose of understanding, rather than seeking rational agreement on 'thick' moral principles that

invite exclusion or assimilation. By following Benhabib (1992) in dropping the Habermasian principle of Universalisation (U), Shapcott is confident that philosophical hermeneutics can forge new forms of non-assimilative solidarity and community.

In spite of its potential for inclusivity, however, Shapcott's dialogic cosmopolitanism remains ambiguously torn between an understanding of language as a non-exclusionary ontological ground for conversation and the promotion of the cosmopolitan project. In fact, one is left wondering, here, whether the operation was successful but the patient has, unfortunately, passed away. With the absence of a normative consensus on the principles of conversation, Shapcott's account may diminish the chances of assimilation, but most likely at the expense of the cogency of his cosmopolitan intentions. In fact, quite paradoxically, to the extent Habermas and Linklater accept the necessary trade-off between assimilation and cosmopolitanism in presupposing agents committed to principles of rational agreement, they seem to be offering a more credible defence of the cosmopolitan project that explicitly recognises the violence of minimal universalism as opposed to the pretensions of non-violence that Shapcott's non-assimilative rendition of cosmopolitanism exhibits. Indeed, even if we accept that his model is less exclusionary than Linklater's, there is no sufficient ground to accept that linguistically constituted agents will engage in revitalising cosmopolitan solidarities instead of resorting to violence and conflict. In other words, in trying to avoid the assimilative moment altogether, Shapcott allows a gap between his ontology (language) and the emancipatory content of his prescription (thin cosmopolitanism) that is never persuasively tackled.

If, then, solidarity is construed as a process that involves the gradual creation of an ever-expanding, all-inclusive community of dialogue, one may be left wondering to what extent this is fundamentally different from conventional accounts of coexistence between political communities in the way described by traditional approaches in the field, such as Realism and English School pluralism (see, e.g. Bull 1977; Nardin 1983; Jackson 2000). Obviously, Shapcott wishes to make a more ambitious claim than fall back to an English School pluralist mode of coexistence.[12] Yet given that his solidarism does not necessarily follow from his ontological commitments, his cosmopolitanism is found both wanting and inconsistent with his anti-teleological declarations. In fact, to the extent that he is pre-empting the forging of solidarist ties as an ongoing and open-ended process that may lead to the 'pragmatic development of wisdom and

understanding in which differences and agreements are worked through' (Shapcott 2002, p. 242), he still remains trapped in a progressivist philosophy of history where agents obey a developmental, gradualist logic of reaching the appropriate level of consciousness necessary to participate in the conversation. Linklater's Habermasian prejudice of the capacity for dialogue acquired through a civilising learning process is still haunting Shapcott's pragmatic claims.

Humanitarianism and the Harm Principle: An Uncontested Point of Convergence?

What becomes gradually clear from the above discussion of Linklater's and Shapcott's thin cosmopolitan projects, is an apparent trade-off between their search for a non-assimilative cosmopolitanism and their sociological account of cosmopolitan motivation. Linklater is less successful in persuading us of the difference-sensitive provisions of his envisaged reconciliation between universality and particularity. His account of universality-in-difference is too reliant on Kantian universalism and a progressivist philosophy of history that tend to foreclose both the content of communication between radically different societies and the form of legitimate agency participating in the conversation. Yet, by rationally specifying in advance the principles of moral validation upon which the process of dialogue is founded, discourse ethics allow for a more convincing transition from the source of cosmopolitan obligation to its motivational basis. In that way, although Linklater is making a normative claim based on a conveniently constructed sociology of history as a learning process, his argument is, nevertheless, logically compelling: political communities form their identities and respective motivations in communication and interaction with one another; this interaction is always conditioned by the imperatives of discourse ethics which, in turn, necessitates a cosmopolitan outcome.

Conscious of the assimilative effects of Linklater's articulation of the relationship between universality and particularity, Shapcott is offering a more difference-friendly account of this relationship. He is convinced that an ever more inclusive framework of conversation between radically different political communities will enhance the prospects of cosmopolitan dialogue by removing the inequalities and power asymmetries unwittingly produced by discourse ethics. His offered solution is more—albeit not entirely—resistant to assimilationism, but remains less convincing in terms of providing inducements towards a cosmopolitan direction. If motivation

towards constructing cosmopolitan solidarities is conveniently assumed by discourse ethics at the expense of taking difference seriously, Shapcott's pluralism runs up against inadequacies associated with the transition from his hermeneutic premises to his cosmopolitan aspirations. At the end of the day, his thin cosmopolitanism risks falling below the limit of boredom to the point of becoming indistinguishable from traditional forms of pluralist coexistence. Put differently, if solidarity is solely understood as the creation of an all-inclusive community of conversation, then genuine respect for difference is achieved at the expense of a commitment to cosmopolitanism as a meaningful normative project. In both dialogic models examined so far, motivation remains an issue. In Linklater's case it is more or less taken for granted due to the assimilationism built in his dialogic approach, while in Shapcott cosmopolitan outcomes remain an open possibility, but in no way as compelling as Shapcott himself would like them to be due to his less than rigorous vision of solidarity.

It is a mark of their intellectual calibre that both thinkers recognise and attempt to grapple with this apparent trade-off between the claims of community and the normative goal of doing justice to difference and plurality. Cognizant of his premature conflation of a normative claim with a conveniently constructed sociological account, Linklater attempts to recast his sociological model as a process of producing 'emotional identification' between different societies (Linklater 2011; Linklater 2007, p. 182). Not unlike Rorty, Linklater (2007, pp. 178–190) accords high significance to the cultivation of sentimental attitudes to human suffering as a corrective to the excessively rationalistic Habermasian ethics. For Linklater (2011), the absence of cosmopolitan motivation is a consequence not so much of the existence of 'bounded' moralities, rather, it is the effect of 'limited sympathies' concerning the infliction of harm across borders. A reconstructed sociology of global morals should take emotional impulses more seriously and incorporate the psychological as well as social-structural dynamics of human interaction. Through a recourse to Norbert Elias' figurational sociology, Linklater documents how responses to public and private acts of violence do matter and have been part of a 'civilising process' that transformed individual and collective attitudes to cruelty in western European societies over the past five centuries (Linklater 2007, pp. 160–177). Linklater essentially attempts to ground the forging of cosmopolitan solidarities on the, as he sees it, firmer ground of the common human experience of suffering. The upshot of his approach is that 'the most basic forms of solidarity between strangers are grounded

in the shared sense of vulnerability to mental and physical suffering and in the related capacity to enlarge the scope of ethical concern to include members of all other social groups' (Linklater 2007, p. 188).

Linklater addresses the crux of the problem head-on, which is the lack of motivation to see the encounter with the distant other through the lenses of empathy, instead of domination or indifference. According to Linklater (2007, p. 181), this involves the articulation of an 'embodied cosmopolitanism' that would strive to anchor moral responsibilities to the common biological legacy of corporeality. The force of this argument rests on the assumption that cosmopolitan emotions are most likely to develop when actors believe that they are causally responsible for physically or mentally harming others. Causal responsibility produces a thicker connection between people than appeals to membership of common humanity; it also takes us more emphatically out of the territory of beneficence and into the realm of justice. If I cause someone harm, the argument goes, I am required as a matter of justice to rectify that harm. If, on the other hand, I bear no responsibility for the harm, justice demands nothing from me and, although beneficence might be desirable, I cannot be held accountable (except in the court of conscience or before God) for not exercising it. Eventually, Linklater believes that, regardless of the Kantian argument that moral responsibility can exist independently of causal responsibility for the suffering of others, belief in *moral* responsibility to assist others is often stronger when evidence of *causal* responsibility for suffering can be provided.

It is not surprising that Shapcott (2008) shares a similar interest in showing how the concept of harm can serve, quite literally, as the embodiment of true universality. In his case, the harm principle is perfectly compatible even with non-cosmopolitan conceptions of the good. He cites the example of communitarian thinkers like David Miller, Robert Jackson and Michael Walzer who recognise that extreme violations of basic human rights can provide a legitimate reason for humanitarian action (Shapcott 2008, p. 193, n. 23). Shapcott, then, rejects the exclusive association of cosmopolitanism with extensive schemes of global distributive justice in favour of a reconceptualisation of cosmopolitan responsibilities more attuned to anti-cosmopolitan critiques. The avoidance of unnecessary human suffering emerges as the most suitable candidate for reconciling the claims of justice, community and diversity. The harm principle is taken to be a transboundary duty with which everyone can easily identify, even when disagreement arises as to 'the specifics of what constitutes a harm'

(Shapcott 2008, p. 195). In that sense, the responsibility to abstain from causing suffering to others remains conveniently broad and innately cosmopolitan as it involves everybody regardless of their membership of any particular community.

Both Shapcott's and Linklater's analyses on the cosmopolitan potential of the harm principle in a diverse world seem to rest on what Linklater (2005, p. 20) calls the 'two universal features of human existence': 'first, all human beings are susceptible to particular (though not identical) forms of mental and physical pain …; second, shared (though unequal) vulnerability to mental and bodily harm gives all human beings good reason to seek the protection of a harm principle.' However, as Shapcott (2008, p. 199) sharply admits, harm remains an abstract concept that needs to be specified 'according to time, context, culture, tradition and worldview'. Linklater (2007, p. 187) appears less conscious of the problems arising from an unmediated conception of corporeality and emotional impulses when he does not seriously discuss Habermas' reservations to take at face value the always mediated—through language and culture—character of emotions or instinctual drives. For Shapcott, the contextualisation of harm becomes an issue (*Sache*) of dialogue and negotiation. Whereas Linklater takes for granted the immediacy of human capacity to experience pain and suffering, Shapcott cautions against the overdetermination of the content of harm. Instead, he calls for a differentiation between levels of gravity of harm through a process of communication and translation. That said, it is also evident that Shapcott sees the harm principle, not only as a means of intercultural understanding, but as a deeply emancipatory concept as well: 'Without a [Universal Harm Principle] the likelihood is that diversity will be eroded by the voices and practices of the powerful, who will proceed to dominate, assimilate or annihilate as they wish' (Shapcott 2008, p. 201).

The question, then, remains whether the shortcomings we identified in the previous section are adequately addressed. The harm principle was introduced as a means of reconciling the claims of justice to difference with the claims of community; equality with diversity; identity with otherness. Linklater, though, insists on treating cosmopolitan harm conventions as an abstract instrument of universal justice based on an unmediated access to human corporeality. His conception of harm still poses a threat to difference to the extent that it is taken to apply transculturally, simply because human beings share the biological capacity to feel pain. The experience, however, of pain and the political or normative implications derived from it are two different things whose interpenetration is governed by a variety

of conceptual, political, social and, perhaps, ideological significations. It is revealing that when Linklater attempts to offer a vision of a future study on the sociology of global morals, he falls back to a fairly Eurocentric sociological account of the aversion to cruelty, not very different than Rorty's ironic liberalism or Nussbaum's basic human capabilities. Even the use of Elias' notion of 'civilising process' creates unpleasant connotations to those 'emancipated' populations that have experienced the promise of liberation from domination and humiliation, as another, more pernicious, version of the same forces of domination and assimilation.

Shapcott is more cautious in talking about the task of translation and negotiation between particularistic beliefs with regard to specifying the content of harm. He also acknowledges that cosmopolitan harm conventions continue to remain a universalistic project that carries the 'bias' of presupposed human equality. He, nevertheless, thinks that the harm principle constitutes a moral advancement from the confines of the basic rules of coexistence to a cosmopolitan 'recognition of the moral standing of outsiders' (Shapcott 2008, p. 200). Shapcott's approach is, in many ways, commendable not least for managing to balance so skilfully between the demands of community and those of justice due to difference and diversity. Doubts, however, remain as to what extent the introduction of the harm principle assumes the function of a 'universalist' fantasy construction that sustains his cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, the content of harm is declared mutable and ever negotiable between dialogic partners. On the other hand, however, the harm principle itself is stipulated as the uncontestable limit of cosmopolitan solidarity. In this respect, the harm principle becomes the fig leaf of a cosmopolitanism that strives to gloss over the fact of its own impossibility.

Concluding Remarks

With the decline of epistemic foundationalism exemplified by the philosophy of consciousness, Habermasian Critical Theory and Gadamerian hermeneutics turned to language as a potential ontological basis for their accounts of discursive rationality (Habermas) and dialogic or relational existence (Gadamer). Habermas remained tied to the critical Enlightenment project of saving reason from the devastating effects of subordination to administrative, political and economic systems of domination. His account of discourse ethics is an attempt to establish the terms of a domination-free community of interlocutors that, despite anticipated setbacks, agree

on the conditions of earnest conversation from the moment they enter language. However, Habermas' project, despite relying on an intersubjective understanding of subjectivity, is unable to reconcile his search for universally valid conditions of conversation with the potentially assimilative effects of the post-conventional identity he imposes on his dialogic partners. Linklater's thought inherits those problems to the extent that he takes his cue from Habermas' discourse ethics. Applying the Habermasian model of conversation globally entails treating diverse communities as potential partners in a dialogue whose terms are determined in advance of the interaction. The evolutionary resonances of the argument, whereby the expansion of international community is envisioned as an ever-inclusive civilising process, attest for its covert Eurocentrism.

Gadamer's hermeneutics come as a corrective to Habermas' over-compromised dialogic conditions by openly recognising and valuing the prediscursive prejudices carried by diverse interlocutors. Gadamer argues for the ontological primacy of language in which we are embedded and through which we bring our biases and traditional interpretations into dialogue—a stronger claim whose emphasis on relationality has divested the last traces of ego psychology upon which Habermas' construction of subjectivity still rests. Gadamer believes that the blending of perspectives through dialogue will cultivate an appreciation of the partiality and parochialism of our established views. It is important to remember, here, that Gadamer does not stipulate fixed normative vantage points as the necessary framework of conversation. It is through our prejudices and preconceptions that we enter the hermeneutic circle where, by affirming the mutability and historicity of our perspectives, we inevitably engage in continuous self-reflection. Although this line of thinking is not entirely purged of the vestiges of a post-conventional understanding of agency, it puts emphasis on the challenge of interaction itself which involves constant revision and reformulation of one's standpoint.

Shapcott's appropriation of Gadamer's thought seems to capitalise on the merits of the hermeneutic approach, yet it does not entirely avoid falling victim to a depoliticised reading of the infinite possibilities of hermeneutics. The antagonistic aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics may not always be at the forefront of his formulations, but it remains a crucial component of his thought that refuses to foreclose the play of possibilities produced by the 'fusion of the horizons'. In Shapcott's thin cosmopolitanism, the end product of hermeneutic dialogue is predetermined to a significant degree since, unless his cosmopolitanism is reduced to a traditional ethics

of coexistence, the dialogic solidarity he envisages takes the edge off of the antagonistic dimension of the conversation. His dialogism, then, accords an almost necessary aspect to the irenic accommodation of pluralism that operates as the fantasy construction obscuring the constitutive role of contention and antagonism in the grounding of political community.

Eventually what unites both perspectives in their failure to escape the depoliticising predicament is a common commitment to a vision of thin universalism that would reconcile the demands of community with the imperative of respect to difference. As Jens Bartelson (2009, p. 39) has aptly put it, even in the absence of pre-constituted universals

> this ambition to reconcile particular moral standards within a larger framework leaves these theories open to the objection that however thin their universalism, the foundations of any such intercultural understanding will necessarily reflect the concerns or predispositions of some particular identity, and thus ultimately be expressions of the very predicament they seek to escape.

Bartelson believes that this is the immediate consequence of the conception of community these theories entertain. If ontological priority is given to the 'boundedness' of community then, inevitably, the only way to reconcile the principle upon which particular communities are constituted (the principle of inclusion/exclusion) with the effect of the same principle (the idea of human diversity) is by proposing legitimate ways to mediate moral and epistemic differences between particular communities. Andrew Linklater seems to opt for globalising discourse ethics reflecting the Habermasian attempt to delineate the requirements of dialogic decency between communities. Richard Shapcott introduces Gadamerian hermeneutics as a corrective to the implicit assimilationism promoted by discourse ethics and argues for the hermeneutic predicament, itself minimally assimilative but sufficiently universal to both necessitate and facilitate dialogue.

Both authors subscribe to a vision of cosmopolitan solidarity based on either linguistically grounded, commonly agreed universal conditions of conversation (Linklater) or language as the sufficiently universal ontological horizon of communication (Shapcott). Equally, both thinkers tend to regard the preservation of human diversity within and outside communities as a normatively valuable and attainable goal. Yet, they both find themselves entrapped in a self-inflicted trade-off between commu-

nity and diversity, identity and difference, universality and particularity, cosmopolitan aspirations and sociological pragmatism. The victim of this failure of theoretical and political imagination is the nature and scope of their pluralism that remains grounded on a foundational ontology short of admitting the ontic, rather than ontological, character of these binaries. Their cosmopolitan pluralism then remains ontic, premised on a foundational rather than a political ontology, which condemns their two objectives, the achievement of community and the attainment of justice to difference, to a mutual irreconcilability.

Notes

1. Approaches to dialogism, of course, abound in IR and some of them may be less prone to exhibit the tendencies to depoliticisation I detect in this chapter (see e.g. Guillaume 2011 and the 2011 Special Issue on 'International Relations in Dialogue' in *Millennium*: *Journal of International Studies*). Yet, all of them struggle with its effects in attempting to articulate a mode of self/other interaction that understands that relationship as political 'all the way down'. The approaches in this chapter were selected as characteristic examples of the major stakes in that struggle.
2. See his critical remarks on the limitations of Rawls' political liberalism in Habermas (1995).
3. See, here, the Forum on 'Habermas and International Relations' in the *Review of International Studies* (2005).
4. The qualitative shift in perspective, compared to the approaches examined in the previous chapter, is here quite visible as, for Linklater's normative project, pluralism is not only a fact to be acknowledged, but *a fortiori* a value to be cherished, protected and promoted.
5. Stephen Hopgood (2000, p. 4) makes an interesting comparison between the universalism of Linklater's project and Sir Robert Filmer's—Locke's intellectual rival in his *First Treatise of Government*—thesis that the accordance of global entitlements requires universal consent. As it is well known, Locke tackled the issue of consent by justifying natural rights on pre-contractual and, therefore, pre-consensual grounds. Filmer wanted to show the futility of arguments in favour of property rights as natural rights, since universal consent is impossible to secure. Linklater seems to

revive the argument from consent without, however, adequately addressing Filmer's objections.

6. For a reformulation of Linklater's argument where he seems to have incorporated Shapcott's critique and cautions against the exclusionary and assimilationist potentials in discourse ethics, see Linklater (2005, 2011). Yet, he still advocates a thin version of discourse ethics as 'the best means of advancing the civilising process in international relations' (Linklater 2005, p. 154).
7. For an argument, though, that Habermas has abandoned the misleading concept of 'ideal speech situation', see Haacke (1996, p. 265).
8. Gadamer (2004, pp. 213–33) heavily criticised previous renditions of hermeneutics, famously advanced by Wilhem Dilthey, as excessively subjectivist and method-oriented.
9. Gadamer borrowed the term 'fusion of horizons' from Edmund Husserl, see Vincent (2004, p. 317, n. 16).
10. The principle of Universalisation (U) is a rule of argumentation Habermas introduces which states that a contested norm can meet the approval of all the participants in a discourse if 'all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects of its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone's* interests (and theses consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)' (Habermas 1990, p. 65; see also Haacke 1996, pp. 264–7).
11. Shapcott acknowledges this criticism, but he argues that while philosophical hermeneutics cannot escape the assimilationist moment altogether, it reduces that moment significantly (Shapcott 2001, p. 165, n. 101).
12. Although recently two excellent books have shown how Realism or English School pluralism can be imaginatively reconstructed to appeal to deeper solidarities or even be combined with a certain kind of cosmopolitanism (see Beardsworth 2011; Williams 2015).

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CHAPTER 4

Depoliticisation in Agonistic Ontologies

The dialogic approaches we examined in the previous chapter mark a transition to more explicitly ontological considerations compared to political, ironic or virtue-based versions of liberal and post-liberal pluralism that put emphasis on epistemological, rhetorical or moral realist justifications of difference and plurality. Either as a ground to the universal pragmatics of communication or the horizon of the interpretive constitution of being, language operates as the ontological foil against which a vision of cosmopolitan solidarity is constructed. And yet, to the extent Linklater's and Shapcott's thin cosmopolitan pluralism remains tied to a depoliticised understanding of ontology that seems ontic rather than ontological, their normative strategies fail to escape the circularity of a foundationalist construal of the political that collapses the productive difference between politics and the political. To be perfectly clear once more, it is not the emancipatory or ethico-political character of their discourse that undermines their normative goal, that is, the critique of exclusion and the promotion of a difference-sensitive cosmopolitan pluralism. Rather, what undercuts the legitimacy of their approach is their inability to address the logic of a foundational ontology that sustains their critical project.

Conscious of the limitations of Habermasian Critical Theory—perhaps less critical of hermeneutics with which they have much in common—a number of critical IR theorists in the 1990s sought to address the validity

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issues arising out of the critique of depoliticisation on a less controversial footing. Strategically oriented towards embracing contingency, multiplicity and a pluralistic critical ethos, early post-structuralist contributions to IR were confronted with the problem of legitimising their critical status and accommodating difference and negativity without falling back to a totalising discourse of unity and sovereignty. From its very inception, influenced by Foucault and Nietzsche in their conceptualisation of an agonistic ethos of critique, post-structuralist IR proclaimed itself to be a critical discourse seeking to offer

> [n]ot so much a method as a form of intellectual activity…[that] alienates familiar language (to show how discourses construct rather than simply reflect reality), dismantles fixed oppositions and hierarchies (between fact and fiction, male and female, Self and Other), and challenges literary conventions (that textual meaning is exhausted by authorial intention) and positivist practices (where the scientific manipulation of facts yields objective truths) that have prevailed in the social sciences. (Der Derian 1989, p. 4)

In fact, ever since post-structuralist approaches were introduced in the field of IR by Richard Ashley's (1981, 1984, 1988) challenge to Waltz's (1979) mainstream neo-realist project, the critique of what was seen as the reification of historically conditioned power structures, such as anarchy and sovereignty, was associated with an almost strategic preoccupation with expanding the realm of resistance and freedom, and with the distinctive purpose of *pluralizing* the field's cognitive, methodological and practical preoccupations. As George and Campbell (1990, p. 280) proclaimed in a special edition containing landmark post-structuralist contributions to the field:

> The (poststructuralist) project is a search for thinking space within the modern categories of unity, identity, and homogeneity; the search for a broader and more complex understanding of modern society which accounts for that which is left out—the other, the marginalized, the excluded.

From the outset, dissident theory—as it was self-proclaimed—declared its dissatisfaction with all forms of 'rationalistic' and 'totalising' thinking in IR theory and sought to uncover new forms of radical reflection on freedom and difference 'beyond' Enlightenment's traditional emancipatory concerns (see Hamati-Ataya 2011). As the familiar story goes, theorists seen as furthering the post-structuralist project in IR, such as Richard

Ashley (1981, 1987, 1988, 1989; Ashley and Walker 1990a), James Der Derian (1987, 1989, 1992, 1995), Michael Shapiro (1989, 1998), R.B.J. Walker (1988, 1993), David Campbell (1998a, c) and William Connolly (1991, 1995a, 2002, 2005, 2011) consciously endeavoured to distance themselves from a particular representationalist thinking they saw as permeating mainstream IR epistemology and politics. Their work attempted to break the ties that bind modern thinking to essentialism, metaphysics and Cartesian subjectivism and embraced a rich array of innovative and diverse practices such as deconstruction, Foucauldian genealogy, intertextualism and the Levinasian ethics of proximity. By placing emphasis on 'traditionally marginal instances such as difference, representation, copy, mimicry and alterity' (Polat 1998, p. 448), post-structuralist IR thinkers claimed to have inaugurated a project of reflexivity and awareness that sought to expose the long-forgotten, non-foundational, contingent origins of the modernist discourse of sovereignty and territoriality (see Walker 2000, pp. 225–6). The subtle purpose of this critique was not to condemn the demarcation of boundaries as inherently evil, but rather to counter what they saw as the mainstream's obsession with 'boundary-fixing' and borders (territorial, institutional, conceptual or other) as the 'indisputable delimitations' of our philosophical, social, political or economic imagination (Devetak 1995, p. 49).

In that particular sense, so-called IR post-structuralists seemed to rebel against any foundational understanding of epistemic, methodological or praxeological delimitations in IR and consciously rejected, as an exercise of conscious or unconscious epistemic hegemony, any talk about ontology, transcendental grounds of legitimation, fixed a priori assumptions and monistic methodologies. Exclusive epistemological claims or unreflective ontological assumptions about what constitutes a legitimate object of scholarly investigation were rather seen as inherently political gestures that sought to exclude dissident voices and impose a uniform scholarly agenda. However, despite their indispensable contribution in bringing the 'political back in' (Edkins 1999) in a much-maligned discipline, their explicit rejection of suspect ontological claims often raised the question of the legitimacy of their own critique given their uncompromising anti-foundational orientation. In what follows, I will examine certain characteristic treatments of the question of ontology within post-stucturalist pluralism in IR in order to expose the ambivalence surrounding their critique of foundationalism. The approaches examined below range from an ardent anti-foundationalism that proposes a '*different* ontology' (Coles

1992, p. 77), or rather ontology as difference, to a strategic abandonment of references to 'ontology' in favour of 'ethics', to an explicit embracement of the so-called ontological turn in (international) political theory according to which fundamental ontological commitments and comprehensive ways of life should be openly recognised and their adherents equally admitted, and accorded agonistic respect, as legitimate players in the global public arena.

Foucauldian Resistance and Nietzschean Pluralism

The main obstacle to rethinking international relations under the new light of an ontology of difference, IR post-structuralists argue, is the reification of traditional concepts and practices by Western rationalism and positivism that is constantly being conducted under the so-called modernist *register of desire* (Ashley and Walker 1990a, p. 381). According to pioneer post-structuralist theorist, Richard Ashley (1988, 1989), IR *qua* a distinct academic subject is constructed on certain parochial postulates serving to demarcate the boundaries of legitimate scholarly production in the field. Concepts such as anarchy, sovereignty, the state and the sociopolitical practices associated with their reproduction are conducive to establishing and sustaining ossified orders of domination, control, closure and exclusion that should be problematised and eventually subverted to open up new spaces for rethinking and practising IR. Broaching this critical agenda, Ashley (1988, p. 254) consciously adopted a Foucaultian strategy of resistance according to which traditional

> practices might be resisted or disabled; boundaries might be put in doubt and transgressed; representations might be subverted, deprived of the presumptions of self-evidence and politicized and historicized; new connections among diverse cultural elements might become possible; new ways of thinking and doing global politics might be opened up.

Resonantly, in their coauthored path-breaking intervention, 'Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline', Ashley and Walker (1990a) explicitly raised the question of how we account for the claims of those that have been marginalised by mainstream approaches to IR with their emphasis on sovereignty and territoriality. To their mind, the project of deconstructing sovereignty and questioning the spatial coordinates of political authority is inextricably linked to the critique of the Enlightenment ideals of unity,

essentialism and certitude through which the modern sovereign individual establishes her own identity and the universalisable pre-eminence of her own rational capabilities (see also Ashley 1996). This radical break with the prevailing mode of subjectivity and claim to universality in modernity is conducted in the name of difference, plurality and freedom.[1] The modern discourse of sovereignty 'invokes a figure of man who recognises some specific limitations on his doing and knowing, not external constraints, but as virtually constitutive of his autonomous being as the necessary centre of historical narrative' (Ashley 1989, p. 266).

In contradistinction, the new 'subject' Ashley and Walker were envisaging would be actively engaged in political decision-making, question reified conceptual and institutional boundaries, promote the expansion of democratic practices and assume direct social, political and economic responsibility for herself and her community from the decentred perspective of the agent of resistance. What distinguishes these new subjects who challenge given boundaries and entrenched hierarchisations of power is that they 'know their "we-ness" always to be "in question" and "in doubt", [they] are suspicious of uniform standards of evaluation, and [they] find joy, openness, and the play of plural possibility in the absence of a center of judgment' (Ashley 1988, p. 90). The dissident subject—having sceptically challenged all sovereign vestiges of 'sovereign authority' as conducive to closure, totalisation and domination—is confronted with the authority of its own discourse. Modernity's master signifiers, 'God, nature, dynasty, citizen, nation, history, modernity, the West, the market's impartial spectator, reason, science, paradigm, tradition… the possibility of a universal human community, common sense' (Ashley and Walker 1990a, p. 368) are thrown into radical doubt, construed rather as open questions as opposed to reassuring vantage points. Inhabiting a post-Nietzschean world where 'God is dead', the dissident individual does not only recognise the contingency or the absence of any 'determinate solution' to those problems, but the ambiguity of her own response as well. Hers is just one more representation swirling in a field of representations that make up the political as a field of antagonism between competing representations and the meaning they hold for us. For Ashley and Walker (ibid., p. 380), this is a liberating predicament as, once the conceptual straitjacket of sovereignty is removed, the individual is furnished with the critical opportunity of 'self-making in a *register of freedom* [my emphasis]'. Self-making in a register of freedom[2] gestures towards an individual who jettisons all attachments to a sovereign centre of judgement or a totalising narrative

of security, recognises the social constructedness of her own identity, and acknowledges that every action is fraught with ambiguity, contingency and uncertainty, but, nonetheless, she does not surrender to despair or resignation by the absence of certitude. On the contrary, she celebrates 'the instability of discursively constructed boundaries' (Hutchings 1999, p. 78) as a sign of and invitation to freedom.

Apparently, self-making in the register of freedom should not be conflated with the freedom of 'anything goes'. Individuals come to grips with the contingency and instability of their positions and draw intellectual resources from the experience of life in the margins, but they do not interact in a relational vacuum. According to Ashley and Walker, all those who resist the rigidity of boundaries and the ossification of conceptual and institutional limitations share the same interest in expanding the horizon of freedom. Therefore, although no particular sovereign perspective for questioning or transgressing boundaries should be privileged or elevated to a universal standard for others to emulate, Ashley and Walker (1990a, p. 394) concede that the struggle to resist the imperatives of sovereign exclusion does involve the enactment of a particular 'disciplinary' ethics; an ethics that 'does discipline the active labor of self-making, orienting that labor not only to respect the uncertainties of every immediate locality but also to explore the connections across localities upon which the struggle for freedom depends'. Theirs, then, is not an inchoate stance of unprincipled multiplicity, but 'a process whereby difference can be expressed, negotiated and recognised within the disciplined effort of listening, questioning and speaking' (Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2005, pp. 662–3).

Ironically, however, the problem of sovereign disciplinarity persists as no sooner does the self-fashioning postmodern individual step outside the sovereign shadow than she finds herself constrained within an ethos imposed from another centre of judgement, one which paradoxically does not emerge within the field of political contestation. If, however, the mode of contestation and resistance is already delimited before it actually emerges from within the terms of the struggle, then is that not a form of premature closure? A closure, perhaps, intended to avoid the unpleasant excesses of freedom (see Shinko 2008, p. 484)? Contestation and resistance involve both risks and promises. Summoning an ethos of questioning and contestability and then taming the normative grounds of the struggle to foreclose undesirable outcomes may alarmingly sound just like another form of subtler and therefore insidiously totalising exclusion. Along similar lines, many critics have been particularly dissatisfied

by early post-structuralist IR's difficulty to justify the 'ground' of its own critical project (Spegele 2002, pp. 91–126; Shapcott 2001, pp. 96–105; Cochran 1999, pp. 121–43; Hutchings 1996, pp. 158–65; Connolly 1989, pp. 335–41). In one of the earliest instances of what has ever since become a cottage industry of critiques of post-structuralist thought in IR, Spegele (2002, p. 93) attacked Ashley's work on six grounds, but his critique could be easily summarised in one main point. Post-structuralism, in view of Ashley's ambivalent relationship with the Enlightenment project, is accused of concealing the Kantian roots of its discourse behind fanciful rhetorical devices and literary metaphors (ibid., pp. 118–22). This is a recurrent theme in nuanced critiques of post-structuralist IR, but also one whose core parameters and ramifications are not clearly spelled out in the literature.

Taking his cue from Kimberly Hutchings' (1996, pp. 11–37) critical comments on the antinomies of the Kantian critical project, Shapcott (2001, p. 103) attacked post-structuralist IR for failing to secure the status of its own critique due to its strategic preoccupation with alterity. In other words, quite ironically, what was perceived to be post-structuralism's critical ontology is eventually taken to pose the main impediment for its engagement with alterity in its own terms, in other words with difference *as such*. In this regard, Shapcott (ibid.) points out that the encounter with difference takes place in a terrain already undermined by a polemical attachment to resistance:

> [i]n this conversation one engages with the other, not in order to understand them *per se*, but rather in order to prevent a further hardening of boundaries that limits their's [sic] and one's own freedom…whereby communication with the other is over-determined by the strategic purpose of expanding the realm of freedom.

Again, critique's attempt to legitimise its own goals, in this case opening new spaces for the inclusion of the excluded and marginalised, is premised on a blanket acceptance of a certain mode of subjectivity. The agent of critique is a priori taken to be a self-reflective individual willing to decentre herself and to question her own beliefs. The spectre of the post-conventional agent, a product of a specific civilisation with a particular view of freedom understood as emancipation, is again haunting the terms of the communication with the other. Based on an agonistic understanding of self/other relations, Ashley and Walker's account of freedom may

avoid the pitfalls of an unreflective reliance on the Enlightenment ideal of emancipation, but their ontological assumption that freedom as difference is not simply a way of thinking but a mode of being might demand too much of a substantive transformation from the other reducing the whole process to one of assimilation rather than unconditional conversation (see Shapcott 2001, p. 102).[3]

Coming from a different, but not entirely dissimilar angle, Molly Cochran (1999, p. 131) castigates post-structuralist IR for maintaining a weak foundationalism which, while nominally resisting closure and ethical universalism, informs a 'politics of resentment'. The condemnation of the violence produced by sovereign notions of subjectivity, truth and the state is cast in a language which calls for alternative political practice as part of a new vision of international ethics (see Walker 1993, p. 50). At the same time, however, the same writers have discredited any possibility of discriminating between legitimate grounds of ethical judgement. Instead, what they offer is a version of *contingent* ethics where the centrality of a sovereign voice is dismissed in favour of the spatio-temporal specificity of values assertions. William Connolly (1991, p. 12) refers to it as a 'second order ethicality', while Ashley heroically describes it as an 'ethics of marginal conduct'. They are both aware of the paradoxical nature of modernist ethics which is constructed around a particular ontological priority of identity over difference and abhorrence for uncertainty and contingency. The meaning of marginality is revealed as a strategy that problematises the totalising spectres of fixed identity, space and time, and adopts a celebratory attitude of resistance to sovereign violence (Walker 1993, p. 52; Ashley and Walker 1990a, p. 394; Connolly 1991, p. 14). Cochran (1999, p. 136) does recognise the merits of an ethical approach embracing contingency, contextuality and temporality; yet, she remains suspicious of the claim for a non-universalised, non-foundationalist ethics of 'radical autonomy in varied local practices'. In fact, she identifies traces of a persistent and almost inescapable universalism and congruent foundationalism in the post-structuralist injunction to celebrate difference and open up spaces for alternative practices in IR. So, in many ways, the issue that remains unresolved in post-structuralist IR is the status of the universal and the violence implicit in the universalisation of its anti-sovereign and anti-territorial ethos. It is true that Walker (1988, p. 135) does invite complexity and creative ambiguity by saying that universalism should be sought and resisted at the same time. Similarly, George (2002, pp. 66–7) accepts the inevitability of critically embracing some sort of universalism,

albeit of a non-modernist, anti-foundationalist kind. However, the 'weak ontology' (White 2000) of their universalism is never fully justified. It is, rather, undermined by the Foucauldian emphasis on 'radical autonomy' which seems to run against the priority they attribute to local practices of resistance. Their restlessly unsettling ethics of radical autonomy seems to never be fully reconciled with the loyalties people accord to local practices (Cochran 1999, p. 141).

What Cochran's critique brings to surface is that the ethical universalism inherent in those local practices is never seriously problematised. Instead, 'locality' and 'contingency' are taken to embody all that is resistant to modernist universalism and are embraced almost dogmatically as the site of difference, as if the normative superiority of presumably non-sovereign social movements and local practices is immediately justified by the site of their origin.[4] But, in this way, territoriality as such and the fixity it represents are not truly challenged, only a specific modernist version of them. It seems as though the modernist discourse of representationalism is reversed to serve polemical purposes in favouring difference over identity, contingency over certainty, particularity over universality, openness over closure. Yet, all in all, the logic of 'groundedness' remains untouched as the reversal of priorities occurs in the ontic realm and is never conceived as the operation of a productive difference as the disjuncture of the ontic and the ontological. As a result, contingency and difference are turned into new principled, fundamentalised 'ontologies'. What post-structuralist IR seems to offer, here, is merely a 'better'—in the sense of more 'representable'—account of the forces of fragmentation, temporal acceleration and the 'globalisation of contingency' (Connolly 1991, p. 24) that are unequivocally taken to be at work in the world today. To be fair, Ashley and Walker are aware of the paradoxical relationship between power, freedom and the authority of critique in their Foucaultian framework,[5] but they insist that the critical edge of theorising from a *register of freedom* can still be sustained, if we construe this move as a project of 'infinite subversion' of sovereign authorities or as 'theorising from the borderlines and as theorising from the void or no place' (Hutchings 1996, p. 162).[6] What if, however, the true gatekeepers of sovereignty are not the ones that strive to hide the void behind the empty signifier that is sovereignty, but the ones who fail to see that it is the void itself that makes its filling possible?[7] Depoliticisation then may not arise solely from the effort to create the impression of fixity where there is only fluidity and historical accident. It may equally be located

in the failure to recognise the condition that makes the contingency of sovereign groundedness necessary but impossible in the first place, that is, the void at the kernel of sovereign representations.

Part of the problem with post-structuralist IR is the temptation to forget that lesson. Necati Polat (2012, 1998, p. 465) insists that targeting sovereignty for making promises it cannot deliver in its historical performances is like positing again a distinction between what sovereignty really is and its simulations: '[b]ut sovereignty *is* its simulations; sovereignty cannot be but ideologies of sovereignty'. In fact, it cannot be anything else, that is, insofar Ashley and Walker wish to retain the critical force of their rhetoric without reinserting the difference between sovereignty and its failed *mimicries*. Essentially, what Polat is alluding to here is the inescapability of representation in a world that is given to our senses, the simple fact that individual experience is never immediate or fully transparent to itself, but needs to be mediated, iterated or simulated in order to take effect (Adorno 1973). This 'primordiality of the mimetic', as Polat calls it, has driven Nietzsche (1990, para. 192) to describe mimesis as a condition of human existence. It is the mimetic quality of human experience—in other words, Kant's lesson of transcendental idealism—that is responsible for the hostility of post-structuralism against binary oppositions, such as the natural and the unnatural, truth and ideology or faith (desire) and freedom; and the concomitant strategies of unsettling the reified hierarchies they tend to produce. At the same time, however, the residual trace of anthropomorphism can still be recognised in the origins of post-structuralism as exemplified in Nietzsche's (1968, para. 147) anti-representational reinscription of the distinction between a pagan—natural and innocent—freedom and Christian—slavish and unnatural—faith.

In Ashley and Walker (1990a, p. 384), the claim of a *counter-memorialising* reading of texts is marked by a similar distinction between an ideological, religious reading and a reading freed from the distortions and prejudices of traditional theorising in IR. If this is true, then the anti-representational, anti-mimetic opposition between faith and freedom is reinstated as a 'genuine' act of resistance, simply because we are invited to pursue an ethical strategy (ethics of marginality) that avoids closure and memorialising reading of texts. This attitude is most forcefully voiced in what celebrated post-structuralist thinkers, such as David Campbell and William Connolly, have described as an 'onto-political' ethos of critique (see Campbell 1998a, pp. 4–5, 2005; similarly, Connolly 1995a, pp. xvi–xix). In their work, the essentialising effects of representation

are condemned for depriving individuals of their autonomy and ethical responsibility and producing normalised models of agency. At the same time, this reification of representation in alienated images is countered by a demand for a supposedly more 'authentic' representation that is based on shifting and multiple grounds of identification, on difference, becoming 'life' or the eternal return of existence affirming itself (see Connolly 1993a, pp. 137–75). In other words, the representationalist, mimetic ethos of post-structuralism is routinely compromised by an almost hyper-Cartesian, anti-representationalist desire to overcome autonomy in the name of a more radical notion of subjectivity gained in the territory of heteronomy (Levinas 1969) or a desperate anthropomorphic drive to move 'beyond ontology' and escape the scar of representation (see also Critchley 2008).

David Campbell's Ethics Beyond Ontology

The ambition to move beyond the constraints of Kantian epistemology and the entire Western philosophical tradition that prioritises ontology over ethics, is most emphatically defended in IR by David Campbell's (1998a, 1999) work. To escape the paradoxes and agony of a life subordinated to the search for secure foundations, guiding moral codes and political certainties, Campbell advocates a post-Nietzschean ethics of appreciation of life for life itself. He warns his readers that such a 'ground' for ethics may sound absurd or nonsensical because it does not seek any firm ahistorical or apolitical justification for moral obligation and political action. Drawing his inspiration from the Heideggerian notion of *Gelassenheit*, Campbell rejects the dual reasoning of a choice between a *telos* or foundational order and groundless anarchy or nihilism. What he invites us to understand is that political action is always already ethically situated and that it is not 'groundless' when it does not adhere to a mystical foundation of authority, be it God, Reason or Nature. In a firmly Nietzschean tenor, he exclaims that the reason for life may very well be life itself, 'for there is no reason beyond life that any "why" could disclose' (Campbell and Dillon 1993b, p. 168). Following Connolly (1993a, pp. 194–95) in his Nietzschean definition of 'life', Campbell (1998b, p. 508, 1994) argues for the indispensability and non-fixity of the notion, which serves as a marker that resists identification with a command, purpose or wilful design. In fact, the instability of every form of identity and its infusion with difference is a result

of the excess of 'life' and its incompatibility with every idea of fullness or completion without surplus, remainder or resistance.

Campbell (and Dillon 1993b, p. 165) shares Walker's (1993) concern that the 'comfort we have derived from the etiological myth of modern politics' restricts us from understanding our contemporary situation. His focus is, however, not on the principle of state sovereignty *per se*, but on narrative processes by which identity is constituted through differences, that is, conditioned and generated in each example from various social, political and cultural factors irreducible to a singular root. For instance, in his *National Deconstruction*: *Violence*, *Identity and Justice in Bosnia* he claims that the prevailing exclusionary conceptions of identity precipitated the failure of Western responses to the Bosnian crisis (Campbell 1998a). Campbell's argument in this book is informed by Derrida's and Connolly's thought on the way identity is performatively constituted in relation to difference. Identity, for Campbell, cannot exist without differences, but this does not mean that difference has always to be construed as ominous to identity (Campbell 1998c; see also Connolly 1991). Crucially, the modern conception of identity makes us look for the same and the different in spatial categories and, notably, in states. Campbell (1998a, pp. 49–53) then argues that this narrow territorialised conception of identity, which is central to modern political thought, was part of the problem in Bosnia, further exacerbated by Western prejudices that interpreted the internecine conflict as the irrational eruption of atavistic Balkan animosities.

As a counter-strategy to what he takes to be a grave impoverishment of our political imagination, Campbell (1998a, pp. 4–5) calls for an *ethos of political criticism* that is supposed to resist the modern construction of essentialised identities and be more in line with the forces of fragmentation and spatio-temporal acceleration that permeate contemporary world politics (see also Connolly 2000). This type of 'ontopolitical critique' seeks to upset fixed ethical dispositions that inform established ethico-political visions of the world and open up spaces for alternative cultural practices by engaging in excessive thought, a thought that invites us to think beyond accepted limits (Campbell 1994, p. 375).[8] Concurrently, Campbell aims to show that those who criticise post-structuralism for sterile negation, relativism and nihilism are wrong, by insisting on an affirmative ethos. In this, he takes direct inspiration from Connolly's vision of agonistic democracy and the latter's concomitant 'ethos of critical responsiveness' (Connolly 1995a). Connolly's version of an agonistic democratic politics encompasses a range of contestational political strategies through which

exclusions, marginalisations and states of domination can be problematised, resisted and possibly altered (see Shinko 2008). Connolly (2005) sees agonism as necessary in creating an ethical framework for negotiating issues of identity/difference in contemporary multicultural societies. In a similar vein to Ashley and Walker, Connolly's (1993b, pp. 370–4) idea of agonistic contestability presupposes a 'pathos of distance', a generosity and forbearance that allows individuals to realise the interdependence and contingency of their own identity.

Taking his cue from Connolly's agonistic ethos, Campbell accords that all life is struggle and my struggle for identity is always already implicated in endless contestations with others because 'I' only come into being and assume an identity as an alterity or other to someone else's self. Thus, for Campbell (1998b, p. 520) being human, because of the inescapable responsibility to the other it involves, establishes the struggle *for or on behalf* of alterity, and *against* those forces which struggle to efface, erase or eradicate alterity, as the political imperative or predicate of life. As a corollary to an agonistic ontology, Campbell articulates a life-affirming ethos that rests upon a practice of energetic care for the 'protean diversity of human life' (Connolly 1991, p. x). This principle aspires to go 'beyond the narrow and static confines of tolerance and maintains that the active affirmation of alterity *must* involve the desire to *actively* oppose and resist—perhaps, depending on the circumstances, even *violently*—those forces that efface, erase or suppress alterity [my emphasis]' (Campbell 1998a, p. 206). With respect to the Bosnian case, for example, Campbell's injunction issues in two guidelines:

> A variety of political strategies which *on the one hand* requires the constant pluralization of centers of power, sources of knowledge, loci of identification, and the spaces of community, while *on the other hand* recognizes that each deterritorialization necessitates and results in a reterritorialization, that in turn has to be disturbed (and so on).
>
> An emancipatory ideal of multiculturalism, which *on the one hand* affirms cultural diversity without situating it, while *on the other hand* recognizes that multiculturalism can itself succumb to an enclave mentality that suppresses cultural interdependence and plurality. (Campbell 1998a, p. 208)

Paradoxically, while Campbell (1998b, p. 513) extols, much like Connolly, the virtues of 'antagonism, conflict, plurality and multiplicity' he, nevertheless, imposes the limiting factor that those principles of difference which do not permit alterity to be are intolerable and may even

need to be violently resisted. Resistance, in this respect, is not something one can opt out of. It is an inescapable requirement deriving from our commitment to a critical but affirmative ethos. In Campbell's (1998a, p. 182) view, deconstruction—or onto-political criticism—has a basic ethicality 'because of its orientation to the call of the other' which also makes it far from nihilistic because such thought implies resisting totalitarianism whether it is political or ontological (Campbell 1998a, p. 4, 2005). Campbell draws attention to the ethical implications of what in deconstructive thought is called the 'double contradictory imperative', that is, 'thinking the limit yet going beyond it, maintaining a commitment to reason by questioning its operation and that which escapes it, and resisting the inside/outside demarcation while exposing how the outside inhabits and helps constitute the inside' (Campbell 1998a, p. 198). For Campbell, this entails that 'deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it' (ibid., p. 129). Hence, Campbell (1998b) concludes, if we endorse deconstructive thought, we also need to espouse the conditionless affirmation of alterity, sometimes even by violent resistance.

In this militant defence of alterity, apart from the ethics of Derridian deconstruction, Campbell is inspired by the work of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas (1969, 1981), ethics is taken to precede philosophy to the extent that the subject of responsibility does not exist as an ethical agent before the ethical encounter with the other, but it is summoned to existence by the call of the other. This makes the ethical subject radically different from the liberal subject which is thought to pre-exist all ethical relations 'deploying either a putatively universal moral code (the deontological view) or muddling through the situation in order to achieve what might be thought of as the best possible outcome (the consequentialist account)' (Campbell 1998a, p. 12). Since the subject is thought to be constituted only through its relations with the other, responsibility also loses its previous meaning as a choice (ibid., p. 165). Instead, responsibility is the relation with the other that makes possible our highly interdependent condition of being in the first place (Campbell 2005, p. 131, 1998a, p. 173). Indeed, 'one's being has to be affirmed in terms of *a right to be* in relation to the Other' (Campbell 1998a, p. 174). Here, Campbell goes on to quote Levinas who writes that '[o]ne has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear for the Other' (Levinas quoted in ibid., p. 174).

Campbell, nonetheless, hesitates to follow Levinas all the way claiming that Levinas eventually allows societal borders to direct attention to intersubjectivity in some privileged instances over others. What is more, Campbell castigates Levinas for compromising his infinite commitment to the other when confronted with the problem of the Third (*le tiers*) in politics. In particular, Campbell (1999, p. 42) identifies an insidious danger of 'political totalitarianism' in what he interprets as Levinas' diminution of responsibility in view of the third other and bias towards the prefigured communal identity of the nation-state.[9] On this front, he believes Levinas is not radical enough. To address these shortcomings, Campbell supplements his commitment to radical intersubjectivity celebrated by Levinas with Derrida's notion of undecidability. Derrida's account of undecidability, of the madness of the decision, acknowledges this dilemma and suggests the need for a 'double contradictory imperative' wherein one acknowledges that in making a decision one is simultaneously asked to calculate the incalculable, to experience the possibility of an impossible justice manifested in doing justice and injustice to others by giving priority to some or one and not others or another (Campbell 1999, pp. 44–50). The need to respond to 'two contradictory injunctions' demonstrates that questions of responsibility are not clear-cut and cannot be decided in a programmatic way prior to the engagement with the other.

And yet, to the extent that Campbell argues in favour of an agonistic respect for difference and a politics of deterritorialisation because he deems this approach more suitable to the changing conditions of a globalised world, he reinforces the paradoxical logic of representation that seeks more authentic ways of relating to our present predicament. To this extent, his pluralism remains problematic even within the parameters of his own onto-political critique. If, as he insists in several places (Campbell 2005, p. 131, 1998a, p. 173, 1999, pp. 44–50), genuine responsibility is generated within the ethical space of the Derridian undecidable, then the call for 'a different configuration of politics, one in which its purpose is the struggle for—or *on behalf of*—alterity, and not a struggle to efface, erase, or eradicate alterity' (Campbell 1999, p. 50, 2005, pp. 132–3), does not remain faithful to the experience of constitutive aporia surrounding political action and ends up being a reversed form of totalising universalism. Campbell may be consistent in arguing for a politics which enacts a 'double contradictory imperative'. Yet, insofar as he is reconfiguring politics as a struggle for alterity, he seems to deviate from this ethical commitment in favour of later Derrida's (1996, 2001) more Levinasian leanings.[10]

Rather, early Derrida's still Heideggerian ontology admitted that violence in the form of arbitrary authority is an inevitable part of the madness of the decision. Undecidability implies that a truly critical attitude towards alterity involves an always ambivalent commitment to the 'lesser violence' (Derrida 1978, p. 313, n. 21; Paipais 2011). While speech can counter the violence of language by disrupting language's pretension to conceptual mastery—like Levinas' (1969) notion of the way the ethical is performed in conversation, in a 'saying' that disrupts the 'said'—it must inevitably, to remain intelligible, do some violence and, thereby, affirm aspects of what it resists.[11] It is for this reason that Derrida argues that an ethical regard requires one to acknowledge this dilemma. The fact that we may recognise that the moment we enter the realm of language and conceptual understanding we commit violence against the other's singularity does not necessarily condemn us to absolute incommensurability (Derrida 2004). Rather, by admitting the continuing violence of one's own discourse, one commits the least possible violence. On the contrary, the most violent position would precisely be a puritan and self-righteous commitment to total non-violence (Shapiro 1999, pp. 67–8). Against criticisms that take undecidability to be the very paralysis of politics and the denial of responsibility, Derrida reminds us, as Campbell (1999, p. 51) approvingly cites, that to aspire to a world devoid of the undecidable would be to wish for the demise of politics, 'for it would install a new technology, even if it was a technology that began life with the markings of progressivism and radicalism'.

In thinking, however, that he has secured a register of opposition to domination by way of choosing 'deterritorialization' over 'territoriality', Campbell tends to become co-opted by the same logic he seeks to transgress. In fact, it is by overlooking that the very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works that the powers of domination are reinforced. According to Judith Butler's (2000, p. 28) pithy remark:

> Dominance appears most effectively precisely as its 'Other'. The collapse of the dialectic gives us a new perspective because it shows us that the very schema by which dominance and opposition are distinguished dissimulates the instrumental use that the former makes of the latter.

If, then, Campbell's project remains valuable as part of a chorus of dissident voices that challenge identitarian thinking in IR, it also appears to be

compromising its pluralist credentials. His unconditional commitment to a non-liberal pluralist utopia based on Levinasian radical interdependence and infinite ethical responsibility towards the other raises the spectre of a new totality. Only this time it is a totality based on the absolutisation of difference. Paradoxically, depoliticisation seems to be here the result of an exuberant zeal to enact the onto-political priority of difference as such directly into politics, thus underestimating the dimension of exclusion that every 'ontic' politics entail and through which the onto-political dimension has to pass (see also Prozorov 2014b, p. 9). Despite his cautionary notes, Campbell seems to opt for the allure of permanent dislocation and appears eager to break with the ordeal of the double bind, that is, the impossibility and simultaneously the necessity of drawing lines of exclusion to defend *some* identity, create *some* community or institute *some* foundation. In Campbell's scheme, however, an exclusion-free pluralism seems to be elevated to the status of an ontological given directly enacted in the ontic realm as an immediately accessible *objet petit a*. In the end, what is undermined here is the critical force of his own onto-political ethos, since it rests not on an affirmation of ontological difference but on a direct ontologisation of difference. To this extent, in the vocabulary of this study, his onto-politics enact a depoliticised rather than a political ontology.

Mouffe and Connolly on Agonistic Pluralism: Cultivating a Democratic Ethos

With Campbell's contribution we are in the territory of a vision of pluralism that rests firmly on the post-structuralist ontology of difference. The purpose is to devise a pluralist framework that would address some of the limitations of conventional (i.e. see liberal) pluralism, or what Campbell (and Schoolman 2008) would call 'old pluralism', by putting emphasis on (1) the instability of fixed identities and their constitution through otherness and (2) the concomitant insufficiency of prevailing universalist or identitarian versions of democratic theory. The two contemporary theorists that are at the forefront of this 'new pluralism' are William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe. They represent two characteristic examples of pluralist democratic theory that attempts to radicalise rather than dismiss liberal democracy by placing emphasis on the dimensions of the political as the irreducible element of antagonism inherent in human relations, the ontological priority of contingency and difference, and cultivation of a critical

pluralist ethos that would expand the boundaries of democratic pluralism beyond liberal proceduralism and the Rawlsian 'overlapping consensus'.

Connolly, for example, has exposed the Rawlsian relegation of faith to the private sphere to be a presumption neither necessary nor desirable by many Muslims (as well as some Christians and Jews) in Europe and North America (Connolly 2005, p. 58). For them, the public declaration of allegiance to their most fundamental beliefs, demonstrated in their dress codes, their practices and their cultural routines, is an intrinsic part of their way of life and belief system. Therefore, the 'innocent and tolerant sounding definition' of secular impartiality and the reduction of metaphysical concerns to the private sphere is perceived as a tacit elevation of secular(-ised Christian) notions of political community leading to the marginalisation of many Muslims (Connolly 2005, pp. 58–9). Connolly faults liberal secularism for the widespread feelings of resentment common among Islamic population and theists alike as the desire to find 'a set of transcendental arguments' to regulate modern society is inevitably accompanied by frustration 'because the [real] world [simply] does not provide the[se] … resources' (Connolly 1995a, p. 29). In rejecting the Rawlsian aversion to cultural density and the invasion of faith to public discourse, Connolly envisages pluralism as a rich public engagement between multiple constituencies honouring a variety of religious and secular beliefs (Connolly 1999b, p. 39).

Although the importance of bringing substantive differences into public discussion is equally shared by Habermasians, Connolly's pluralism is suspicious of deliberative models of democracy due to their reliance on a mythical, disembodied rational subject that seems to exclude the visceral aspect of subjectivity from the political process (Connolly 1995a, p. 13). For Connolly, this neglect or deliberate dismissal of the affective dimension of politics nurtures a particularly sterile conception of rationality, cognition and the nature of language and public reasoning that tends to privilege particular cultural practices of patriarchal, middle-class, professional forms of dialogue. As Iris Young (1996, p. 126) has powerfully put it, when participants in a democratic dialogue 'are all supposed to leave behind their particular experience and interests [in search of a transcendent common good], the perspectives of the privileged are likely to dominate the definition of that common good'. According to Connolly (1993a, p. 135), a true pluralistic polity would contain multiple rationalities, identities and conceptions of the good 'engaged in respectful competition and selective collaboration' and among which there can be no appeal to a moment of

impartial juridical regulation. Employing a Deleuzian imaginary, Connolly (1995a, pp. 94, 103) envisages a 'rhizomatic', rather than 'arboreal', pluralism where human constituencies and human/non-human networks would participate in a multiplicity of criss-crossing interactions in the same way that a stem growing under the ground consists of multiple shoots and filaments rather than one tree trunk or root. The interconnectedness of constituencies that engage each other rhizomatically performatively enact a sense of the contingency and interdependency of each identity, thus fostering an ethos of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness. The former 'folds forbearance into the inevitable element of conflict between alternative identities' (Connolly 1993a, p. 190), while the latter 'takes the form of *careful listening and presumptive generosity* to constituencies struggling to move from an obscure or degraded subsistence below the field of recognition, justice, obligation, rights, or legitimacy to a place on one or more of those registers' (Connolly 2005, p. 126; emphasis in the original).

This ethos is underpinned by what Nietzsche would understand as an 'ontology of abundance' (see Tønder and Thomassen 2006), though in the context of late modernity Nietzsche's arguably elitist philosophy of 'existential gratitude' for life's excess has to be lived out in conditions of plurality and democracy. Connolly is not reticent in making explicit his ontological commitments as his fundamental thesis is the inseparability of politics and metaphysics, although not in the exclusivist fashion Schmitt (2006) would understand that statement and which would only be one ontology among many. He believes that ontological statements are inevitable in politics, but that does not diminish at all the strength of one's arguments neither does it condemn one to a self-debilitating relativism as if there is only one ontological truth.[12] His preference is for a materialist ontology of 'immanent naturalism' (Wenman 2008, p. 162). It is a basic supposition of his conception of (social) 'life' that emergent political and social forces repeatedly introduce 'new possibilities of being into the existing matrix of pluralism' (Connolly 1995b, p. 134, 1999b, p. 53). Indeed, the central ontological claim of *The Ethos of Pluralization* is that pluralism is never a static empirical fact, because 'existing forms of diversity are [forever] challenged … by new movements' as they struggle to come into existence (Connolly 1995a, p. xiv, 1995b, p. 134, 1999b, p. 5). In his subsequent writings, Connolly (2011) has grafted this account of the 'politics of becoming'—of the fundamental mobility of things—onto a materialist ontology that 'mixes nature and culture' in a 'world whose

subtle powers of multiple causality may exceed our best approximations of it' (Connolly 2001, p. 592, 2002, p. 57). The word he invokes to describe a world without inherent purpose and replete with energies that 'function[s] without the aid of a divine or supernatural force' (Connolly 2002, p. 85) is naturalism.

The idea of a purposeless universe is, then, tied to the notion of radical immanence, which means that—from Connolly's perspective—there can be no appeal to a noumenal world (in the manner of Kantian philosophy) outside of the materiality of forces that make up reality (Connolly 2011, pp. 70–9). He invites us, instead, to 'translate the Kantian transcendental field into a layered, immanent field' of material forces (Connolly 1999a, p. 21). In an obvious attempt to circumvent Kant's moment of transcendence, Connolly redefines the supersensible as the realm of the 'infra-sensible' or the 'virtual', which is understood as a positive realm of being that is beyond direct observation, but which, nonetheless, has effects on the realm of the 'actual'. Connolly is clearly influenced, here, by Spinoza's philosophy as appropriated by Deleuze (2001, p. 26): 'absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. In Spinoza, immanence is not immanence to substance; rather, substance and modes are in immanence'. Connolly (2011, pp. 77–8) reads a number of developments in contemporary physics, neuroscience and biology as confirmation of his materialist ontology of 'infra-sensible forces' and employs them as his model for a political cosmology of openness and contingency. He imagines that such developments announce a new cosmic sensibility and warrant distancing oneself from foundational conceptions of 'ethico-political life' (Connolly 2005, p. 130), whether conservative, liberal, communitarian or communicative, in order to adopt, instead, 'an alternative strategy of ethical cultivation' that strives 'to tap into a care for the rich diversity of life', which he hopes 'already flows through the conventional identities installed upon us' (Connolly 1995a, p. 27).

Connolly translates his immanent ontology into an invitation to promote a public agonistic ethos in tune with the inevitability of contingency and the exuberance of life. He counsels competing social forces to try to embrace contingency in order to combat the ever-present temptation of resentment arising out of the precariousness of their own identity and their most fundamental values and beliefs. From his perspective, 'forbearance and modesty are presumptive virtues in pluralist politics' (Connolly 1999b, p. 9). Therefore, the task is to strive to foster 'generosity' towards

other 'contemporary movements of pluralization', and to 'respond reflexively to the next set of surprises' in the politics of becoming (Connolly 1995a, p. xv, 1999a, p. 36, 2002, p. 166). Connolly strives to make abundantly clear that his concept of agonistic respect is not another version of the Kantian categorical imperative and so it cannot ultimately be given rational justification. Rather, this is 'anchored … in a non-juridical source such as human love of the complexity of the world or the abundance of life' (Connolly 2005, p. 47). Individuals and groups will therefore need to *cultivate* an ethic of agonistic respect by painstakingly working on themselves and on their dispositions towards others (Connolly 2005, p. 77). This sentiment can grow from an embodied appreciation of the 'gift of being' understood 'as a protean set of energies that enable[s] various identities' to be (Connolly 1995a, p. 40, 2002, p. 73). He does accept the inevitability of conflict between competing identities, but he believes that his idea of 'agonistic respect' can introduce forbearance as a more appropriate ethical sensibility, than the idea of liberal tolerance, for a late-modern world that 'renders inescapable the intensive entanglement of everyone with everyone else' (Connolly 1991, p. 188, 1993a, p. 190). In other words, Connolly's pluralism includes an acknowledgement of social conflict, but of a distinctive type whereby 'adversaries are respected and maintained in a mode of agonistic mutuality' (Connolly 1991, p. 166, 1999b, p. 3, 6). This gives his theory a certain rigour and subtlety distinguishing his position from mainstream accounts of pluralism.

In a not too dissimilar fashion, Chantal Mouffe has also emphasised the pivotal role of passion and antagonism as a means of repoliticising the terrain around the possibility of a radical democratic order under conditions of pluralism. Instead of privatising or parenthesising conflicting identities and differences in the name of a rational consensus or in keeping with the exercise of a shared public reason á la Rawls, democratic theorists should 'dedicate their attention to the different ways in which [the] dimension of conflictuality could be played out in ways compatible with a democratic order' (Mouffe 2002, p. 616). Her prescription for a deep and meaningful pluralism includes recognising the ineradicable dimension of antagonism that splits social relations and identifying ways to domesticate extreme animosities by fostering 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe 2000, p. 101) within a 'shared symbolic space' in a way which bears strong resemblance to Connolly's emphasis on an 'ethos of pluralization'. Mouffe's proposal arises similarly from a critique of contemporary liberal conceptions of democracy, whether they take the form of Schumpeter's aggregative

model in which politics involves the aggregation of preferences by political parties competing for office and the negotiation of compromises between competing interests and policies; or the deliberative model proposed by Habermas in which politics is conceived as a practice of communicative rationality between free and equal citizens seeking to achieve a rational consensus by means of free discussion (see Young 2000, pp. 18–25). In Mouffe's interpretation, both models of contemporary liberal political theory serve to negate the role of politics because of their strong individualistic and rationalistic assumptions about politics, society and subjectivity. In these accounts, politics is reduced to economic competition or rational deliberation.

Working with Carl Schmitt's (1996, p. 26) friend/enemy distinction, Mouffe understands politics as the moment of intensification of antagonism between opposed collective identities and agencies (Mouffe 1993, 2005, p. 14). Mouffe endorses Schmitt's critique of liberalism and pluralism in which all politics revolves around the role of rational individuals seeking to reach a reasonable consensus, rather than groups or collective identities that may at times exhibit 'irrational' instincts and proclivities. She also accepts his view that liberalism seeks to subordinate the moment of political decision and sovereignty to a rational system of rules and procedures. In parallel, drawing on Heidegger, she goes one step further in distinguishing between politics and the political, in which the political refers to the inherent dimension of antagonism in human relations, whereas politics is 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created', and human coexistence organised 'in the context of conflictuality provided by the political' (Mouffe 2005, p. 9; see also Mouffe 2000, p. 101). But where Schmitt tends to spatialise the political by reducing it to a simple opposition between 'friend' and 'enemy', Mouffe argues that the self/other relation could assume different forms that is neither the liberal relationship between economic *competitors* or rational *interlocutors*, nor the Schmittian war between irreconcilable *enemies*, but a relation of political *adversaries*.

In this perspective, for Mouffe, the challenge is not how to eradicate conflict, but rather how to channel its resources in ways that are compatible with a pluralist democracy. The truly democratic task, then, becomes the art of 'domesticating hostility' (Mouffe 2000, p. 101) and taming antagonism in the name of agonism (Mouffe 2005, p. 19). Actors in this context may engage in conflicts where they express and contest their differences passionately, but they must also invest in republican commitments and

view themselves as 'belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place' (Mouffe 2005, p. 20). Indeed, as Mouffe puts it, a democratic society requires a consensus on the common symbolic space citizens inhabit: 'the institutions constitutive of democracy and on the ethico-political values informing the political association—liberty and equality for all—which are enshrined in a constitution and a common legal framework' (Mouffe 2000, pp. 31, 122). Yet, in Mouffe's paradoxical formulation, what is required is a 'conflictual consensus' whereby citizens struggle to impose different interpretations of equality and freedom within an overall allegiance to the principles and institutions of liberal democracy (Mouffe 2005, pp. 52, 121). In this picture, then, not all demands and practices are legitimate since those that challenge fundamental democratic institutions should be discriminated against. However, the establishment of these boundaries is of a political, rather than moral or natural, character; that is, it is open to contestation by those forces seeking to change and, thus, transfigure the space of 'normal politics' (Mouffe 2005, pp. 17–9). The politics of 'agonistic pluralism' calls, in short, for a plurality of passionate subjects to exercise voice, make demands and be heard, within a shared symbolic order, but it does not eliminate the exclusionary dynamics of politics nor does it circumvent the need for an 'outside' that partly constitutes such an order. This is because the construction of any ethico-political order depends upon the creation of certain limits that exclude certain practices, beliefs and values, or the particular way they are held or practiced. In other words, the protagonists of agonistic pluralism do not subscribe to a utopianism that foregoes exclusion in the name of a complete inclusion.

Yet, this raises questions about the fate of those demands, claims and identities that are excluded from a democratic symbolic order—those who remain antagonists rather than adversaries—or those who are perpetually defeated in the fray of agonistic politics, and who may turn away from an agonistic politics towards a more antagonistic stance. As such allegations have been repeatedly raised by critics, it is important to note that both Connolly and Mouffe insist that any particular order can be challenged and transformed. Indeed, certain norms, practices and regimes *must* be challenged and transformed in the name of alternative principles and values. But this, in turn, raises further questions about *how* this can be brought about: queries concerning the strategies, tactics and conditions of such projects and assemblages. Finally, there are some important theoretical and conceptual questions to be clarified. Does, for instance, Mouffe's

concept of agonism effect a radical shift away from the liberal emphasis on harmony and reconciliation as she claims her definition of pluralism does? Or, as critics insist (Erman 2009; Dietz 2002, pp. 75–6), is her reworked notion of the politics *qua* agonism confined to liberal democratic regimes, and thus consonant with contemporary liberal theories of autonomy and justice? If, as she argues antagonism and instability are all-pervasive ontological presuppositions, how can we distance ourselves from that predicament so as to expect that conflict can be tamed into something productive, an agonistic arrangement of deep pluralism? Is it not, then, tacitly presupposed by Mouffe that the assumption of some position of neutrality, similar to the one she abhors in liberal pluralism, is possible despite her exhortations to the contrary (see also Johnson 2007, pp. 100–1)?

Concluding Remarks

For theorists of agonistic democratic pluralism such as Mouffe and Connolly, the problem with consensus-based forms of democracy, represented by the proponents of the Habermas-inspired deliberative democracy or the Rawlsian politics of metaphysical neutrality, is their anti-political stance exemplified by their attempt to ground the political process in institutional procedures or rational foundations (the utility principle of social choice, the veil of ignorance of social contract theory, the universal pragmatics of communicative action). Agonistic pluralism and radical democracy, instead, begin from the fundamental condition of antagonism as the absent ground of political ontology, the necessary contingent nature of all the efforts to hegemonise society and occupy the empty place of the universal. Mouffe's project is saturated by the difference between politics and the political; yet, she also seeks to channel the ensuing radical negativity of antagonism into an adversarial form of agonistic politics. Radical democracy does rely on an anti-essentialist social ontology of lack as its condition of possibility, but it is also concerned with taming the aggressive forces of politics by foregrounding or institutionalising the radical contingency of politics on an agonistic or democratic ethos.

Refreshing as this strategy may be in comparison to traditional democratic theory, the problem of reducing the logic of heterogeneity that governs political difference to an instance of representation within ontic politics remains. Post-structuralist IR seems to be plagued by an ontological politics, as opposed to a political ontology, that valorises difference, contingency and multiplicity as a form of reversed universalism. The

issue here is not the emancipatory or counter-hegemonic ethico-political orientation of these approaches, but their tendency to reverse rather than transcend the polarities they set out to deconstruct. The persistence here of a logic of depoliticisation may seem odd since both post-structuralist and agonistic approaches to difference and pluralism are programmatically opposed to the priorities of onto-theology and traditional metaphysics that valued unity, harmony and presence, and, reversely, are enthusiastically in favour of an alternative non-foundational or weak ontology that denies fixities or eternal verities and announces a critical ethos of freedom, responsibility, critical responsiveness, generosity and reverence for life. And yet, this chapter raised considerable doubts about whether such an emphasis on a post-metaphysical ontology and 'ontopolitical' critique delivers its promise for a more politicised engagement with difference and plurality. The task of the second part is to take up this challenge and delineate the ontological and phenomenological parameters of such an endeavour.

Notes

1. Walker (1988, p. 86) explicitly associated this critique with the wider project of attacking the modernist philosophy of identity. It includes a 'wholesale critique of the philosophy of identity', it critiques 'the moment of unity and the way in which the moment of difference…becomes subordinate to unity', and it calls into question the 'great dualistic schemas [where]…truth, beauty and goodness reside in the moment of identity, their opposites with the inferior moment of difference'.
2. Echoes of Foucault's (1990, 1988) idea of an artistic ethos of self-fashioning are more than relevant here. In many ways, not unlike Gadamer's dialogic understanding, the emphasis in these Foucauldian texts are on the art of cultivating the self's creative activity in agonistic interaction with the other (see also early Derrida 1978; Coles 1992, p. 91).
3. It is fairly indicative of the assimilative moment in post-structuralist thought that support for diversity is neatly 'clothed in unambiguously universalistic garment'. Linklater (1998, p. 72) characteristically remarks that this late humanistic ethics of freedom 'may be the final repository for the damaged hopes of the Enlightenment and the sole surviving refuge for a modernity which has shed its utopian delusions'.

4. The almost authoritative identification of resistance with the local is often surprisingly undertheorised or paid little notice. It is no coincidence that in globalisation literature the local is mostly celebrated as the site of resistance and the global as the site of domination (see Wilson and Dissanayake 1996; Jameson and Miyoshi 1998). Almost no effort is made to highlight the interpenetration of the global and local and the ways global forces can also be used to promote resistance (e.g. by modern communications and media networks internationalising internal dissent and local protests) or, contrarily, how locality sometimes is treated as the depository of backward tribal violence by hegemonic Eurocentric discourses employed to legitimise external intervention 'in the name of humanitarian relief, good governance or stamping out terrorism' (see Darby 2004, pp. 10–11).
5. This is a major issue of controversy among scholars regarding the interpretation of Foucault's work from which Ashley and Walker draw significant amount of inspiration (for a good overview of the debate, see Johnson 1997).
6. Speaking from the 'no-land' of exile (Ashley and Walker 1990b) is, in fact, also in keeping with the tradition of post-colonial criticism, pioneered by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, which puts emphasis on the figure of the migrant, refugee or asylum seeker who continually transgresses territorial and racial boundaries, destroys particularisms and points towards a common civilisation (see Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 362–3).
7. This is a point made profusely by Sergei Prozorov (2014a, b). It is also at the heart of Žižek's Lacan-inspired political ontology that informs this investigation.
8. Both Campbell and Connolly draw inspiration on this point from Foucault's genealogically inclined critique of Kant and the Enlightenment: 'The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' (Foucault 1984, p. 50).
9. Critics such as Neumann (1999, pp. 16–18), Campbell (1999, pp. 38–9) and Shapiro (1999, pp. 68–71), taking their lead from

Levinas' reluctance to condemn the Israeli massacres committed against the Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps, accuse Levinas of partisanship wholly incompatible with his non-anticipatory ethics of encounter. However, there may be good reasons to argue that those critics have misread Levinas on this point. As Jacob Schiff (2007) has very persuasively shown, critics who tend to see an inconsistency in Levinas here share a 'redemptive vision of the political' that Levinas is trying to do away with. Ultimately, Levinas ethics of proximity, thus interpreted, share affinities—yet, do not become wholly identifiable with—the Derridian ambivalence of the lesser violence (see also Fagan 2013).

10. For an illuminating discussion about what is at stake here, see the exchange between Warner (1996) and Campbell (1996) in *Millennium*: *Journal of International Studies*. Campbell (1996, p. 138) derides Warner's plea for an energising ethics of responsibility on the grounds that this seems to be 'an act of recidivism that takes us back to a perspective of deracinated ethics and denuded politics'. But, if politics is constructed as 'the struggle *for*, or *on behalf of* alterity', then Campbell is guilty of the same sin: his 'figuration of politics' is equally informed by a strategic concern that threatens to reduce radical interdependence to a defence of a reversed totality.
11. For a defence of Levinas on this point, see Critchley (1999, pp. 156–169), although Critchley's change of course on this subject is noteworthy in Critchley (2012).
12. In that sense, in its ontological claims Connolly's pluralism, while not being entirely identical with, yet likens the value pluralism promoted by theorists such as I. Berlin (2002), B. Williams (1981), C. Larmore (1987), J. Kekes (1993) and J. Gray (2000).

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PART II

Political Ontology and the Future of Politics

CHAPTER 5

From Stasis to Tragedy: Ontology and Phenomenology of Political Difference

In the preceding three chapters, we have critically examined the way prominent approaches in international political thought, ranging from Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian liberal and post-liberal pluralism to cosmopolitan dialogism and democratic agonism have dealt with the factual and normative question of pluralism in world politics. In particular, we launched our critique by demonstrating how specific attempts to mediate between liberal cosmopolitan and conventional communitarian responses to global diversity reveal themselves as resting either on an unsustainable conception of liberal neutrality or on smuggled-in anthropological and/or ideological assumptions that are tacitly presupposed. The problem with liberal or consensus-based articulations of the relationship between universalism (as abstract procedural principles of toleration) and difference (as the fact of the multiplicity of value systems and forms of life) is that they tend to see the latter as something that needs to be recognised under predetermined rules of coexistence, while themselves remain outside the realm of political contestation as some sort of timeless, unrivalled truths of liberal wisdom. Assuming the fact of manifold diversity in an empirical world supposedly held in common, they strive to offer a version of universality inclusive enough to avoid assimilating particular differences without at the same time denouncing the necessary functions performed by the universal (i.e. producing political unity or peaceful coexistence). In so doing, however, they either rest on a conception of universality as a

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neutral container for accommodating particularistic claims or expose the partiality of abstract universality without acknowledging the violence of their own particularistic discourse.

Two gestures are in operation here with reverse directionality but a common denominator. On the one hand, Rawls, Walzer and Nussbaum leave themselves open to criticisms that threaten to reduce their difference-sensitive thin universalisms to versions of hegemonic universalism. On the other hand, Rorty's ironic liberalism and MacIntyre's post-liberal retrieval of premodern virtue tend to unwittingly rely on unargued assumptions that expose their defence of particularism as an equally exclusionary gesture of universalism. Rawls' notion of reasonableness and Walzer's reflexive conventionalism seem to recognise the need to engage with a world that does not exclusively comprise liberal societies, but their proposed solution to the issue of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding seems to privilege particular forms of communication that go unrecognised and unconfessed. For example, Rawls builds from universalistic premises and employs his idea of a public reason as the necessary framework of consensus-building. His concept of a reasonable society of states, however, seems like an invitation to participate in an already predetermined, non-negotiable framework of coexistence. Walzer, on the other hand, moves from a particularistic starting point outwards to a version of thin morality that expresses aversion for gross violations of the rights of life and liberty. His weak foundationalism, however, fails to defend the ontological status of his minimal morality which, eventually, renders his project vulnerable to criticisms that castigate it as a repackaged defence of good old liberal values.

Rorty's professed anti-foundationalism, on the other hand, attempts to break with the sterile defence of foundations and offer a pragmatic turn to democratic politics that puts emphasis on identification rather than identity, and rhetorical redescriptions rather than metaphysical convictions. Expressing dissatisfaction with unresolved epistemological dilemmas, however, does not necessarily make their abolition an easier task. For reasons related to his radical historicism, Rorty's advocacy of ironic liberalism and the politics of sentimentality raises justified doubts about his ability to escape the paradox of foundationalism. If this is so, the innocence of his ethnocentrism can no longer be sustained. Finally, neo-Aristotelianism calls for a revalidation of particularism that resists ascribing a normative status to community as such. Nussbaum's capabilities approach appeals to an exalted form of human flourishing based on a list of recognisable

human capabilities, but, when it comes to accounting for her unabashed essentialism, she resorts to a list of liberalism-friendly values that may not unequivocally be recognised by everybody as part of human nature. MacIntyre, on the other hand, denies the possibility of a cross-cultural understanding under the conditions of moral confusion brought about by emotivism—the late-modern predicament in which moral pronouncements have become a matter of taste. He insists on the rationality of traditions as a way of at least initiating a constrained dialogue between literally untranslatable moral schemes. However, a careful reading of his strategic reliance on the linguistic base of community reveals the limits of his dismissal of emotivism. Eventually, his particularism cannot avoid but appeal to an extra-linguistic authority.

The tendency to fall back on foundational forms of justification or reproduce a residual form of foundationalism, even when such a move is explicitly rejected, has to do with an implicit reliance on a foundational ontology that makes no distinction between *beings* as entities in the world and *being* as the ontological horizon that makes particular worlds possible (see Heidegger 1996, 1959). Instead, the world itself is recognised as another entity, a totality that constitutes the sum total of all the entities that inhabit it. As we have mentioned in the introduction, Prozorov (2014a) has very persuasively shown why such a view of totality is self-contradictory and ends up in absurdity. On the other hand, even when foundational traps such as the Cartesian construction of subjectivity as a philosophical/anthropological linchpin of the political is given up in favour of a phenomenological emphasis on language as the ontological horizon of the constitution of subjectivity, the foundational ontological imaginary remains persistent in the form of a latent teleology and reflexive anthropology. The attainment of undistorted communication or cosmopolitan solidarity is almost a priori presupposed in a manner that turns dialogic sensitivity to difference, rather unwittingly, into almost another version of the liberal post-conventional reflexivity, perhaps stripped of the pretensions of liberal neutrality, but still assuming too much. Either by interpreting universality as resting on some linguistic universal pragmatics or some global civilising process (discourse ethics and the harm principle in Linklater) or by directly ensuing from a relational ontology (language as the matrix of cosmopolitan solidarities in Shapcott) or, even, by construing freedom as the capacity of all human beings to exercise critique (Ashley and Walker), dialogic and post-structuralist ontologies pre-empt the terms of their engagement with plurality and difference.

However, depoliticisation is not only produced by rendering the operation of the political (the exception or contingency upon which every particular order is constituted) in politics *invisible* through the employment of an abstract or neutral universalism or through the a priori rejection of universalism (that returns as 'repressed'). Such a critique of depoliticisation would simply substitute one foundational ontological claim for another, since it would still rest on the assumption that, somehow, there is an overarching totality (a 'World of worlds') that constitutes the sum total of the various social worlds and that it is somehow graspable from some 'external' vantage point. The question then becomes, not only how to recognise the plurality of diverse articulations of the political within politics, but also how to remain faithful to the constitutive moment of antagonism that splits politics and the political from within and opens up the difference between politics and the political as the movement and recognition of this double voidance. The lack of fidelity to this second crucial dimension of a constitutive double negativity is the reason why otherwise commendable attempts to develop a non-foundational pluralising agonistic ethos in politics run the risk of compromising their critical ontologies either by ascribing foundational value to 'difference' (Campbell) or embracing contingency as the 'essence' of politics (Connolly) or ceding a privileged normative status to a particular *telos* of agonistic politics, that is, radical democracy (Mouffe). As a result, agonistic pluralism—promising as it may be—encounters limitations in bringing about its avowed purpose, namely to rehabilitate diversity, plurality and contingency in political discourse, that is, to repoliticise domains of political theory and practice that have remained hitherto uncontested. The above discussion did not purport to offer a nihilist critique of mainstream and radical responses to world pluralism *in toto*. Rather than being a demolition exercise, it should rather be seen as offering a sketch of the depoliticising logic at work and the temptations still looming in approaches to global pluralism that rest on what we have come to designate in this study as foundational or 'in the last instance' ontologies. The next section will outline what is involved in constructing a political ontology that seeks to undermine this logic and recast ontology in formal (i.e. non-anthropological or non-ideological) terms.

Political Difference as Formal Ontology

What has hopefully become apparent from the above brief rehearsal of the main reasons behind the eclipse of the political in leading discussions of pluralism across the theoretical spectrum is that depoliticisation works

both ways: as disavowal of the necessarily contingent ground upon which every positivity rests (the forgetting of the exception upon which every particular order is constituted) *and* as the denial of the formal structure of political difference (the necessity of its constitutive role in the production of social order, exactly because not only is the Symbolic lacking but also the Real itself is 'non-all'). So, if every particular social and political order is condemned to exist only if it conceals the void out of which it emanates,[1] the disavowal of this logic (or else the illusion of stepping out of ideology)[2] is also a form of depoliticisation (marking the ontologisation of politics as a self-destructive or impossible passion for the void). The latter option reproduces the logic of Hegel's (1995) bad infinity as it turns the void into an unreachable ideal (and, thus, unwittingly another 'ontic' particular) that is constantly pursued, but never attained spawning either fanaticism and destructive nihilism or, its opposite, resignation, cynicism and despair. Paradoxically, then, the displacement of the political may also occur through discourses that place the notions of contingency and historicity at the centre of their argumentation, yet nevertheless treat difference, multiplicity, plurality and contingency as ontic primordial realities grounding a conception of politics as incessant 'becoming'—and thus collapsing ontology into politics—by turning it into another ontic strategy for the defence of 'difference'.

Granted, the moment of the political as it is theorised here implies that every practical activity (including philosophy) is fundamentally political and, therefore, such an argument might be taken as another species of the same ontic strategy of hyperpoliticisation. Yet, the fact that everything is political (i.e. the transgressive moment of constitution/deconstitution of every order is always a dormant possibility to be activated or an erupted exceptionality to be normalised) does not mean that the politics/political double gap is eliminated. A world bereft of this doubly intensified difference between politics and the political would either be a world in which a totally administered politics would have colonised all corners of the social (a nightmarish Orwellian prospect) or a world in which the political (in the ontological sense of antagonism) is fully enacted on the entire scale of the social. Yet, this latter possibility is a peculiar instance which nobody has ever seen. The moment of the political, when society confronts its own contingent origins as well as the necessity to institute temporary grounds—what R.B.J. Walker (2010) would call 'the politics of the authorisation of politics'—has always already come and does not stop looming as an endless possibility. Yet, nobody has ever seen the realm of the 'onto-political' *as*

such, except in the cracks and fissures of the social which politics is always striving, yet constantly failing, to foreclose (Marchart 2007, p. 174). It is exactly the *implacability* of this double negativity that makes political difference the name for a paradoxical enterprise which is both impossible and inevitable—which is also why none has ever witnessed 'pure politics' (i.e. a totally administered world) either. The political cannot be brought about voluntaristically but, whenever we act, it is as if we always activate it or, better, we are always enacted by something which is itself the movement of incompletion (see Žižek 2002; Glynos 2003).

This also explains why every displacement of politics—whether it involves the foreclosure of society's ungroundable nature by collapsing the political into politics or, vice versa, politics into the political—is a political move *par excellence*. The denegation of society's groundless ground may take either a foundationalist or an anti-foundationalist direction, either by affirming an ultimate ground or by denying the possibility of grounding altogether and, thus, transposing the necessity of contingency from the ontological to the ontic realm—that is, by hypostasising the ontopolitical in an immediate way. Both gestures end up abolishing the double impotence of political difference and ultimately result in an ideological displacement of politics. The distinction, therefore, between politics (any particular constituted order) and the political (the exception(s), contingency and pure difference that constitutes it by transgressing it) is not simply another posited, arbitrary structural necessity. As Oliver Marchart (2007) has persuasively shown, it rather constitutes a necessary quasi-transcendental condition of possibility for any meaningful order of historicity to arise. Quasi-transcendentality, here, stands for the paradoxical operation of the political as both belonging to the social order by authorising the principle(s) of its constitution *and* being in a relation of constitutive exception to it. And yet, this is only half of the picture of the logic of double negation that governs political difference, that is, the half that corresponds to the operation of the political as constitutive exception of every particular order. The other crucially important half is the radical impotence penetrating the political itself in the form of a constitutive split permeating its operation that corresponds to the idea of the Lacanian Real as inexistent, incomplete, not-all.

The logic described here is not captured by the foundational prejudices of conventional substance ontologies, but constitutes a *formal ontology* or, else, a type of political ontology that—as explained in the introduction—undermines the logic of foundationalism from within without falling back

to an abstract exteriority or a 'false' transcendence. To gain a better gasp of the paradoxical operation of this 'immanent transcendence' (Haynes 2012), Žižek's reworking of the retrospective logic of the Lacanian Real is a good guide. According to Žižek, Lacan's Real is posited as something belonging both to the 'outside' of the symbolic ordering of society and at once participating in the 'flesh' of the society or representing the retroactive effect of its absence. As such it is envisaged as a quasi-transcendental condition of (im)possibility for the self-grounding/degrounding of social order:

> The Real is…that which cannot be inscribed…the rock upon which every formalisation stumbles. But it is precisely through this failure that we can in a way encircle, locate the empty place of the Real. In other words, the Real cannot be inscribed, but we can inscribe the impossibility itself, we can locate its place: a traumatic place which causes a series of failures…The Real is not a transcendent positive entity, persisting somewhere beyond the symbolic order…some kind of Kantian 'Thing-in-itself'—in itself it is nothing at all, just a void, an emptiness in a symbolic structure marking some central impossibility. (Žižek 1989, pp. 172–3)

Put differently, Žižek suggests that the Real in Lacan stands for the limit of signification that does not appear in symbolic reality as presence but is felt only by its absence. In this formulation, Lacan's understanding of the Real shares many similarities with Heidegger's (1959) conception of ontology and Georges Bataille's (1985) concept of 'base materiality'. Being for Heidegger is never captured by instrumental attempts to fix its meaning or represent it through language. It can only be 'grasped as it unveils itself as a nonreducible, heterogenous totality (or "being-ness") that exists within a specific history, location, and temporality' (Breu 2009, p. 188). Equally, insisting on a non-recoverable negativity, Bataille argues for a negative conception of materialism that exceeds any symbolic recuperation. Materiality is brute, contingent and intransigent but it is not undialectical. Instead, Bataille radicalises the dialectics by positing materiality as the site which resists dialectical sublation. Similarly, Lacan posits the Real as that which is excised and disavowed from the Symbolic. However, this externality is experienced only through signification[3] as the failure or blockage of all schemes to social completeness. In other words, the Real is something that cannot be represented (it reveals the limits of symbolic order), but it is shown in the failure of every attempt to symbolise it (Žižek 1997, p. 217; see also Stavrakakis 2003, pp. 327–8).[4]

What makes the Lacanian concept of the Real suitable for 'representing' this unrepresentable quality of quasi-transcendentality is precisely its undecidable status as an 'impossible' utterance that keeps the signifying process open and thus prevents the crystallisation of a metalinguistic position.[5] That is, the reference to the Lacanian Real permits us to think of that impossible metalinguistic position, not as something contingent, accidental or imaginary, but as something 'real' in the Lacanian sense, that is, as something negatively *necessary*: 'one cannot attain it, but one also cannot escape it' (Žižek 1987, p. 34). In the apposite words of Yannis Stavrakakis (1999, p. 162, n. 8): 'in order to avoid a fantasmatic meta-linguistic position (a meta-linguistic affirmation of meta-language) it is *necessary* [emphasis added] to produce an utterance which shows the impossibility of occupying a pure meta-linguistic position through the failure of meta-language itself (a meta-linguistic negation of meta-language).' This insight is further advanced by Žižek who suggests that we first need 'to distinguish more explicitly between contingency/substitutability *within* a certain historical horizon [first-order exclusion or the logic of constitutive exception] and the more fundamental exclusion/foreclosure that *grounds this very horizon*' [second-order exclusion or the logic of an exceptionality inherently lacking] (Žižek 2000a, p. 108). Echoing Stavrakakis' concern, Žižek affirms that we need 'a kind of meta-narrative that explains [the] very passage from essentialism to the awareness of contingency' (ibid., p. 106). This metanarrative, however, cannot be another ground, but it must represent the *possibility of grounding* that is at the same time undermined by the *impossibility* of it serving as the ultimate ground.

This sensibility is not far from, although by no means identical with, Agamben's project for an affirmative conception of language that seeks to overcome the unnameable, the unspoken—pure difference or radical negativity—as the negative foundation of Western metaphysics (Agamben 1991).[6] Agamben is critical to what he interprets as Derrida's regression to a conception of negativity as the unsurpassable limit of signification. The charge here—with an interestingly Hegelian twist—is that by instituting negativity as another limit to the possibility of 'speaking the unspeakable', Derrida is resurrecting the spectres of metaphysics in the form of age-old dualisms such as those between being and entity, nature and culture, essence and existence. Agamben's critique, inspired by, but also critical of aspects of, latent Heidegerrianism in Derrida, seeks to establish language as a positive universality as opposed to a negative foundation—what he terms *experimentum linguae*, the experience of the facticity of language

(*factum loquendi*)—that conditions the very possibility of the fecundity of political effects in the ontic world (Agamben 2000, p. 116; Prozorov 2014b, p. 63). Absolute exteriority or transcendence in that sense is neither exalted nor domesticated, but reconstrued to signify the void within immanence (Prozorov 2014a; Stavrakakis 2006; Marchart 2006; Haynes 2012; Žižek 2012) as the condition of possibility for *historicity itself*; an irreparable gap within historical forms of social identification that both enables social reproduction and prevents its ossification; an inherent 'divergence' of signification, and of consciousness itself, as a ''dialectic'—in every sense of the term and before any speculative subsumption of this concept' (Derrida 1973, p. 69). It is also genuinely materialist in the sense that radical negativity or pure difference understood as the 'internal-external' excess/gap of signification—that is, as emerging in the intersection of the Real and the Symbolic—explains empirical differentiation and multiplicity, not as emanating from the infinity of positive historical actualities (that would make the contingency of positive worlds not necessary but contingent), but rather from an originary differentiation that makes this actuality possible in the first place.[7] Ultimately, this is a *materialist* understanding of dialectics that problematises the view of 'matter or material experience as naively representational or naturalistic' (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 3) and recognises the 'indivisible remainder' of negativity (Žižek 2007) in the field of discursivity as the quasi-transcendental structure that makes materiality and historicity possible.[8] The concept of quasi-transcendentality, then, reflects the need to imagine a non-reductive logic of immanent self-grounding that is both more than the sum of its parts (refuelling an open-ended dialectics) and, at the same time, a condition that is always caught up in the things that it constitutes (reflecting the uncoded materiality of the Real).

The fact that the radical notion of contingency has gained traction within a specific historical period for reasons that are historically conditioned does not necessarily affect the very *status* of the concept as a quasi-transcendental (i.e. quasi-transhistorical) term. This point cannot be emphasised enough: no historical or contextual variations or the supposed absence of contingency as an event of rupture in earlier periods[9] could eliminate the difference between contingency as necessary (a second-order formal ontology) and contingency as non-necessary (a first-order ontic happenstance). To assume that contingency can be 'a bit' or 'not quite' necessary is to collapse the ontological to the ontic and, thus, to fail to exclude the possibility of a non-contingent, and thus ultimate foundation.

The latter would plunge us back to the paradox associated with imagining a totality that includes itself. Therefore, the question is not whether one has the experience of contingency in empirical-ontic terms, but, rather, 'how the encounter with contingency, for example in the form of paradoxes, of fortune, of freedom, of antagonism, of "democracy", is realised and accounted for or how it is dismissed and disavowed' (Marchart 2007, p. 32). A strictly historicist view may identify the reasons why a specific discourse has historically emerged or describe the variations of its historical occurrence, but it cannot account for what can be called the moment of the political *as such*, that is the encounter with the crisis or breakdown of signification *per se* that reveals society's absent ground (see Žižek 1989; Laclau 1990; Badiou 2007) nor can such a historicist discourse account for the failure to institute a permanent ground without relapsing to relativism or unconfessed foundationalism.

Viewed as such, this movement of *double voiding* becomes intimately aligned with potentiality. Potentiality, here, has no necessary normative predilection setting limits to power, as in Agamben (1999), or signifying the singularity of the body, a body that is never alone but always a being-with, as in Nancy (2001). What is primary here is the contestation that takes place as potentiality unfolds and also as a condition of that potentiality itself. Put differently, contestation or antagonism is inscribed within potentiality in the form of an, as it were, generalised civil war. Such a civil war, such a *stasis*,[10] becomes the ontological condition of possibility of the politics/political nexus. Stasis, here, does not signify any prejudice in favour of ontic mobility, upheaval, anarchy or irregularity. As the term's ambiguity itself suggests, stasis operates as the ontological condition of possibility for the constitution/deconstitution of any particular order, namely a site for possibility and destruction/creation never determined in advance. In other words, it stands in for political difference itself as the movement of a double split within politics and the political.[11] Once more, Žižek provides a rather illuminating discussion of how this second-order antagonism—for which, analogously to stasis, he reserves the name 'class struggle'—operates as the inherent split in the interstices of the Real and the symbolic order that cuts across any particular, ontic antagonisms. While the concept of antagonism is derived from Schmitt's (1996) concept of the political as friend/enemy distinction, within Žižek's writings—as well as in Laclau and Mouffe (1985)[12]—the term takes on a very different meaning from Schmitt's who intends it to mean that every collective identity implies an opposed other (the 'antagonist'). Rather, for Žižek the

antagonistic other also names the absence or void that emerges where we expect to find a full identity. Understood in this way, 'antagonism' does not point to the 'inevitability of struggle' between a 'we' and a 'they', as in the identitarian proto-fascist fashion of Schmitt and social Darwinists, but to a radical heterogeneity that arises from within any constituted order marking both the latter's strangeness to itself (and, therefore, its contingency and utter gratuitousness) *and* enabling the very terrain of intelligibility that permits us even to talk about contingency. The other can never be reduced to a particular being that enables me to construct my own antagonistic identity. Rather, in a more Heideggerian/Derridean fashion, it refers to a condition of being itself which is punctured by non-being (Heidegger 1996; Derrida 1981). Identity itself is split from within and this internal blockage, the constitutive hiatus at the heart of every identity, represents the true 'antagonist' in Žižek's understanding.

It is also important to note that, unlike Agamben's (1998) excessive overidentification of sovereign power with governmentality (that transforms the physical existence of individuals into a political state of exception, which is paradoxically maintained into perpetuity), this reading of political difference as stasis reads sovereignty, not as necessarily murderous politics or biopolitical depoliticisation, but rather as 'nothing but a name for the impossibility of self-immanence and hence the designator of the infra-structurally necessary alterity that constitutes order' (Prozorov 2005, p. 88).[13] Sovereignty, then, rather than being necessarily disastrous or oblivious of the political, is itself this zone of indistinction or indifference that Agamben (2015, p. 11) ascribes to the concept of stasis. In particular, it stands for two ontological possibilities or, rather, it signifies two ways of instantiating the political: (1) as a defensive, claustrophobic and forgetful delimitation of the boundaries of political community with a clear designation of the community's internal and external enemies (sovereignty as the restrainer (*katechon*) of social chaos and disorder and the guarantor of political unity), as in Schmitt (2003, p. 60, 2008b, p. 92) and Machiavelli (1996), and/or (2) as a constant interrogation of society's principle of constitution (see Lefort 1988; Žižek 1999; Marchart 2007; Stavrakakis 2006; Honig 2009). The second possibility should not be envisaged simply as perpetuating the structural impossibility of achieving another type of community, designated by various post-structuralist thinkers as the 'unavowable' (Blanchot 1988), 'inoperative' (Nancy 1991) or 'coming' (Agamben 1993) community, lest this structural impediment—envisaged by Lefort as the 'empty place of power'—turns into

another depoliticising device that may well imagine an agonistic politics of reform and refoundation, but could never fathom the possibility of absolute renewal or transformation of the political (see Wenman 2013). The evocation of the transgressive nature of the political and the unstable fixity of every constituted order can, in other words, almost imperceptibly be turned into a pretext for new forms of depoliticisation that may perpetually defer any commitment to dangerous or so-called lost causes (see Žižek 2009c).

It is for this reason that it does not suffice to defend the 'impossibility of society' as the ultimate hallmark and guide of a politics of repoliticisation and resistance.[14] One has to be mindful, here, of the possibility that a historicist understanding of antagonism may undermine the *truth* of antagonism itself. It is mainly for this reason that Žižek took issue with what he read as early Laclau and Mouffe's historicist appropriation of antagonism. In a critical review of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Žižek (1990) attacked the apparently innocent question of the relationship between antagonism and the theory of subjectivisation in Laclau and Mouffe's landmark book. The argument is that antagonism undercuts the text's insufficiently radicalised vision of the subject of the political. *Hegemony* remains trapped, argues Žižek, in an Althusserian vision of the subject, one which conceives of society as discursively hegemonised by 'subject-positions' each of which brings its own 'point of view' on political matters. As Brockelman (2003, p. 190, 2008) notes, however, such a vision of the political implicitly already *substantialises* society—suggesting a master 'viewpoint' of the social itself, a viewpoint from which all the discourses of the 'subject-positions' are exposed as limited and ideological. Antagonism, then, becomes the form of historicism leaving the image of society as a larger inclusive totality intact.

In contrast, Žižek invites us to understand the bond between antagonism and truth that *Hegemony* would otherwise conventionalise. The thought experiment in 'Beyond Discourse Analysis' is simple and effective: Žižek asks us to consider the effect that the insight of antagonism might itself have upon the field of political action. With the *knowledge* that every construction of a *we* relies on a differentiation from the *them*, the political agent does not only acknowledge the impossibility of society achieving a final or utopian identity; rather, we affirm the oppositional determination of politics, 'that *even if* the concrete "other" facing me (the capitalist if I am a worker, the lord if I am a slave, etc.) were to disappear, another would take his or her place' (Brockelman 2003, p. 190). As a result, Žižek (1990,

pp. 251–2) writes: 'to grasp the notion of antagonism in its most radical dimension, we should *invert* the relationship between the two terms: it is not the external enemy who is preventing me from achieving identity with myself, but every identity is already in itself blocked, marked by an impossibility.' The impossibility of society, then, is not signified by the failure of different subject-positions to hegemonize the universal but—as Laclau (1990) himself, as a result of Žižek's criticism, came to recognise in the *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*—is inscribed in the very structure of self-representation, wherein every identity remains insufficient to the subject it masks.

In that sense, when one prefigures the content of critical discourse or predetermines the meaning of emancipation, resistance and solidarity or stipulates that 'we really are contingent, open beings', one refuses the practical imperative implicit in antagonism—an imperative to refuse the independence and finality of any substantial identity. Because it posits the imperative of openness as an ideal, identity politics, even and especially an identity politics valorising the multiplicity and versatility of identifications, necessarily does violence to the truth of antagonism, to antagonism *as truth*. To the extent that the openness that is its precondition gives content to the 'radical democratic imaginary', the politics that emerges from it will miss out on the radically critical nature of antagonism (see Brockelman 2003, p. 191). Instead, as Žižek (2000a, p. 100) writes, we should appreciate how

> the impossibility at work…is *double*: not only does 'radical antagonism' mean that it is impossible adequately to represent/articulate the *fullness* of society—on an even more radical level, *it is also impossible adequately to represent/articulate this very antagonism/negativity that prevents Society from achieving its full ontological realization*.

As to how to project a contingency so radical that it refuses to be hypostatised as content *or* form, Žižek's answer—repeated throughout his prolific writings—marries the Hegelian notion of a 'concrete universal' with the Lacanian notion of 'the Real'. Antagonism punctures the very rift between form and content by simultaneously appearing at both levels in the same way that in our understanding of political difference the political cannot appear without the ordeal of politics exposing its radical nullity, while politics is always already punctured by the political as the exceptionality grounding its very possibility. Paradoxically, truth always

emerges both as a particular content—the problematic site of social definition/exclusion, the defining historical moment, and so on—and as the void universal form/horizon for making possible all those particular contents. In this peculiar double lack, antagonism challenges all 'pictures' of society, including the one produced in asserting that *there is no picture of society*; for it insists on redividing the form within the particular content that produces it.

More systematically, the point will always be *both* that the particular content is universal (that it is not merely some particular and limited point of view) *and* that the universal form is particular (that it is not simply a 'neutral' universality, but one embraced from a particular social/political world). The structuration of society by antagonism refers to this fundamental and also impossible instability of historical/social truth with regard to its own status. As Žižek (2000c, p. 315) likes to put it, in agreement with Judith Butler, every particular 'viewpoint' brings with it its own universal: 'each particular position, in order to articulate itself, involves the (implicit or explicit) assertion of *its own mode of universality*.' Eventually, Žižek's Lacanian lesson is not the relativity and plurality of truths but the hard, traumatic fact that in every concrete constellation truth is bound to emerge in some contingent detail. In other words, although truth is context-dependent—that is, although there is no truth in general, but always the truth of some situation—there is, nonetheless, in every plural field a particular point which articulates its truth and as such cannot be relativised. In this precise sense, Žižek (2002, p. 196), following Badiou (2001), proclaims that truth is always One.[15]

But, how does one have access to the truth of a situation without running the risk of betraying that truth by the very act of enforcing it? Does the very act of investing the truth with some form of symbolic signification at once constitute its betrayal? Or else, as Badiou's (2009) and Agamben's (1998) antinomian exceptionality would have it, does the very naming of an event signal its inevitable normalisation? In the next section, I will aim to show how the negotiation of this question requires a transition from the realm of political ontology to that of the phenomenology of political worlds where the logic of political difference inevitably manifests itself as the nature and operation of tragedy. In the terms of this study, tragedy exemplifies the tension between two contradictory tendencies that, nevertheless, meet in their depoliticising effects: either by reducing the political to its constituted expression (post-politics) or by hyperpoliticising the transgressive moment of the political (ultra-politics). Both tendencies

express the irresolvable tension between two extremes, 'family' and 'city', inherent in the 'political scene of the West' trafficking between politicising the unpolitical and economising the political, or what Agamben would describe as the 'precarious equilibrium' between 'private' and 'public', 'politics' and the 'economy' (Agamben 2015, pp. 16–7).[16]

Tragedy: A Phenomenology of Political Difference

What I have suggested so far is that the *difference* between politics and the political designates not only the unstable and impermanent nature of our existing and future political arrangements, but also the necessity of *some* symbolic (constituted) order as the political only appears through its mediations (as absence or instituted suspension akin to, for example, Lefort's (1988) notion of 'power as an empty place' and Laclau's (1996) concept of 'empty singifiers') by ever necessary, yet contingent, constitutional (global/domestic) settlements. Elsewhere, I have shown how the fictional necessity of the political (its dimension as the Real of the symbolic order) foregrounds the necessary fictionality of *some* political order that makes its manifestation (im)possible as any phenomenal order retroactively produces its (failed) legitimation (Paipais 2013). Here, I build on this insight to argue that this confluence of a necessity that is fictional in its origins, yet necessary in its effects, signifies the way through which the political is viewed from the side of its phenomenological constitution whose name is tragedy as *necessary fiction* (see also Butler 1997). Tragedy, in this respect, constitutes a phenomenology of the political as at once fictitious and real, both necessary because intrinsically connected with the constitution of subjectivity and the construction of meaning in the world as public events, *and* fabricated because tragedy is not a property of 'this' world, but the manifestation of a fictitious order that guarantees the intelligibility and communicability of *a* world.

I recognise that such an approach to tragedy does not only run contrary to accepted definitions of the term since Aristotle's famous musings on the topic, but may also rest on an anachronistic use of its meaning for philosophical purposes contrary to its aesthetic nature (see relevant objections in Rengger 2012, 2016). However, what is usually missed when the question of the relationship between tragedy and its philosophical use is posed in the abstract is that it cannot be answered, or even comprehended, out of the intellectual and historical context within which it is periodically raised. The point is not—at least not exclusively—that tragedy and philosophy

mean different things in different epochs. Rather, it needs to be borne in mind that attacks against philosophy for its use or interpretation of tragedy have to be placed within the agendas and the intellectual struggles that conditioned or prompted their emergence. When, for example, we read Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical treatment of tragedy, we tend to forget that in its own time Socratic rationalism was a revolutionary mode of thought challenging, not the superiority of a literary device over theoretical knowledge, but the traditional form of knowledge tragedy represented which was then undergoing a crisis, that is, mythic logos. Similarly, Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with Plato's and Aristotle's 'demystifying' treatment of tragedy has to be seen as part of a wholesale reaction against metaphysical modes of nineteenth-century rationality—interpreted as the systematic pursuit for transparency, certainty and scientific clarity—that had been well under way at least since Kant.[17] So the idea of an opposition between the two terms perpetuates a historically determined and retroactively constructed presumption that there can be no philosophical understanding of tragedy or a tragic reading of philosophy.[18] In contrast to such a purist optic, I would argue that a philosophical reading of tragedy as phenomenology of political difference may not only yield valuable insights into the intimate link between the constitution of political subjectivities and the logic of political action. It may also guard against overly romanticised applications of the idea of the tragic that threaten to reduce it to an aesthetics of existence.

The stage for the modern philosophical interpretation of the tragic not as a conflict that pits an inexorable external necessity against the human will, but rather as an internal struggle of freedom against its own limitations, was set by none other than Immanuel Kant. By postulating in the third and last section of his *First Critique*, the 'Transcendental Dialectic', a necessary antagonism between freedom and necessity, Kant made the problem of freedom and its reconciliation with natural necessity the Holy Grail of German thought (Lambropoulos 2006, pp. 23–4; Szondi 2002, pp. 1–2). Following Kant's failed attempt to achieve the reconciliation in his *Third Critique*, German post-Kantian philosophers, such as Schelling and Hegel, attempted to pursue the prospect further by building on Kant's idea of the aesthetic as a propaedeutic for the practice of moral freedom. With the tenth of Schelling's *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795), the idea of the tragic begins to revolve around the relationship between freedom and tragic destiny. Building on the subliminal experience of tragedy's ability to produce pleasure from pain, Schelling

sees in human beings' confrontation with tragic fate the triumph of human freedom. The fall of the tragic hero is brought about by necessity, but it is a willed fall which affirms human will by voluntarily submitting to suffering and downfall: what is tragic is that 'this guiltless person accepts punishment voluntarily… thereby alone does freedom transfigure itself into the highest identity with necessity' (Schelling 1989, p. 255).

As with Schelling, so too for Hegel, the terrain of the conflict is no longer external but internal. Freedom itself is now at odds with itself, it becomes its own adversary. Wary of the inherent tendency in speculative thought to collapse into an undifferentiated identity in which differences are eliminated, Hegel presents tragedy as the supreme challenge of thinking: 'to grasp the tragedy of spirit speculatively, that is, as a unity which is a unity precisely because it is lodged in the antinomy of its own contradictions…And so the question becomes whether or not spirit can take the idea of the tragic into itself without thereby extinguishing the truth of the tragic' (Schmidt 2001, p. 90). Ultimately, then, tragedy for Hegel operates as the model of the manifestations of the spirit in its varied forms, contradictions, conflicts, complexities and sacrifices. So the task of thinking becomes exactly how to think speculatively of the life of spirit (idea of tragedy) without compromising its versatile, conflictual and agonistic quality (truth of tragedy). The quest of tragedy seemed to revolve around the inescapable need to engage with the symbolic representations of reality without exhausting or fixing the semantic potential of the symbol (tragedy) itself (see Breckman 2013, pp. 35–41).

The Hegelian argument that the structure of tragedy is ultimately a dialectical structure is, of course, not an uncontested one. In fact, Hegel's speculative ambition is still seen with suspicion by critics who think that such an achievement is impossible and that it only reveals the colonising tendencies of reason-as-uniformity against the myriad ineliminable, intractable and irreducible instances of 'life'. These voices of objection to the imperialism of speculative thought saw in the aestheticisation of the tragic in German Idealism the death of the truth of tragedy (Nietzsche 1993; Steiner 1961; Eagleton 2003) or, inversely, the 'domestication' or 'hypostatisation' of the tragic. This argument holds that, having lost its uniqueness and specificity as a Greek drama, tragedy runs the danger of being reduced to a technique of existence (Taxidou 2004). When this happens, tragedy becomes the fig leaf of the pessimist or the convenient pretext for the 'arrogant nihilist [who elevates] himself to the pathos of feeling himself a hero' (Jaspers 1953, p. 101). Raised to the structure of

existence, from a staged drama, tragedy becomes a special 'sense of life' that invites the temptation to master it 'in the fixed rational terms of a 'tragic philosophy of life'' (ibid., p. 103). Such a treatment reveals that the illusion of mastery governs not only the pessimist but the optimist as well who is quick to draw useful 'lessons' or facile connections between understanding and action. When that happens, tragedy is simply invoked as a justification either for relativistic inaction or melioristic reformist fervour without recognition of the bottomless 'ground' of existence that tragedy announces and modern culture lacks the courage to confront (Nietzsche 1993).

It is this Nietzschean reading of tragedy that wants, on the one hand, to save tragedy's truth from the excesses of logical reasoning and, on the other, to displace thinking about the tragic from metaphysical to existential moorings. This is the task Heidegger takes up. 'The tragic' is an important theme in Heidegger's description of human existence as revolving around a 'double bind' between an irreconcilable denial and embrace of fate (Schürmann 1999; McNeill 2000; Schmidt 2001). For Heidegger, the experience of the tragic is no longer something that pertains to the collision of ethical substances or the aesthetic, but an existential condition that provides a new frame for rethinking concepts like destiny, history or human freedom. As with Nietzsche's struggle of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, Heidegger presents tragedy as the struggle between the force of destiny that has been revealed and the excess it produces the moment it reveals itself. Human presence in tragedy enacts the birth of the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, the movement of grounding one's existence as concomitant with an inevitable transgression that accompanies the worldly appearance of form (*eidos*) or, as Heidegger would put it, 'the struggle of the new gods against the old' (McNeill 2000, p. 179). Freedom and necessity, constituted order and its transgression, are no longer seen in opposition, but each one is paradoxically the presupposition of the other; freedom cooperates with fate to conceal the abyss around which meaning is constituted (Curtis 2007). Or, in Agambenian terms, constituted order (the city, public space) gives up or denounces its transgressive moment (the private discord, the factional bond) in order to exist as politics (legitimate, that is, publicly and constitutionally validated order).

In her *Seductions of Fate*, Gabriela Basterra explains this paradox of autonomy's (freedom) birth in heteronomy (necessity, fate) through a psychoanalytical lens. Basterra (2004, p. 6) argues that tragic protagonists gladly assume the place of the victim in order to displace the culpability

from the gods to the human self, and they do so by cooperating with what she calls an 'inverted redemption'. The tragic hero willingly accepts a fault she is not responsible for 'in order to avoid recognising divine fallibility'. It is true that the language of sin, culpability and guilt sits uneasily with ancient Greek conceptions of the role of the gods and their intervention in human affairs. Gods do not represent the source of the morally good incapable of doing wrong as later in Platonic and Christian theology. However, they still personify an identity-conferring framework for the tragic protagonists, the violation of which, *hubris*, represents the disruption of divine order, and which, in turn, leads to *nemesis* seen as the inescapable restoration of divine justice. Basterra insists that 'if the tragic subject blinds itself to the transference of culpability from the gods, it is in order to preserve the integrity of the tragic order that gives him [*sic*] an identity'. In modernity, the symbolic justifications mobilised to sustain the necessary illusion of order and give solace to the subject of action were traditionally concepts such as Reason, Science, Progress or History. Even if, in psychoanalytical terms, this transcendent originary fault lacks substance, it is precisely by virtue of its emptiness, the fact that it lacks a positive content, that transcendent culpability structures the tragic order of intelligibility. What tragic protagonists would abhor is the idea that the very objective necessity that victimises them is an empty structure. Confronting the ethical implications of recognising this emptiness would entail the 'abyssal act' of determining their duty and assuming it without any assurances offered by a positive symbolic order. As Basterra (2004, p. 6) argues most emphatically, tragic death no longer seems such a high price, since it averts something more terrible, the suspension of the sublime sense conferred by the transcendent origin of guilt and their dismantling as tragic subjects that 'would precipitate them into an unintelligible abyss worse than tragic'. Tragedy then becomes a *necessary fiction*, that is, a fiction that we have constructed, but we cannot do without because it constitutes who we are (Erskine and Lebow 2012, pp. 198–9).

In this reading, the real challenge is not to be tempted to proclaim tragedy an 'illusion'. The fact that tragedy is the result of the subject's 'positing' activity and, therefore, it is not a property *of* the world does not make its effects on it (the subject) less real. If we accepted such an extreme form of transcendental idealism, we could abolish the effects of tragedy by simply being disillusioned of its objective externality. It is for this reason that the knowledge of tragedy's artificiality does not deliver us from fate's necessity or why tragedy cannot be mobilised for prescriptive use:

tragedy's depiction as a fabricated reality is at the same time its extreme moment of truth as it is inextricably linked with the constitution of subjectivity and human agency and cannot, therefore, be abolished without risking the loss of intelligibility. Tragedy, in other words, thus conceived, signifies the inescapability of approaching the world (whatever is 'out there') through symbolic investments that make the world intelligible to us through memories, personal and communal experiences, inherited signs and narratives and other means of individual and collective identification and meaning imposition. Tragedy, then, reflects the human condition, not because there is an inhospitable world 'out there' that raises insurmountable obstacles to our creative activities or facilitates our destructive ones, but rather because failure, transitoriness, fragility and vulnerability *is* the human condition (see also Strong 2012b).

However, although the human response to such a predicament may take the form of an obsessive sustenance of the symbolic order to avoid the collapse of intelligibility, as Basterra describes it, the allure of tragic subjectivity may also drive subjects to the perverse enjoyment of transgressing the existing order as a supplement to its perpetuation. In structurally homologous terms to Žižek's psychoanalytical analysis of ideology, tragedy here operates as the perverse affirmation of the guilt of existence in order to sustain the subject's ability to enjoy, despite the knowledge that the "big Other' does not exist'. Even in the absence of the master signifier that would render a given situation 'readable' or 'intelligible', the subject remains a prisoner, not of the Other (which the subject knows not to exist), but of the inexistent Other, or better of her own desire for generalised metonymization (the constant displacement of the master signifier), a process that Lacan (in Šumič 2015, p. 34) has labelled the 'proletarisation of desire'. For Badiou (2003) this generalised logic of inherent transgression is a manifestation of the 'death drive' of a subject that is desperately trying to escape from the law. Badiou refers, here, to Romans, 7.7–11, where Paul is grappling with the paradoxical association between the law, sin and the logic of transgression that phenomenally governs their relationship:

> What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'. But sin, *seizing an opportunity* (*aphormēn labousa*) [emphasis added] in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.

> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

The Pauline lesson here seems to be that tragedy is generated by the law as an obstacle generating its own transgression which it then fails to control. This reading reveals tragedy as an autistic process positing its own presuppositions. In a crucial way, tragic subjectivity resides at the level of the identification of the *evil of enjoyment* (Lacan 1992, p. 186)—the irreducible otherness of *jouissance* the subject shares with the Other), gained from the logic of inherent transgression—with the function of the subject Žižek describes as the vanishing mediator, the primordial 'night of the world' that reveals the infinite power of freedom emanating from the void that structures the symbolic order as a punctured lack. And yet, as the excerpt itself reveals, the identification of law and sin is only an *opportunity seized* by sin, not a necessity.[19] In an interestingly homologous way, the same arbitrary conflation is committed by a certain post-Tridentine interpretation of the theological doctrine of original sin as naturalised perversion.[20] As I have shown elsewhere (Paipais 2016b), this interpretation tends to confuse the doctrine of the creation of the world from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*)—an ontological condition that accounts for the fragile and impermanent nature of worldly affairs—with the deficiency of evil (*defectus*), that is, the phenomenology of human beings' moral imperfection.[21] The instrument through which this illegitimate transition from an ontological condition to a phenomenological absolutisation takes place is the identification of evil with *meaningless* suffering in need of justification, a typically theodical gesture. What this 'naturalisation' of suffering accomplishes, is an unquestioned equation of evil with human finitude to the extent that suffering cannot be accepted as the fate of human beings' mortal and created nature, but has to be explained away as part of a general scheme of things that justifies it. This theodical impulse is the true target of Nietzsche's aphorism that it is the 'meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering as such, [that] was the curse that lay over mankind so far' (Nietzsche 1967, p. 162). Nietzsche's point here is not that suffering *as such* is suffering devoid of valuation, but rather that the experience of suffering should be open to value ascriptions and symbolisations. Taking meaningless suffering to be a priori evil presupposes that 'suffering as evil' is accepted as an ontological given of the human condition which then

authorises the need for its justification.[22] What this understanding of the human condition forecloses is the possibility to read suffering not as evil but as part of the facticity, so to speak, of human finitude open to meaning imputation.[23]

Opting for that latter possibility, Žižek reacts to Badiou's reading of Paul by refusing to identify the 'death drive'—the primordial freedom of a subtracted subjectivity that Žižek equates with the Hegelian 'night of the world'—with the gesture of inherent transgression. In a move that refuses to read the economy of inherent transgression as an inescapable predicament, Žižek insists that the 'death drive' better describes the attitude of the hysteric who rejects the theodical association of law and sin, and gradually starts to realise the contradictory nature of the symbolic order and the impotence of the big Other (see also Kotsko 2008, p. 80). The biblical figure who best personifies this attitude is Job who stands for the utter opposition to any theodical concerns to save God as the fundamental Ground of existence or rationalise suffering—for example, 'Let us do evil that good may result' (Romans, 3.8)—in order to salvage God's omnipotence and all-goodness. Far from being the obedient, patient sufferer who endures every ordeal in faith, Job, for Žižek (2003a, p. 125), is the relentless individual that bombards God (the big Other) with incessant questioning insisting on 'the utter *meaninglessness* of his suffering' and thereby laying bare the groundlessness of every theodical discursive strategy. Job adopts this stance

> …neither because he was crushed by God's overwhelming presence, nor because he wanted thereby to indicate his continuous resistance, that is, the fact that God avoided answering Job's question, but because, in a gesture of silent solidarity, he perceived the divine impotence. God is neither just not unjust, simply impotent. What Job suddenly understood was that it *was not him*, *but God Himself*, *who was actually on trial in Job's calamities*, and He failed the test miserably. (Žižek 2003a, pp. 126–7)

In the next chapter, I examine how this concurrence of an impotent big Other with the structurally analogous vision of a weak, hollowed-out subjectivity can provide an alternative paradigm for an exodus from the two depoliticising logics of neurosis and perversion that characterise tragic subjectivity. As we saw, these two logics run the danger of authorising a kind of anthropological pessimism that equates human finitude and mortality with various forms of political and moral evil, suffering and destruction

that abound in a world of diverging collective interests, colliding ambitions, unequal resources and antagonistically constructed identities, as the IR realists would see it.[24] Such a view of tragedy would invite the arbitrary judgement that tragedy is an inexorable ontic property of the world (leading to the reification of tragedy as another ultimate 'existential' ground) and that therefore evil and suffering are ontologically woven in the texture of 'reality'.[25] On the one hand, tragedy does signify that such a view is not only phenomenologically possible, but almost inevitable given not only the advantages a stable public identity confers, but also the inexorable attraction the forbidden *jouissance* of an existence a priori guilty exerts on the subject of inherent transgression. Yet, on the other hand, exactly because the two logics of neurosis and perversion may be *inevitable* but not *necessary*, the possibility of a different conceptualisation of political existence is opened up, one that takes the necessity of symbolisation seriously, but also seeks to neutralise the temptation of depoliticisation usually encountered either in the form of erecting another unshakable law (neurosis) or staging the very transgression of the law in order to sustain it (perversion).

Notes

1. To recapitulate this point: 'The political is…revealed not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured…It is obscured in the sense that the locus of politics…becomes defined as particular, while the principle, which generates the overall configuration, is concealed' (Lefort 1988, p. 11).
2. Here, I follow Žižek's (1994, p. 6) argument that 'the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it'. According to Žižek, therefore, ideology does not depend on the fact that, in their praxis, human beings *do not know it* (that they act in benefit of certain power groups) *but they do it*, as Marx would have it. It, rather, depends in the fact that *they know it perfectly well, but they act as if they did not know* (Žižek 2002). Ideology, on this reading, is not a dream-like illusion that we build to escape reality. It is, rather, an illusion which pre-reflectively structures our social relations by masking a traumatic social division—the Real in Lacanian terms—which cannot be symbolised, not because fullness is perpetually elusive, but because it is *inherently* incomplete or non-totalised (1989, p. 45, 1993, p. 55).

3. Lacan insists that it is language that brings things into existence, that is, we should not think the Real as something that 'exists' temporally prior to the construction of symbolic order in a 'time before the word', but as something we become aware of as an effect of our insertion into language: 'the letter kills but we learn this from the letter itself' (Lacan 1988, p. 38).
4. This interpretation emphasises the symbolic dimension of the Lacanian Real, but not in isolation from the other three registers. Lacan (1981, 1992) imagined the operation of the Real on three registers: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (see also Chiesa 2007). The imaginary dimension of the Real signifies the domain of the drives and the unconscious as it constitutes the structuration of the subject and its fantasmatic desires. The symbolic register of the Real marks the space where the order of signification breaks down and reveals the disavowed hole in the Symbolic usually filled with fantasies of a big Other (God, Nature, Reason) that sustains the Symbolic. Finally, the real register of the Real expresses the forms of uncoded materiality that resist integration into the Symbolic and triggers the various attempts at symbolic control of those *real* events mediated through 'a whole range of different forms of enjoyment… from guilt, to blame, to denial, to repulsion, to perverse fascination, to ecstatic embrace' (Breu 2009, p. 192). My own emphasis on the gap between the real Real and the symbolic Real does not neglect the third register but tries to conceive of the ways they work together. It is the continuous movement between the three registers that prevents the concept from being reduced to another reified symbolic structure and permits us to investigate both the symbolic construction of discourses and acknowledge that which resists, eludes and disrupts those symbolic constructions.
5. For the philosophical problems raised by the effort to produce a metalinguistic level of enunciation of metalanguage, see Coole (2000) and Stavrakakis (1999). For an exercise geared towards 'tarrying' with the reification inherent in socio-political critique, but from a more Adornoesque/Weberian perspective, see Levine (2012).
6. For an argument that this critique of negativity in continental philosophical thought is compromised by a depoliticising search for an affirmative ethos, see Noys (2012). For a counterargument, see Coole (2000).

7. The Hegelian roots of this insight is often obscured by unfair and somewhat outmoded criticisms of Hegel's supposed panlogism. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel carefully distinguishes two senses of negativity that, in many ways, prefigure the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological. On the one hand, negativity as *reflective* designates the purely negative process of Becoming as self-differentiation, or moving-away-from, which is independent of specific content. Negativity here becomes the condition of possibility for any differentiation, identity or particularity within the ontic world. On the other hand, negativity as *qualitative* is a mediated negation—reflecting the Spinozian dictum that 'all determination is negation'—which describes the way negation *appears* within existence as the affirmation or identity of a thing as differing from its own opposite and from everything else (Hegel 1995, p. 407). This parallel between Hegel's and Heidegger's discourse is premised on their agreement that pure negative activity is only visible in the world as 'qualitative determinateness' (see Rosen 1974, p. 115; Taylor 1975). Hegel's philosophy, then, does not cancel difference but, in a way reminiscent of the extimate logic of the Real within the Symbolic, present us with the structure of how we came to be what we are, how we retrospectively come to see that the contingencies of experience (in-itself) that constitute us are, in fact, determinate insufficiencies (for-itself) of the movement of the Concept (see Lumsden 2007, p. 688; Žižek 2012).
8. In a counterintuitive critique of traditional notions of dialectical materialism, Žižek proposes an alternative understanding of the term based on the idea that we conceive the 'material' not as an all-encompassing fundament, a totalising basis for reality or history, but rather as 'not-all', as the marker of the incompleteness of being, of the inexistence of totality as the set of all sets (see Žižek 2006, p. 168, 2011).
9. I am of course alluding here to Koselleck's (2004) and Arendt's (2009) ruminations on the dichotomous meaning the term 'revolution' assumed after the French revolution. Koselleck describes the radical temporalisation and historicisation of political concepts that marked the decades before and after the French Revolution as *Sattelzeit* metaphorically referring to the horse saddle which is unified but nevertheless has two diametrical sides. For instance, the concept of 'revolution' underwent a transformation of its meaning

from the cyclical and etymological meaning of *revolvere*, 'rolling back' or restoring the previous order to the subsequent linear and future-oriented connotation it gained after the French Revolution signifying an absolute rupture with the past and a radical renewal of political time. For further elaboration, see Palonen (2006).

10. I am here drawing on the pioneering work of Nicole Loraux (2001) in her superb study on stasis, *The Divided City*. Stasis is derived from the ancient Greek verb *istamai* or *istemi*. The verb can mean either to stand up, or to be standing, to be waiting. It can be either the movement upward or the state in which one finds oneself after the movement is completed. It is this ambiguity of the word bearing connotations of both immobility and movement, standing firm and taking sides, that renders it ideal as a stand-in for the concept of political difference. Loraux builds her analysis of stasis on the amnesty granted in 403 BC to mark the end of the civil war that plagued the city of Athens after the fall of the oligarchy of the 'Thirty' tyrants. The amnesty was granted, not merely as a protection from persecution, but also as a prohibition against remembering the events of the civil war. Stasis was an active injunction to forget, to repress the memory of factionalism as the condition of possibility for 'creating an imaginary past of a utopian democracy, an idealized *politeia*, whose unretrievability is the present's condemnation to a lack of redemption' (Vardoulakis 2009, p. 126).
11. Another way of putting it would be Agamben's (2015, p. 12) designation of stasis as 'the threshold of politicisation and depoliticisation' between what is traditionally seen as the unpolitical space of the family and the political space of the city. In Agamben's interesting reversal of that relationship, the so-called political space of the city is always already penetrated by the internecine strife, while the transgressing force of the political is always already present in kinship ties. Depoliticisation is here the denial of the political nature of the family through the suppression of civil strife that permeates political life or the subsumption of the private under the public role. I will below suggest how, in phenomenological terms, this logic authorises the constitution of tragic subjectivity and, in the next chapter, how it may also enable the formation of a tragicomic subjectivity as more consistently nihilistic.

12. That said, in the case of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the treatment of antagonism is more complicated. For instance, it can be convincingly argued that Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of the concept oscillates ambiguously between treating it as a discursive construction and as the limit to discursive objectivity. The former may easily lead to a spatialisation of politics with an inside opposed to an antagonistic outside and a reintroduction of the fullness of society, see Thomassen (2005). Laclau's notion of 'dislocation' in *Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time*, however, comes closer to Žižek's idea of 'antagonism'.
13. However, in his subsequent work Prozorov (2014b, pp. 77–8) seems to move closer to Agamben's antinomian direction painting all sovereign politics as murderous and by definition illegitimate.
14. This is ultimately the limitation of Jenny Edkins' (1999) otherwise pioneering book on the repoliticising role of Lacanian political theory in international politics. In that sense, her book still resides in what Žižek has identified as his early period of the 'Ethics of the Real', inspired by Alenka Zupančič's (2000) work, that resurrects the spectre of an 'ethicisation' of politics, similar to Simon Critchley's (2008) early work on how the critical theorist should address impossible demands to the seat of power. In his later writings, Žižek (2002, pp. xi–xii) has interestingly rejected his original analysis of the Real, found in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, as the impossible Thing-in-Itself, destined to remain unrealisable and constantly leading to impasse, resignation and forfeit, rather than opening up a sphere of authentic, revolutionary action: 'it basically endorses a quasi-transcendental reading of Lacan, focused on the notion of the Real as the impossible Thing-in-itself; in so doing, it opens the way to the celebration of failure: to the idea that every act ultimately misfires, and that the proper ethical stance is heroically to accept this failure'.
15. See also Slavoj Žižek, 'Repeating Lenin: Lenin's choice', available online at lacan.com, unpaginated: 'In other words, what gets lost here is simply the dimension of truth—NOT "objective truth" as the notion of reality from a point of view which somehow floats above the multitude of particular narratives, but truth as the Singular Universal." When Lenin said "The theory of Marx is all-powerful, because it is true," everything depends on how we understand "truth" here: is it a neutral "objective knowledge," or

the truth of an engaged subject? Lenin's wager—today, in our era of postmodern relativism, more actual than ever—is that universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its UNIVERSAL truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly PARTISAN position—truth is by definition one-sided. This, of course, goes against the predominant doxa of compromise, of finding a middle path among the multitude of conflicting interests.'

16. For a recent argument that redirects attention to the concept of *oikonomia* in IR—approached from an Arendtian rather than Agambenian viewpoint—in order to criticise the various forms of domestication of political life through the exaltation of the social (especially in the form of economic rules of colonial administration and modern techniques of counter-insurgency), see Owens (2015).
17. See here Nietzsche (1993) and Schmidt (2001). For an argument about how the rehabilitation of Greek tragic thought in Germany was intimately related to the construction of a burdened German identity in the nineteenth century (with catastrophic consequences for Germany and Europe), see the chapter on 'Germans and Greeks' in Lebow (2012).
18. For versions of an argument that challenges the opposition between tragedy and philosophy arguing either for the philosophical dimension of tragedy or the tragic character of philosophy see Euben (1990), Ahrensdorf (2011), Kaufmann (1992, pp. 93–4), Beistegui and Sparks (2000), and the contributions by Carl Hausman, William Desmond, and Drew Hyland in Georgopoulos (1993).
19. The military or polemical tone adopted here by Paul sounds deliberate and reveals influences from his cultural environment. The Greek word used here is *aphormē* (chance/opportunity), a term that invokes a number of Greek texts on military history. The idea of random occurrences seized by those polemically inclined to capture the kairological moment sets up parallels between sin and the nature of sovereignty as the force that is trying to immunise itself from these unformed moments of chance. The same image is invoked by the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, in his *The Antiquities of the Jews* and, of course, very later on by Machiavelli's reference in Chap. 25 of *The Prince* to the 'dams and dykes' virtuous princes construct to stop the 'flood' of Fortuna. Paul registers

here the common origination of sin (sovereignty) and its overcoming (partisanship) in a moment of openness (*aphormē*) which accounts for their ambivalent identification: 'if law and sin were not within me, then faith would mean nothing. Our wretchedness is our greatness' (Critchley 2012, p. 15).

20. The transition from a concern with original sin as the general fallen situation of mankind to that of the congenital relationship between the sin of Adam (*peccatum originale originans*) and the sin of humankind (*peccatum originale originatum*) that has attracted so much opprobrium from modern thinkers is usually considered intensified and solidified in post-Tridentine theology (see Wiley 2002, p. 91; Sesboüe 2004, p. 15).
21. This imperceptible tendency to slip from the biblical nothingness of the creation of the world from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) to the nothingness of man's evil inclination (*defectus*) can arguably be witnessed in the father of the doctrine of original sin, St Augustine (see Paipais 2016b). Augustine's Neo-Platonic prejudices do not really make it easy for him to sustain the difference separating the nothing of creation (finitude) from the nothing of deficiency (sin) (see McFarland 2010). His diatribes against the Pelagians only helped to accentuate this conflation by posing a corrupted nature carrying a hereditary vice in an obvious parallel to the positivity of *evil as the world* (Jonas 1992, p. 329) in the Gnostic myth (see also Forsyth 1987; Ricoeur 2004; Duffy 1988).
22. The Book of Job stands as the opposite example wherein a just man is overwhelmed by suffering with no apparent justification. See, also, the Johannine account of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind in which He refuses to associate the man's misfortune with his sins or the sins of his parents (John, 9:1–4) or the story of the victims of the tower of Siloam and that of the Galileans massacred by Pilate (Luke, 13:2–6). For the Christian narrative, such confusion between guilt, death and suffering is characteristic of the demonic capacity of sin to conceal its binding power.
23. For an excellent analysis of how the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing undermines the equation of suffering, pain and the apparently pointless destruction of creatures through natural disasters or the struggle for survival with evil, see McFarland (2014, pp. 77–8, 129–31). McFarland convincingly argues that the unity of creation 'groaning in labour pains' is a corollary of the belief in

one God who creates from nothing, rather than an empirical judgement.

24. For different aspects of the same criticism that mainstream realism in IR, as opposed to theologically inspired versions of realist thought, fail to make this distinction between an existential pessimism of hope and an anthropological pessimism of despair, see Paipais (2013, 2016a). For an excellent discussion of these different types of pessimism, see Dienstag (2009).
25. For an argument that sees in this attitude a reification of human beings' tragic predicament by an act of 'naturalisation of original sin', see Critchley (2012) and Paipais (2016b). Critchley (2012, p. 144) argues that such a view of the human condition attributes an apriori ontological defectiveness to human beings and justifies a conservative disposition that he finds pervasive in its modern analogues, such as 'Freud's variation on the Schopenarian disjunction between desire and civilization, Heidegger's ideas of facticity and fallenness, and the Hobessian anthropology that drives Schmitt's defence of authoritarianism and dictatorship (which has seduced significant sectors of the left hungry for what they see as Realpolitik)'.

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CHAPTER 6

Traversing the Fantasy and the 'Morning After': From Political Ontology to Theopolitical Meontology

In the previous chapter, I briefly suggested the significance of the hysteric subject for a politics that would undermine the depoliticising effect of either a neurotic or a perverted tragic subjectivity. Following Žižek's analysis,[1] I indicated that hysteria is the type of subjectivity that reveals the radical inconsistency of the big Other and the impossibility of it posing as an unshakable ground or ultimate reference point. Žižek relates this type of interrogation of the symbolic order to the primordial form of subjectivity generated by the abyssal contraction of consciousness he identifies with the Hegelian 'night of the world'. For Žižek, this is a radicalisation of the kind of subjectivity proposed by Descartes' scepticism. In his account, contra Descartes who failed to follow through his insight of positing a radically doubting subject—eventually exchanging it with the masculine logic of turning the thinking subject into a secure ground of existence and knowledge—Žižek (2007, p. 92) proposes a 'feminine' vision of subjectivity as the 'vanishing mediator', that is, the absolutely necessary step for the foundation of any order that is nevertheless ontologically prior to it or, put differently, a formal moment of withdrawal that enables the 'rebooting' of the symbolic order.

A brief account of Žižek's reading of Friedrich Schelling on the creation of the big Other would throw some light on how he envisages this mode of pure subjectivity as the sheer void of self-relating negativity (the 'subjective' equivalent to the 'objective' void of a 'not-all', non-totalised whole).

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His ruminations on the topic can be found in his book on Schelling, *The Indivisible Remainder*, but they are also scattered throughout his latest work laying out a theologically inflected account of what he describes as a 'transcendental materialist ontology' (Žižek 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012; see also Johnston 2008). In his unfinished *Weltalter*—a work that Žižek (2007, p. 36) brazenly christens the 'founding text of dialectical materialism'—Schelling explains why the apparent rational ordering of the world cannot be taken for granted, but has to be accounted for by reference to a primordial, radically contingent fact which is 'freedom itself, a freedom bound by nothing, a freedom which, in a sense, *is* Nothing' (Žižek 2007, p. 16). In his essay *On Human Freedom*, Schelling (1936, p. 34) indeed declares that 'the world as we now behold it, is all rule, order and form; but the *unruly* lies ever in the depths. This is the incomprehensible basis of reality in things, the *irreducible remainder* [emphasis added] which cannot be resolved into reason'. For Schelling, what precedes the tranquil appearance of everyday existence is something akin to chaos that rationality emerges out of and attempts to exclude. As he metaphorically[2] articulates it: 'All birth is a birth out of darkness into light: the seed must be buried in the earth and die in darkness in order that the lovelier creature of light should rise and unfold itself in the rays of the sun' (Schelling 1936, p. 35).

What Schelling is here trying to speculate on is what God was doing before creation. His answer puts forward a conception of a 'God' who is in the process of *becoming* God containing the ground of 'His' own existence:

> The ground of his existence, which god has within himself, is not God regarded absolutely, in other words in so far as he exists; for it is of course, only the ground of his existence. It is nature—in God; a being which is indeed inseparable from him, but yet distinct from him. (Schelling 1936, p. 32)

In this state of indistinction, 'God' is not yet God but, in order to become the Creator-God, He contracts Being in the dual sense of a contraction as an abridgement or condensation and of contracting a disease. At this stage God is caught in a vicious circle of contraction and expansion that mirrors Žižek's vision of blocked subjectivity as inherently failed, that is, caught up in a series of failed attempts to establish rationality. Eventually, God is only able to escape this self-defeating circularity by uttering His Word which symbolises his effort to draw a line between past and present,

eternity and history and, thereby, gain some consistency: 'The Absolute "opens up time", it "represses" the rotary motion into the past, in order to get rid of antagonism in its heart which threatens to drag it into the abyss of madness…*eternity itself begets time in order to resolve the deadlock it became entangled in*' (Žižek 2007, p. 31).[3]

Drawing a parallel between Schelling's (pre-)God as pure will or, better, Nothingness *as* Will and his own account of pure contracted subjectivity, Žižek imagines the subject as the spontaneous, non-transparent abyssal freedom that constitutes reality as the fundamental fantasy. In psychoanalytical terms, this empty subject is desperately trying to gain some distance from the trauma of encountering its own *jouissance* which is always the impossible *jouissance* of the Other. In an equivalence to God's act of creation, the fundamental fantasy is the 'word' the subject pronounces in order to expel the horror of attaining her own (i.e. the Other's) *jouissance*. The decision to institute this fantasy is in itself unbearably traumatic because the imposition of order on madness is itself an act of insanity. However, the subject *has* to make this step as the attainment of a modicum of consistency is absolutely necessary to escape the insufferable anxiety of her 'lost' *jouissance*. In a sense, the subject is caught in a dialectics of impossibility. On the one hand, taking a decision to institute the symbolic order is madness as that order is premised on standards that are themselves not amenable to rational validation. On the other hand, every such decision condemns the subject to a state of 'inauthenticity' as any imposed order is a 'betrayal' (yet gratifying, since the subject enjoys it) of one's own *jouissance* (a shield to protect the subject from its raw destructive force) or a staged perpetuation of its unattainability (through the law's inherent transgression). The hysteric subject represents a third option, that of incessantly indicting a demystified big Other for its contradictoriness and unresponsiveness.

However, while the subversive potential of its energies is significant, the strategy of hysterical provocation is arguably inherently fragile and ambiguous. Unlike the pervert who knows what the Other wants, the hysteric subject desires a direct answer to the question of what she is for the Other and what the Other *really* wants. However, the hysterical demand seems to always come with a hidden subtext: 'Don't give me what I ask you, because that's not *it*' (Žižek 1999, p. 359). The problem with this attitude is that it still relies on the Other to provide an answer despite the realisation that the Other is lacking.[4] What is more, the hysteric's entreaties may degenerate into a series of staged confrontations where impossible demands are put forward in order to be rejected so that nothing really changes (Žižek 1999,

pp. 292–4). Therefore, even if the hysteric subject has traversed the fantasy of the symbolic order as an elusive something 'out there' by recognising the fictional character of the big Other, it still remains parasitical on the latter's existence. The question then arises, what is to follow after that? Or, as Žižek would like to put it, does 'the morning after' have to be always followed by melancholy or disappointment out of the realisation that 'the cured subject' has simply traded masters? Or can the whole process set in motion some kind of qualitative transfiguration that does not deny the artificiality of the big Other but neither does it accept the necessity or versatility of the discourse of the master as inexorable fate?

Žižek devises two strategies to address this impasse. The first could be called the 'Jewish' route and relates to his view of Judaism as the necessary context or space-making within which the second option develops, a type of antinomian Pauline Christianity that operates as an indictment of the official Orthodoxy's—as he sees it—'perverse core'[5] (Žižek 2003a) and which Žižek, following a line of thinkers stretching from Taubes to Breton and Badiou, would read as the radicalisation (a repetition which is never a faithful reproduction, but always an infinitesimal displacement) of the 'Jewish' gesture albeit with a twist that takes him down the path of a Hegel-inspired 'death of God' theology (Žižek 2009a). It should be noted here that Žižek envisages this foray into political theology, not as an opportunistic raid into a theological territory, but as a necessary emancipatory move in a wider offensive against our contemporary depoliticising predicament as described throughout this study.[6] Indeed, Žižek's recourse to theology is part of his broader objective to outline a critique of ideology that would render the cunning ideological machinations of our contemporary allegedly post-ideological era inoperative. His turn to theology, then, is a conscious one that invites wider reflections about the relationship between theology and the political and the critical potential in a once neglected, yet recently rapidly burgeoning, field of investigation such as political theology, beyond the facile limited Schmittian version of a structural analogy between the two terms or the limited ambition of devising an up-to-date Christian politics.

Benjamin's Messianic Nihilism and Paul's Meontology

To start with the first strategy, Žižek reads the 'Jewish' attitude towards the law in very different terms than the recent revival of Pauline Christianity in philosophical circles and the latter's radicalisation of the messianic mes-

sage. For Badiou (2003), for instance, Judaism serves more or less as the punching bag for what Paul's mission opposes, that is, the particularism and parochialism of a sectarian community that attaches itself to the 'death drive' of obedience to the Jewish law. Badiou's stance, seeking to revive a type of universalism that would overcome its contamination by neoliberal ideology or its relativisation in the proliferation of postmodern identities, is promising, yet it still labours under the familiar trope of the 'Jew' as the constitutive exception to European universalism.[7] For Žižek (2001b, p. 127), Badiou fails to see that the Jewish stance towards the law is not that of the pervert that obeys the imperative of an obscene supplementary superego (Žižek attributes this stance to the perverse core of official Christianity), but that of a subject that 'ONLY sticks to the SYMBOLIC RULES, deprived of the obscene fantasmatic background. There is no place in Judaism for the private wink of understanding, no obscene solidarity about their shared complicity among the perpetrators of the transgression'. As was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Žižek's recourse to the biblical figure of Job is an effort to foreground the critical subversive potential of Judaism in its hysterical provocations against the law. Job realises that the law is impotent but he keeps pressing the big Other for an answer. For Žižek, this is what sets apart the Jews from any other nation and at once deconstructs the masculine logic of the 'Jewish' exception to the constitution of every order (i.e. the complicity of neurotic and perverse enjoyment in the construction of the fundamental ideological fantasy which, as we saw in this study, forms the background to the logic of foundational ontologies). In fact, Job's silence represents the necessary first step of the critic of depoliticisation, namely the subtraction from the symbolic order in order to deprive it of its obscene fantasmatic support. As Žižek (2003a, p. 129) intimates, the Jewish relation to the law points exactly to those initial conditions of possibility for what Lacan (2007) describes as the transition from the *register of desire*—where the *objet petit a* of ideology is the *symptom* (object causing desire) of a metonymically displaced desire—to the *register of the drive* where the *objet petit a* becomes the *sinthome*, that is, the object-cause of desire itself[8]:

> A crucial line of separation is to be drawn here between the Jewish fidelity to the disavowed ghosts and the pagan obscene initiatory wisdom accompanying public ritual: the disavowed Jewish spectral narrative does not tell the obscene story of God's impenetrable omnipotence, but its exact opposite: the story of His *impotence* concealed by the standard pagan obscene supplements.

Žižek (2003a, p. 119) points here to an inherent subversive potential in the 'Jewish' relation to the law that relies on a gesture of 'unplugging', that is, on a move of fundamental distancing from the established order leading to a state in which one lives in a condition of perpetual remembrance of 'the vision of the final state in which all the wrongs done to individuals will be undone'. To articulate such a possibility, Žižek explicitly relies on Walter Benjamin's (2007a, b) messianic nihilism as it is expounded in his 'Theses on the Concept of History' and his enigmatic 'Theological-Political Fragment'. For Benjamin, the coming of the Messiah—which for him refers to an actual possibility[9] and not to an 'as if' clause as it is for Adorno (see Taubes 2004, p. 75)—is the extreme perspective from which he thinks history. For Benjamin (2007b, p. 261) history is not based on the linear flow of 'homogeneous, empty time', but on an idea of time as something which can be interrupted, brought to a halt and 'rebooted', time and again. In his favourite manner, Benjamin (ibid., p. 263) uses an image to convey the presence of divine time, eternity, into human history, time: the 'splinters' or 'chips' of messianic time. This image denotes the possibility of politically recapitulating or recapturing in the present lost causes or unredeemed struggles of the past that animate the historical discontinuum of the 'tradition of the oppressed'. These possibilities cannot be intentionally activated, since it is only by way of the 'weak messianic power' (Benjamin 2007b, pp. 257, 254) of the oppressed that they are enacted. This concept of a disruptive anti-historicist messianic openness operates beyond conventional dichotomies of activity and passivity, intentional acting and non-intentional contemplation as well as beyond theological apologetics or progressive narratives. It is, rather, an anti-teleological temporal short circuit of past, present and future as now-time (*Jetztzeit*), which is the term Benjamin uses to indicate *kairotic*, that is, interrupted, time pregnant with repoliticising possibilities as opposed to the linear, irreversible flow of homogeneous, empty time.

Far from introducing a kind of esoteric theological mysticism, however, this kind of messianism is thoroughly nihilistic suggesting a means of traversing all teleological fantasies and theodical narratives. In the aforementioned 'Theological-Political Fragment', written in the early 1920s, Benjamin clearly delineates an asymptotic relationship between the historical and the messianic, for '[o]nly the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic'. 'Therefore', as the fragment explains, 'the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic: it cannot be set as a goal.

From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal, but the end' (Benjamin 2007a, p. 312). In other words, the ground of this messianic relation is subtracted from the historical happening, yet not because the messianic can have no actual presence in history, but because only the doctrine of the Messiah, for Benjamin, authorises a rigorous anti-theocratic distinction between the order of the profane and the order of the messianic Kingdom. There is a strict anti-teleology at work here which consciously dissociates itself from historicist visions of the fulfilment of the historical or its coming to itself through a Hegelian-Christological narrative of the Last Judgement or a Christian Origenic doctrine of *apokatastasis*. Instead, Benjamin implicitly suggests a self-voiding of the personal Messiah.[10] Again, however, unlike negative theology, Benjamin subscribes to no *Deus Absconditus* or 'hidden God' that explains the widespread suffering in the world but eventually guarantees its sublation. His perspective is rather thoroughly melancholic, since the voidance that the messianic subtraction from history effects is a hole within the order of the profane resembling what we have come to recognise as the Lacanian incompleteness of the whole, the feminine 'not-all' of a non-totalisable totality. The messianic, then, signifies this paradoxical double tension or gap between politics and the political that leaves as its empty imprint, a signature, a weak messianic power within the historical happening.

Instead, then, of positing the messianic as an ethical ideal, a regulative principle or a religious absolute, Benjamin (2007a, p. 313) envisages it as a radical engagement with the order of the profane viewed as the order of the eternal transience or downfall of everything in happiness. To pre-empt any misunderstandings, happiness here is not the traditional utilitarian goal of human flourishing, security or (self-)possession. Nor is this 'eternal and total passing away' (*Vergängnis*) that never reaches the final stage a movement where all tension is relaxed and life finds its blissed fulfilment in some kind of Buddhist nihilistic Nirvana. Rather, the messianic tension is happiness as a disruptive break, a restoration of 'the possibility for new possibilities' (Khatib 2013b, p. 6). This is the true meaning, for Benjamin, of anticipating the messianic Kingdom: not by positing the messianic as a *telos*, but by residing in the intensive gap, the division that maintains the tension between the order of the messianic and the order of the profane. The distinctive way that this tension is endorsed in Benjamin is by declaring profane politics *world nihilism*. Viewed from the messianic standpoint, the surrounding world of politics has to be experienced as nullified.

This is exactly the point where various commentators, such as Agamben, Taubes and Žižek, have read Benjamin's messianism as sharing family resemblances, if not direct relation, with Paul's view of the world after the coming of the Messiah as overdetermined by a kind of negative political theology. As the famous and oft-quoted passage from the first Letter to the Corinthians (7:29–32) goes:

> The appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had non (*hōs me*), and those that mourn (*hōs me*) as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice (*hōs me*) as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy (*hōs me*) as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world (*hōs me*) as though they had no dealings with the world. For the form of this world (*to skēma tou kosmou toutou*) is passing away.

The *theopolitical meontology* proposed here by Paul, while appearing to be premised on the rhythm of negative theology (see Bradley 2002; Arfi 2012b), is far from endorsing the Nothing that nullifies existence from a transcendent viewpoint. The messianic power is not a power that will replace the Nothing of this world with the nullified 'something' of another positivity. Rather, what will take the place of the 'god of this world' is at present nothing or better *less than nothing*, what Paul—referring to the new illicit community of weakness (*astheneia*) gathered around the proclamation that a condemned man was the 'anointed one': *Christos*—would describe as the 'refuse of the world (*ta perikatharmata tou kosmou*), the offscouring (*peripsēma*) of all things' (1 Cor. 4:13), that is, literally the excrements, the shit of the earth. The weakness of messianic power that Benjamin was referring to and Paul announces as the 'power that is perfected in weakness' (*ē gar dunamis mou en astheneia teleioutai*) (2 Cor. 12:9) is not another placeholder for the metonymic displacement of desire, but the very movement around the void that punctuates the big Other and denounces every dream of security and safety before the overwhelming power of powerlessness. In that sense, the weakness of messianic power is not the cancellation of desire, but its transformation or transfiguration into *drive*, that is, into a 'satisfied' desire that is successful ('perfected') in its failure ('weakness'). Žižek finds in Paul's meontology the way out of the Schmittian masculine machine of constitutive exception—that still haunts even the promising subjectivity of the hysteric—towards the affirmation of a subjectivity that has traversed the fundamental fantasy through its

founding in impotence. For Žižek, then, the logic of Pauline meontology transcends the cynical distance from ideology, that the subject of perversion maintains, through a direct identification with the impotence of the big Other that is now revealed as the work of love. In this new community of powerlessness, symbolic identifications do not disappear, only what is disavowed is 'symbolic realism itself: I use symbolic obligations, but I am not performatively *bound* by them' (Žižek 2003a, p. 112).

Žižek follows, here, in crucial ways Badiou's analysis of the militant universalism of St Paul as an act of faith that authorises a committed politics of truth but, even more importantly, he endorses a type of subjectivity that recognises in the folly of the cross and the radical impotence of the divine the hallmark of an authentic existence. Yet, rather than the Badiouian emphasis on the 'fable' of resurrection as a 'formal, wholly secularized conception of grace' (Badiou 2003, p. 66), Žižek seems to be closer here to the tragicomic experience of going through the 'null point of the cross' which beckons one to become 'nothing' as emphasised by Stanislas Breton's (2002, p. 95) kenotic Christology of dispossession.[11] For Breton (2011), Pauline meontology invites us to assent to the 'gapping' or 'distancing' effects of the voidance of the cross in all its guises. Explicitly linking this gapping with Heidegger's ontological difference as well as drawing on Benjamin's messianic nihilism, Breton talks about the cross as the nullifying experience that urges us to see beyond the reified world of existing subjects and objects, thus suggesting that the world of appearances is or could yet be otherwise. Beyond the masculine logic of constitutive exception, the cross invokes the feminine one of divinity as inflicted with 'mad love' that distances or dispossesses God from Himself.[12] That tragicomic double movement (similar to the double movement invoked by political difference and Lacan's formula of sexuation) constitutes the heart of philosophical Paulinism for Breton: 'that sublime point where man [*sic*] ceases in some way to be man' and 'where God, in some way, ceases to be the god common to the religions'. In an act of divine insanity which is revealed as the utter folly of divine self-alienation, a politics of love is born manifested in the divine scandal and stupidity of the weak, failed and mutilated Messiah, a tragicomic subjectivity 'that strips that love of its too human resonances or consolations' (Breton in Blanton 2011, p. 21).

Following suit, Žižek further elaborates on this Bretonian concept of *double kenosis* by insisting on the Hegelian point that what dies on the cross is not only God in human form, but God himself as a transcen-

dent entity guaranteeing the benign consummation of human history. The political meaning of incarnation and crucifixion, then, for Žižek (2009b, p. 56) is that:

> the finite existence of the mortal humans is the only site of the Spirit, the site where Spirit achieves its actuality. This means that in spite of all its grounding power, Spirit is a *virtual* entity in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition: it exists only insofar as subjects *act as if it exists*'.

Eventually, for Žižek—echoing the work of 'death of God' philosophers and theologians (see Caputo and Vattimo 2007; Altizer 2002; Peterson and Zbaraschuk 2015)—the dead body of the incarnate God is maintained in the transubstantiated form of the Holy Spirit which is only retrospectively enacted as the Cause of the activity of finite individuals (the community of believers) that act in Its name. Despite the substantial gain, however, procured by the eclipse of the notion of a transcendent Absolute, Žižek's messianism seems to be plagued by the temptation of pantheism which is the mirror image of the Protestant *Deus Absconditus*. His combination of Benjaminian nihilism and Pauline meontology is characteristic of recent philosophical efforts to eschew false transcendence and unveil the materialist potential in theological insights that read immanence as punctuated from within by an impossible transcendence (see, e.g. Blanton 2014; Crockett 2011). In these attempts, a messianic immanentism emerges as the privileged terrain where these investigations take place exactly because it refuses to yield to the blackmail of a totally depoliticised world that cannot be imagined otherwise.

And yet, for the very same reason these approaches to messianism seems to be liable to the opposite temptation, that of introducing a schism or irreparable gap between the world and its being otherwise, a gap between politics and the political that would loom so large or irreconcilable that any real possibility of redemption would be a priori foreclosed or perpetually deferred. As I will show in the next section, this is not a temptation that afflicts only the Jewish-Benjaminian element in Žižek's thought, it is also a tendency that characterises the Protestant influences in his Paulinism. My argument here is that this temptation, which I will be describing as antinomianism, is responsible for this constant oscillation between politics and the political, law and love, immanence and transcendence, and has to be thoroughly traversed before one revisits the same tension, the same impossible simultaneity of politics and the political having gone through

the experience of this traversal. In other words, rather than overcoming the aporias of antinomianism, what is needed instead is a constant remarking of its paradoxes.[13] Eventually, a repoliticising phenomenology of political difference rests not on the overcoming of the tension between politics and the political or a despairing resignation to reconciling antinomian positions—what Gillian Rose (1992) would call the diremption of law and ethics—but on how our failure to do so is an invitation to take responsibility for acting politically in the world.

Messianism and the Temptation of Antinomianism

In the previous section, we examined Žižek's drawing on Benjamin to show how, arguably, the 'Jewish' stance towards the law is uniquely free of the perverse logic of 'inherent transgression'. Put differently, how the archetypical Jewish attitude towards the law, for Žižek, is that of hysterical 'unplugging', that is, of keeping a formal distance from the traditions, customs and regulations of the societies Jews found themselves in. Indeed, despite protestations to the contrary,[14] Benjamin's aversion to teleology seems to be carrying an implicit predilection towards some sort of deferment of fulfilment and indictment of the big Other's inconsistencies that recall the attitude of the hysteric. Despite, or rather because of, Benjamin's depiction of the messianic rhythm as the 'eternity of downfall'—a rather opaque formulation that Žižek directly links to the Freudian notion of 'death-drive' understood as a derailing having no final goal and, therefore, reaching beyond the pleasure principle—the question remains: Even if we reject the view that the two opposing forces of the historical and the messianic can be sublated to a higher principle in a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, how can we avoid the suspicion that their asymptotic relationship may fall into the depoliticising complacency of either a mystical detachment from the world[15] or a hysterical acting-out? Such a possibility is, arguably, already visible in Derrida's Benjamin-inspired concept of 'messianicity without messianism':

> Messianicity (which I regard as a universal structure of experience, and which cannot be reduced to religious messianism of any stripe) is anything but Utopian: it refers, in every here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogeneous otherness. Nothing is more 'realistic' or 'immediate' than this messianic apprehension, straining forward toward the event of him who/that which is coming. (Derrida 1999, p. 248)

Despite Derrida's emphasis on concreteness here, his reference to an 'irreducibly heterogeneous otherness', coupled with his persistent allusions in his *Spectres of Marx* (2006) to the messianic as echoing an irrepressible alterity, may still invoke a negativity that betrays the most frequent temptation of negative theology, namely the rejection of an alien world and the slippage into an otherworldly embracement of a *Deus Absconditus*. What is more, such a purist orientation of an infinitely unattainable messianism[16] may very easily issue into a self-righteous condemnation of the mundaneness or profanity of the everyday life as irredeemably fallen and, thereby, misrecognise the terrain of everyday struggles and concrete instances of resistance to depoliticising challenges.[17] Late Derrida's ethics of deconstruction, for instance, can arguably be reproached for reinforcing this purist chasm by insisting on the Levinasian infinite responsibility towards the other's singularity each time one has to take an ethical or political decision. For Derrida (1996, 2001), I am bound by the infinite responsibility of unconditional hospitality which is the condition of possibility/impossibility for any ethico-political decision. Derrida, here, can be seen as keeping the gap between the empty form of decision 'taken without any determinate transcendental guarantees' (Critchley 1999, p. 275) and the concrete political content visible at the expense of permanent guilt. That is, I can never be sure that I made the right choice or that I fully assumed my responsibility because, even if I manage to treat someone virtuously or justly, that will always happen to the detriment of someone else, my family to the detriment of other families, a stranger to the detriment of other strangers. My inevitably bad conscience and the impurity of the ethical act seem to be the fundamental requirements of a truly ethical decision.

For Žižek, such an ethical conduct, either in its Kantian form of the categorical imperative perversely born in heteronomy or its Levinasian cousin of infinite responsibility,[18] remains trapped in the ethics of desire (see Glynos 2000; Zupančič 2000, pp. 240–1). In the ethics of desire, the feeling that, whenever I am called to discharge my duty, I am always left with a feeling of uneasiness, as if I am never faithful to the ethical call, is still structured by the fantasy that there is always something that escapes the ethical capture. One, then, is still seized by the superegoic doubt—similar to the Kantian moral duty—that something must escape us when making an ethico-political decision in the face of undecidability. The Derridian ethics of infinite responsibility are still obeying a desire that serves as a defence formation against the *jouissance* of the Real. By keeping the gap between the formal and the concrete open, infinite responsibility appears

as the Lacanian fantasmatic *objet petit a* signifying the surplus that always escapes, the desire that ensures the endless postponing of the encounter with the Real. Despite its apparent promise, however, the problem with this understanding of the relationship between transcendence and immanence is that it postulates an unbridgeable gap between the two aforementioned dimensions, fuelling, in turn, a process of what Hegel called bad infinity. Put differently, depoliticisation is likely to emerge not only from misrecognising necessity and naturalness where there are only impermanent and contestable social arrangements, but also from the temptation to view universality as an empty form always longing to be filled and a priori failing to achieve the reconciliation between an a priori recalcitrant 'reality' and our ethical ideals.

What seems to be creating the problem here is the tendency to view the gap between the immanent and the transcendent element in politics (the formal ontology of political difference), not as a double split internal to both terms, as suggested in this study, but as an antinomian dualism. Simon Critchley has recently identified this tendency as an almost inevitable movement of return to crypto-Marcionite interpretations of Benjaminian and Pauline messianism by thinkers such as Agamben (2005), (early) Taubes (2009), Badiou (2003) and Žižek (2003a).[19] To understand what is at stake in this claim, one has to briefly revisit the whole affair of the revival of Paul's legacy in political theological debates of the twentieth century. In his recent work, *The Faith of the Faithless*, Critchley (2012) reminds us that the invocation of Paul's name in religious thought and dogmatic history usually means trouble for orthodoxy as the apostle's thought combines both the announcement of a new order and the self-revolutionising of that order (Critchley 2012, p. 155). In Christian parlance, Paul attempts to work within the law, yet interpreted under a messianic light as something that conditions our relation to faith and redemption. Throughout history the Pauline message has been interpreted in various ways, either as legitimising the powers that be or as entirely antinomian, opposed to the order of being that represents man's sinfulness and constitutive imperfection. The latter impulse has been the inspiration behind reactions against the secularism, corruption and scholasticism of the established Church in favour of a return to the authentic core of Christianity. What usually happened when Paul's legacy was evoked was that the official Church was denounced as the Whore of Babylon in need of reformation and realignment with the roots of true unalloyed faith. What the signifier 'Paul' denotes *par excellence* is the need for reformist action, the demand

for activism and vigilance against complacent pietism or worldly powers and institutions that think of themselves as well grounded and secure in their legitimacy. In this context, Paul has been the inspiration for both heretics and reformers within the established Church. This was true of Marcion's Gnostic critique of the Apostolic Fathers, Augustine's response to Gnosticism[20] and Pelagianism, and Luther after the Scholastics up to the post–World War I neo-orthodox movement that emerged as a reaction to liberal Protestantism. The Pauline moment represents the spirit of reform and uncompromising return to the authentic core of faith.

The point, here, is not to pit those who defend Paul's orthodoxy against those who read him as a Christian Gnostic, but to indicate how Paul's uncompromising spirit and radical messianism can be seen as both reflecting and enacting the temptation of antinomian dualism (between law, canonicity and redemption, messianicity) in religious thought.[21] For Jonas, who detected a clear Gnostic vein in Paul, the problem with Pauline antinomianism was what he termed a tendency towards 'de-worldification' (*Entweltlichung*), a stance he collectively attributed to all modern-day Gnostics, from Barth and neo-orthodoxy up to Heidegger's existentialism (Lazier 2008, pp. 27–48). More specifically, a tendency in Gnosticism to conflate the Pauline 'flesh', which stood for anything worldly, with sin and, thereby, to deprive human beings of their prelapsarian or primordial grace. For Jonas, both Paul and later Augustine—who, in Jonas' view, in his attack against the Pelagians failed to escape the Gnostic bind—opted for the equation of human finitude ('law') with sin. As a result, any prospect of human beings participating in their own salvation through lawful piety ('works') was a priori excluded, and what began as an ethical opposition between 'flesh' and 'spirit' was turned into an intractable ontological rift between a fallen world and divine grace. What is important here is not to endorse Jonas take on Paul, Augustine or Barth. It is only partly that Paul's own ambivalence can be held responsible here, as it is also partly an inherent tendency in religious thought to slide into dualistic categories of justification instead of maintaining the dialectical tension between the law, the order of being, immanence, on the one hand, and love, the order of faith, transcendence, on the other hand (Lilla 2007, pp. 251–2). Indeed, Jonas does point here, albeit unwittingly (Lazier 2008, p. 34), to a constant 'Gnostic' temptation in religious thought manifested as the inability to sustain the dialectical paradox of religious experience and the tendency to fall back to antinomian dualism in search of purity and security; what the political theologian Johann Baptist Metz would describe as

the *gnostische Dauerversuchung* (permanent Gnostic temptation) of the Church (Metz 1988) and, I may add, of messianic experience in general.

As a reaction to religious conformism and ambiguity, this 'Gnostic' purism arises in two forms that converge in their dualistic orientation: either, as we saw in the previous chapter, in the form of the naturalisation of original sin, which attributes to human beings a congenital defectiveness or inherent predilection to wickedness, malice, violence and extreme cruelty. Or, its mirror image, in the form of utter disengagement from worldly affairs, driven by a purist sentiment of disgust for the imperfections of civilisation. The former is a type of pessimism that is grounded on a passive nihilist rejection of human beings' capacity for improvement through worldly engagement. The latter is a type of moralism that is grounded on the typically Gnostic idea of an alienated world incapable of redemption. Both result in an essentially dualistic anti-political purism that divests human beings of any responsibility for changing the world or participating in its amelioration. This idea, which relates back to the second-century CE Christian Gnostic sect, Marcionism, is tempting, yet potentially debilitating. It is tempting because it places responsibility for a defective world on a malevolent deity who has instilled corruption in the world, thus absolving human beings from the blame. It is also alluring because it rests on the idea of religion as pure faith that can detach itself from anything debased or degenerate in the real world and pursue individual perfection through a radical act of renewal and rebirth. It can, therefore, breed fatalism or self-righteousness as it ultimately relies on a conception of salvation as retreat from creation and on an image of God that usurps individual responsibility for evil in the world (see Critchley 2012, p. 202).

Arguably, caught up in the double bind of a similar dualism between a condemned creation and an impossible redemption, Agamben's antinomian identification of lawlessness with the messianic[22] betrays a similar Gnostic purism that reduces the law to its violent and denigrated expression and then identifies the messianic with the absolute suspension of the law.[23] Any dialectics or mediation between creation (not necessarily as the guilt of law, but perhaps as the gift of love) and redemption (as an actual possibility), transcendence and immanence, politics and the political is a priori foreclosed:

> There are moments when Agamben seems to want to push Benjamin's Messianism towards a radical dualism of, on the one hand, the profane order of the created world and, on the other hand, the Messianic order of redemption. (Critchley 2012, p. 200)

Apart from the influence of a kabalistic reading of Benjamin's messianism (see Sharpe 2009),[24] Agamben's antinomian approach to the messianic is also crucially inspired by Jacob Taubes' (2004) reading of Paul's messianism as negative political theology. Taubes reads Paul as a radical Jew who announced the creation of a spiritual (*pneumatic*) community embodying a living condemnation of both Rome (sovereign power) and Jerusalem (revolution), that is, both of the power that be and its violent revolutionary dethronement. Despite his sensitivity to striking the right balance between obedience to the law and its spiritual overcoming through love, Taubes' take on Paul eventually focuses on the latter's refusal to identify with 'the world as it is'. While Taubes consciously diagnoses Gnostic tendencies in modernity and equally derides Jewish and Christian Orthodoxy, either for capitulating to the secular orders of this world through their institutionalisation and accommodation to power or (as Jewish mystics and Christian Protestants have done) for 'interiorising' faith in order to keep its spiritual message unalloyed from any temporal contamination, he himself exhibits the same ambivalence towards antinomianism in proclaiming that Pauline messianic nihilism should be seen as authorising '*no spiritual investment in the world as it is*' (emphasis added) (Taubes 2004, p. 103).

The problem, here, with this type of Gnostic detachment, adopted by both Taubes and Agamben's antinomian[25] reading of Benjamin, is arguably the impulse to ontologise politics. According to this ontologisation, political action, agency and institutions reappear under the light of this purism as a reified degeneration of the perennially elusive realm of the political. Such an outlook, in turn, presupposes a prefixed debasement of the historical framed by way of an ontological inquiry which takes its bearings from an epochal, Schmittian philosophy of history and a one-sided ontological reading of Heidegger (modernity as the end of history, culmination of *Technik*, metaphysics, biopower, age of depoliticisations, etc.). The messianic then appears, not as the trace of transcendence within immanence or as the voidance of the historical through the radicalisation of the profane,[26] but as an 'ontologico-messianic machine'—to paraphrase Agamben—intensifying and crystallising, rather than transcending or mediating, the purist chasm between ontology and politics. Two dangers would then issue from such a paradoxical proximity (because uninterrupted) of politics and ontology, either an apolitical passivity of theoretical life exclusively concerned with ever-refined conditions of possibility for political life or its opposite:

> if the 'coming community' would live beyond law, 'ordered exclusively for the full enjoyment of worldly life' [as Agamben would have it] could we in any way be sure it would not quickly degenerate into, for example, the unhappy chaos Plato for example reports in the *7th Letter* as the result of the Sicilians' anomic pursuit of the 'happy life'? (Sharpe 2009, p. 40.13)

At first glance, Žižek's politics of symbolic subtraction seem to be equally animated by such an impulse of detachment from the given, or what Badiou would describe as the confines of the 'state of the situation'. For the Badiouian Žižek, the unmistakeable mark of an authentic political act is that it emerges as 'an intervention ex nihilo' (Žižek 2001a, p. 178) and, in this quality, it is an affirmation of an event.[27] This is why he insists that an authentic political act is by definition revolutionary. In such an act, one disrupts an evolution, and establishes the event of what happens as new, as radically other (Žižek 2001b, p. 111). At this level, politics is not to be reduced to *Realpolitik*, nor is it merely a question of democratic rules, formal procedures or moral principles: in a recognisably Benjaminian (i.e. also Schmittian minus the Schmittian anxiety for order) fashion, it is a question of an act that suspends all rules and procedures, including the democratic ones.[28] At the same time, however, the political act cannot just be an uncompromising fidelity to a truth event achieved only at the level of thinking, as Badiou (2001) would envisage it. Granted, by exalting the unique force of the political and its disruptive invasion into politics one indeed reactivates dormant political possibilities. Yet, a strong attachment to the 'eventful' without taking into account the existing configuration of power and the multiplicity of competing forces vying for hegemony hides another danger. Political action becomes an ethical, quasi-religious[29] exhortation to remain faithful to a specific event that subsumes the political under the ethical (see also, Marchart 2007, p. 129). The perennial dualism that denies the possibility of a politics of praxis is recast as a rigorous and uncompromising ethics of the unconditional against the demands of political reality (a priori taken to be totally dominated by the State); infinite responsibility towards the other[30] against tactical flexibility and alliance-building; a self-righteous, purist ethics of the Real against the Machiavellian emphasis on strategy and acknowledgement of the 'dirty hands' problem (the fact that one's ontological commitments have to go through messy, less than perfect, 'ontic' mediations).

To illustrate how a politics that takes into account both the subject's direct link with radical negativity and the need to engage with the his-

torical contingencies at hand may look, Žižek (2001a, pp. 114–7) has resorted to the history of Soviet Communism, and analysed Lenin's decisive intervention in the Russian Revolution. Žižek credits Lenin with transforming the suspended revolutionary atmosphere of early 1917 into October's successful *coup d' état* later that year. For Žižek, the genius of Lenin was revealed in his break with the sterility of the Mensheviks' orthodox Marxism. It is not that Lenin had any doubts about the 'truth' of Marxist theory concerning history's 'objective' line of progression. Yet, at a certain critical moment he deliberately intervened in it. Fully accepting that a proletarian revolution was indeed premature (and, thus, fully aware of the truth of Marxist theory), he, nonetheless, went on with the proletarian revolution. 'History', so he said, 'will never forgive us if we miss this opportunity!' (Žižek 2001a, p. 116). Here, Lenin's revolutionary act reveals history's real subject, as Žižek interprets it. Assuming the formal point of radical negativity, one is able not to create new history *ex nihilo*, but to rearrange and resignify history's existing coordinates. Objective conditions do not constitute but the formal possibility of a revolutionary situation. Yet, revolution occurs when some individuals—or even a single one—take the risk of jumping into that empty 'space' consciously affirming history's contingency. This is what Žižek calls an 'act': a jump beyond the symbolic order, beyond the signifier's security. This is also the decisive distinction that Žižek draws between the madness of Lenin and the piety of Stalin. The latter religiously swore by the truth, and was, therefore, forced to deny truth's contingent ground—its subject (pious ethicism). Lenin also held onto truth—the same truth as Stalin's—but he did not objectify it. He passed into action and, so, handed truth over to its contingent 'bearer' as the only way of realising the truth (tragicomic madness). Unlike totalitarian denial, the revolutionary act acknowledges contingency—and thus lack, subject and desire (and 'will', to name one of Lenin's terms). An act is not truth's implementation; rather, it leaves all truth behind and delivers it to contingency (its moment of insanity), which is the only way to make it really happen (see De Kesel 2004).

It is on this precise point that Žižek gets fiercely attacked at best for entertaining nebulous revolutionary visions and, at worst, for advocating totalitarian politics.[31] In his concretisation of a contemporary political 'act', Žižek argues against the acceptance of capitalism as 'the only game in town' and the renunciation by 'post-modern post-politics' of any real attempt to overcome the existing liberal capitalist constellation. But as Laclau (2000a, p. 206) argues in his noteworthy exchange with

Butler and Žižek, it remains very unclear what 'overcoming liberal capitalist democracy' would actually amount to and what alternative model of society Žižek has in mind. What does it really mean to change the existing capitalist liberal order? Does this mean, for example, that Žižek wants to socialise the means of production and abolish market mechanisms? And what would then be Žižek's political strategy to achieve this, in Laclau's eyes, 'peculiar aim'? This 'peculiar aim', however, seems for Žižek precisely the point when he repeatedly pleads for 'a kind of direct socialization of the productive process' as the only solution in the present global situation, 'in which private corporations outside public political control are making decisions which can affect us all, even up to our chances of survival' (Žižek 1999, pp. 350–7).

Leaving concrete decisions that cannot be determined in advance aside, Žižek is, nevertheless, concerned that a Laclauian politics of perennial hegemonic articulation may lead to a new, less visible, but equally debilitating encroachment of the political. If, in Badiou (2007), the betrayal of political difference paradoxically results from his strong attachment to the purity of an Event, in Laclau (2005) it is revealed in the crystalisation of an a priori failure of mediation between the political and its realisation. In Laclau, and a large part of the post-Marxist Left in general, the political is understood as naming an irresolvable gap between contingency and necessity: there is (incomplete) order and there is an infinite capacity (in principle) to subvert that order. On these grounds, democracy is affirmed as a unique historical configuration which is able to contemplate its own contingency and to, thereby, assign a proper materialist dignity to the dimension of the political (Stavrakakis 2007). Democracy contains the promise of a new form of engagement in which political subjects acknowledge hegemony as a basic existential condition and demonstrate an awareness of both their historical limitations and the provisional and partial basis of their interventions. For Žižek, however, Laclau's and radical democracy's politics of hegemony commit them to a self-hampering antinomic 'Kantianism' that lies in the acceptance of the unbridgeable gap between the enthusiasm for the impossible goal of a political engagement (the *point de capiton* around which populist demands are articulated) and its more realisable content (the everyday struggles that fall short of our ideals). The problem remains that, if we accept such a gap as the *ultimate* horizon of political engagement, does it, then, not leave us with a single dilemma apropos of such an engagement? Either we must blind ourselves to the necessary ultimate failure of our endeavour—regress to naivety, and

let ourselves be caught up in the enthusiasm—or we must adopt a stance of cynical distance, participating in the game while being fully aware that the result will be disappointing (Žižek 2000c, pp. 316–7).

Indeed, for Žižek, with the ascendancy of the hegemonic form of politics, as it were, the materialist force(s) of the political are becoming more and more displaced and domesticated. Unsurprisingly, his key reference here is Hegel. In post-Marxism there is a basic distinction between necessity and contingency, where hegemony and the political are typically viewed as allied to the latter. As Žižek has pointed out repeatedly,[32] this distinction is, from a Hegelian perspective, considerably overdrawn. For Hegel, the point is rather to see how necessity develops (retroactively) in the very midst of contingency. In other words, what is overlooked is an account of the speculative dimension of Spirit: that is, the continually unfolding historical attempts to realise a rational consistency vis-à-vis lived existence. What the Hegelian perspective enables us to grasp is that the materialist divide is not straightforwardly between order and contingency (with hegemony functioning as an open-ended process of particularities striving to occupy the empty place of universality); such a vision would merely operate as a reversed Kantian formalism. Rather, the passage from Kant to Hegel involves recognising different modalities of order and contingency. This insight reveals one of the problems with contemporary defences of radical democracy. That is to say, it is the very emphasis on the 'empty place', contingency and reactivating the political that becomes the most insidious ideological gesture:

> Along the lines of a smoker who boasts that s/he could give up any time they want, democratic ideology is one that reproduces the fantasy that it can submit everything (including global economic activity) to conscious political control and that we could change if we *really* wanted to. In a far more insidious way than any totalitarianism, closure can be achieved through the very (fantasmatic) sense of political openness. (Daly 2007, p. 13)

Along similar lines, Lois McNay (2014, p. 40) charges radical democracy advocates with 'social weightlessness' and an abstract conception of agency. McNay (2014, p. 208) worries that radical democracy entertains a conception of 'radical agency as an empty process of flux and contestation rather than as embodied practice in the world'. The concern, here, is that an exclusive emphasis on the 'coincidence of the political with the ontological' construes agency as the dynamics of an ever expanding

democratic imaginary, regardless of the actual social relations of exploitation and domination, and without appropriate attention to the existing asymmetrical relations of power. As a result, radical democracy promotes a form of radicalism that wishes to change everything but, in reality, changes nothing as it remains detached from the actual configuration of political forces that produce distortive inequalities and unimaginable suffering. Paradoxically, a democratic theory that wishes to reactivate the political and reignite dormant emancipatory possibilities, runs the risk of regressing to a moralistic or existential category capitulating to the fragility and general vulnerability of the human condition, instead of intervening in concrete political constellations and targeting persistent forms of deprivation, inequality and social suffering.

Even if, however, we tentatively accepted that Žižek succeeds in avoiding such a debilitating existentialism and the purist dualism of either a formal politics of Badiouian universalism, on the one hand, or a reversal to either a postmodern 'beautiful soul' stance or a Machiavellian/Weberian politics of compromise and instrumental rationality, on the other hand, the question still remains: what is it that makes this oscillation almost inevitable and the effort to reside on this elusive tension almost impossible? As we saw earlier, Žižek develops his own Breton-inspired radical nihilism of the cross which can be read as his own ambivalent attempt to escape the Gnostic temptation and the Marcionite distrust towards the God of creation. However, his reading of Christ's kenotic incarnation—where, in the place of 'substance', the divine element in Christ is a certain gap or lack separating Him from the human and the human element in God is also a gap inherent to God—is still very much tainted by the Schellingian Gnostic metaphysics of godly creation/contraction as an almost necessary evil and his Lacanian outlook on desire as an obstinate *evil enjoyment*, both raising the spectre of an implicit antinomian otherworldliness in his thought.

Why is it, then, that Žižek finds it quite difficult, in fact inherently paradoxical, to think of this tension between politics and the political as nothing other than precarious, ambivalent and innately fragile to the point of appearing as an impossible feat, a *parallax* view (Žižek 2006) that obliges us to be able to look at either the subjective (love, life, the political) or the objective (law, order, politics) but never at both simultaneously? Why do we find it almost futile, or only fleetingly possible, to imagine a concretised form of the latter possibility or a phenomenology of action that would reflect such a commitment? No doubt, Žižek (2006) has provided

examples that stand as a marker of that ambivalence, prominent among which is the Melvillian figure of Bartleby who consciously detaches himself from the symbolic order as a means of shattering the ossified symbolic coordinates of an ideological world with his politics of refusal: 'I'd prefer not to'.[33] However, why is it that even this messianic figure of an active/passive unplugging seems so odd, uncanny, perhaps equally strange as the repulsive Kafkaesque creatures that Benjamin (2007b, p. 116) evokes to describe the agents of hope for humanity, that is, the hunchback, the Cat Lamb, Ordadeck, the Assistant and so on? Another way of putting it is, why does the gap between politics and the political tend to be thought of as either a pristine separation, an unbridgeable chasm (leading to inaction, quietism or mystical detachment from the political world) or, alternatively, as fatal proximity (authorising an active nihilist ultra-politics of violent revolutionism or theocratic fundamentalism)?

Already but *Not Yet*: Sacramental Political Ontology and the Structure of Christian Hope

To even start sketching a possible answer to such a daunting question, one has to take a step back and delve into the history of ideas, and even more concretely, the history of theological ideas since the concept of kenotic incarnation that seems to be Žižek's proposed phenomenology of the drive is *par excellence* a theological/messianic concept. If, as we saw earlier, Pauline messianism and its relevance to politics tend to be interpreted through the lenses of a crypto-Marcionite or Gnostic-like antinomianism, one has to ask whether this move is inevitable or, to put it differently, whether this is the only conceptualisation of the messianic available. Is this slippage to either an ontological dualism that conflates the world's finitude (or, more theologically, createdness) with the world's fallenness, or a pantheistic monism that cancels the distance between nature (creation) and the divine, the only imaginable accounts of the relationship between politics and the political, history and redemption, immanence and transcendence? Our guide to this quest will be a landmark study that had an enormous influence on several fields of scholarly inquiry—such as political theory, philosophy, the history of religious ideas and theology—Henri de Lubac's (2006) *Corpus Mysticum*: *The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, a work of historical theology from a Catholic theologian, first published in 1944. The influence of this study inside and outside Catholic

circles, and in general theological discourse, is perhaps comparable only to the continuing power of Ernst Kantorowicz's (1997) monograph, *The King's Two Bodies*, for which de Lubac's book served as a major source. Despite great differences in their intellectual commitments, Kantorowicz used de Lubac's meticulous study of the concept of the *corpus mysticum* in the early Church and the Middle Ages to carry out a certain critique of Schmitt's notion of political theology. The key role played by the concept of *corpus mysticum* is confessed by Kantorowicz (1997, p. 506) as he recapitulates the steps of his argument in his concluding paragraph:

> the change from the Pauline *corpus Christi* to the mediaeval *corpus ecclesiae mysticum*, thence to the *corpus reipublicae mysticum*, which was equated with the *corpus morale et politicum* of the commonwealth, until finally (though confused by the notion of *Dignitas*) the slogan emerged saying that every abbot was a 'mystical body' or a 'body politic', and that accordingly the king, too, was, or had, a body politic which 'never died'.

Kantorowicz was anxious to substantiate his claim that the fictive concept of the mystical body of the Church migrated from the realm of ecclesiastical to that of political authority, but not in order to sanction some notion of vertical equivalence of God's power with sovereign primacy on earth, as Schmitt's (2006) authoritarian decisionism did, but rather in order to defend the enabling fictions of the liberal constitutional state against the 'idols of modern political religions' such as Fascism and Soviet totalitarianism (Kantorowicz 1997, p. xviii).

De Lubac's study, however, would go further than acting as an arbiter between an authoritarian (Schmitt) versus a liberal constitutional (Kantorowicz) confirmation of sovereign power. His study, instead, would challenge the very idea of the fictiveness of a notion that was initially employed to bridge the gap between the spiritual and the material, 'flesh' and 'spirit', or if you like, the *pneumatic* (Paul's term) and the sociological. De Lubac demonstrates how this transformation—which Kantorowicz cites approvingly—of the *corpus mysticum* into a political fiction constitutes a distortion of the dynamicity and polyvalence of concepts such as 'mystical' and 'mystery'. Instead, he seeks to recover a more sacramental tradition of the mystical body that existed as a dynamic, transimmanent paradox resisting sublimation into a sheer *corpus politicum*. In de Lubac's narrative, the meaning of *corpus mysticum* changed from its particular liturgical use in the early Church, where it referred to the

sacrament of the Eucharist, to the general socio-political usage that had crystallised by the mid-twelfth century, where it referred to the Church-society as a mystical body. These medieval shifts in terminological usage, which de Lubac traces as early as the ninth century,[34] ushered in a new modern formulation, which remained in use until the twentieth century. The early Church, instead, had taught that the Eucharist was the *corpus mysticum*, the mysterious sacramental communion with God in Christ, into whose body Christians were being reborn. This liturgical usage concerned participation in Christ's sacrifice, and thus his redemption of humanity. Sacramental communion generated the ecclesial communion that gathered human beings into one mystical, but nonetheless real body, united in communion with God and with one another. Thus the *invisible* but real and mysterious presence of Christ as a 'hidden power' and an 'inner reality' in the bread and wine of the sacrament of the Eucharist was understood as that which constitutes the *visible* ecclesial body as opposed to the subsequent separation of the body of the consecrated host from the ecclesiastical-sociological body of the institutional Church.[35]

To spell this out further, early Christians would not have thought of the Church as the *corpus mysticum*, they would have thought of the Eucharist as that sacrament of communion with Christ's body, now ascended to heaven, but really and mystically present to the one true Church (de Lubac 2006, p. 13). The Church receives its institutional life, its reality, as a gift precisely because it receives Christ's mystical presence in the Eucharist. That is to say, *corpus mysticum* would not have been thought to refer to 'the body of believers' as a separate, sociological entity. The Church was causally related to the Eucharist as the *corpus mysticum*. Christians of the first millennium could, however, make distinctions between Christ's historical body, his sacramental or mystical body, and his true, ecclesial body (de Lubac 2006, p. 16), and it is in the making of these distinctions that the term gained some 'freedom of movement' that would later transform its meaning and turn it into an abstract fiction serving the legitimation of ideological purposes and power claims once the Church had unhinged it from the liturgical sphere. As Hans Boersma (2009, p. 249) argues in his superb study of the *Nouvelle Theologie*, de Lubac attributed the loss of the Church's spiritual authority and its sliding into authoritarianism—both in its internal hierarchy and in its accommodation of oppressive secular authorities such as Fascism in World War II—to the general tendency of 'extrinsicism' which had regarded 'the Eucharist too much as a supernatural intervention unconnected to the life of the Church' and which, for de

Lubac (1998), had been nurtured by a neo-Thomist gradual autonomisation of the natural from the supernatural. Such a doctrine had eroded the earlier tradition in which the Church was conceived as simultaneously sacramental and social.

This development constituted, for de Lubac, an impoverishment of the idea of 'mystery' itself. The Eucharist was now thought to be 'an objective Real Presence produced by the intervention of an extrinsic miracle…[and] the church simply a hierarchy channeling this intervention' (Rust 2012, p. 106). De Lubac was instead—we could say with Jennifer Rust—arguing for a *performative* rather than static understanding of the 'mystical'. In this performative sense, then, the 'mystical' does not simply signify the superimposition of one entity over against the other (Church vs. sacrament), but rather evokes a state of affairs in which the relation between these two figures is ceaselessly dynamic in line with the true meaning of the word 'mystery' which, for de Lubac (2006, pp. 37–54), denoted in the old sense of the word 'more of an action than a thing', a way of life and a communal experience, rather than a supernatural, magical intervention. This dimension of an invisibility which is visible, not as a thing or a fictional representation of a transcendent beyond, but as a transimmanent comportment, a genuinely incarnate spirit, is de Lubac's path to conceptualising the Christian eschatological 'already', that is, the mystical dimension[36] of the ongoing transformation of the world without falling to some kind of 'bad faith' mysticism that sees the whole process either as a Gnostic fidelity to a metaphysical a priori or a pantheistic immanentism that dissolves the eschatological tension.[37]

For a particular strand of radical theology that goes by the name of Radical Orthodoxy, this type of sacramental ontology can only be grafted onto an unabashedly Trinitarian ontology. Harbouring similar commitments to the 'immanentisation of the spirit' as a singular event as Badiou's (2003, p. 69) 'evental' universalism but rejecting the underlying Heideggerian ontological difference, doyens of Radical Orthodoxy, such as John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, appeal to the 'incarnate Christ as the archetype of a continuing spiritual revolution—a true *Sittlichkeit*' (Klassen 2010, p. 66), a truly incarnate spirit embodied in the 'self-cancelling [i.e. non-coercive] hierarchy' of overlapping authorities and corporate bodies beyond and beneath the sovereign state (Milbank 2014; Milbank and Pabst 2016). The idea, here, is that the overcoming of the Enlightenment blackmail—either abstract cosmopolitan universalism or exclusivist parochial particularism—requires nothing less than a return

to a vision of ontology, not as onto-theology or as the Heideggerian abyss between temporal flux and self-present being (Pickstock 1998), but as a *living participation* in the infinite differentiation of the Trinity itself (Milbank 2006). Milbank consciously sets himself apart from the Protestant theological and philosophical crowd that he deems responsible for the Gnostic-like or antinomian deviation from Trinitarian sacramental ontology. For Milbank, the main culprit for the loss of the sacramental mystery and the subsequent emergence of the secular as a separate sociological domain as well as the providential emancipation of 'true religion' from the authoritarian grasp of the institutional order is the nominalist turn[38] in medieval theology and the adoption of a Scotist ontology of the univocity of Being (see also Pabst 2012).[39] Milbank argues that the very idea of a separation between a spiritual and a sociological view of reality rests, not only on a metaphysics of history as disenchanted (Weber 2004; Taylor 2007), but also on a view of the latter as an autonomous immanent terrain (naturalism) accessible through an objective historical science and interrupted by the irruption into social life of 'transcendent' principles that are either rejected as irrational nonsense or heroically aestheticized or, at best, pragmatically/agnostically tolerated.

De Lubac's critique of the mystical body in modernity and Milbank's ontology of participation are both pivotal in helping us rethink the roots of the antinomian temptation in messianic thought and the near impossibility of imagining a phenomenology of political action that would reside on the tension of political difference or the paradoxes involved therein. However, it could also be legitimately argued that such imaginaries directly threaten the view of political ontology put forward in this study. Indeed, Milbank is especially hostile to the Heideggerian ontology of the difference between beings and Being after which political difference as formal ontology is modelled. Unquestionably, there is a crypto-Marcionite element in Heidegger that resonates with the varying antinomian tendencies in the political ontologies of Breton, Badiou, Agamben and Žižek that take their cue from (without, of course, being identical with) Heideggerian fundamental ontology.[40] Indeed, Milbank (2006, p. 300) thinks that a major step of depoliticisation in Heidegger's ontology work is taken through the latter's idea of authenticity which obliges us to remain permanently in a posture of 'questionableness, and not seek in any way to reduce the mystery of the ontological difference'. Milbank argues that this authorises a nihilistic attitude of indifference to going further towards an 'interested' disposition vis-à-vis this mystery as any such move would inevitably

reveal itself as inauthentic, since the ontological difference is everywhere and always inexorable. For Milbank, such a necessary temporalisation of Being as *falling* and existence as forgetting (since every ontic appearance necessarily presupposes a withdrawal of Being) eventually becomes an objective state of affairs. In other words, inauthenticity ceases to be an existential qualification and becomes an implacable structure of ontic life as such. In Pickstock (1998, p. 111), this criticism arises even more starkly. Heidegger's 'disinterested' stance is reproached for merely being a 'rather defiant strategy of security against the arrival of the unknown'. Heidegger is, in other words, here accused, not of being too caught up in the temporal flux of life, but rather of not being nihilistic enough, that is, he is charged with using his dialectics of authenticity and inauthenticity as a prophylactic, 'a cover for an all too modern necrophobic desire to get to death before it gets to you'.

And yet, as various commentators (Critchley 2012; Klassen 2011) have already highlighted, Heidegger might still be the best guide to introduce us to a conceptualisation of the structure of Christian hope—the tension between a world 'already' being transformed and still awaiting fulfilment ('not yet')—that takes the messianic promise seriously without regressing to an antinomian rejection of the world as a priori *fallen* or to the reification of the masculine logic of constitutive exception that extols the inherent split in politics, but leaves the incompleteness at the heart of the political intact. In other words, Heidegger—especially his reflections on the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (2004) where he takes up Paul's messianism—might be ideally suited to introduce us to a type of consistent nihilism that, far from being apolitical or unredeemably necrophiliac, may creatively supplement Benjamin's world nihilism and Žižek's idea of incarnation as double *kenosis* towards offering a picture of political action as deeply temporal, historical and fragile and, yet, truly powerful in its vulnerability.

For Heidegger (2004, p. 63), as well as for Radical Orthodoxy, history and temporality is not something objective that can be deciphered from a detached point of view, but rather always something *lived* that can only be approached from an engaged perspective, namely a perspective of faith or fidelity to an original-historical situation that cannot be 'mathematically-physically determined' but is rather something 'that belongs to understanding in the manner of an enactment'. The congregations Paul addressed in his letters did not need their situation be described as something external nor did they need to be explained what it meant to

belong to the messianic community of proclamation. They experienced their belonging to it as a 'turning-*toward* God and a turning-*away* from idol-images' (Heidegger 2004, p. 66). Accepting the proclamation, then, meant entering into a comportment that experiences life, not as an 'is', but as a 'how' and the how itself *is* this turning around. This is exactly the structure of the Pauline 'already', a stance not of untroubled, self-secure hope but of hope as anguish, absolute distress (*thlipsis*), service (*douleuein*) and obstinate waiting (*anamenein*), what Heidegger (2004, p. 67) calls the 'self-world of Paul'. What is important here is not how one can make a prediction or lay a Pascalian wager about a future life of rewards, but how one comports herself to this promise in actual life: 'for Paul, in other words, one enters into a "knowing" relation to the Parousia not through persuasion by a beguiling hope, but by venturing all known security in the "how" of anguish' (Klassen 2010, p. 79). Christian life is characterised by the absence of any security, yet, for Heidegger (2004, p. 74), this is no declaration of despair, but 'an urging to awaken and to be sober' (compare here with Jesus' injunction: *grēgoreite*, that is, 'be alert' in Mark, 14:38).

The upshot of Heidegger's position,[41] here, is that one has to resist the temptation to see in the Parousia the future fulfilment of religious expectancy in any objective historical situation, yet this 'obstinate waiting' should not be construed as some ideational expectation or katechontic deferral of salvation, but rather as 'a serving God' (Heidegger 2004, p. 79). Against understandings of life as abstraction from the 'how' of its temporality, Heidegger insists that Paul's message is that in order to remain attuned to life as enactment, one has to remain unwilling to give up despair, unwilling to abandon the situation of weakness for a sensational aestheticised hope or a consolatory abstraction. Real annihilation, real nihilism resides in the refusal to sublimate, aestheticise, or embellish one's fears, trauma and horror. Instead, one has to call a spade a spade, or as Heidegger (2004, p. 78) puts it, the 'meaning of the proclamation of the Antichrist is the following: one must take the Antichrist for Antichrist'. Far, then, from separating true life from temporal enactment, as Radical Orthodoxy accuses him of doing, Heidegger calls attention to consistent nihilism as the wholehearted assumption of the tragedy and horror of human existence in temporality. What Heidegger refuses to do, however, is go beyond this nihilistic traversal into an aestheticised synthesis of faith and scepticism, joy and anguish, the 'already' and the 'not yet'. He rather prefers to reside on the tension of their '*living* reconciliation by emphasizing its character as irreducibly paradoxical' (Klassen 2010, pp. 88–9). This

vision of the human life as factically open to hope as anguish and weakness provides a powerful picture of the conditions of authentic political action. It suggests the birth of the power of human agency in the midst of its constitutive powerlessness. In the astute words of Simon Critchley (2012, pp. 194, 206):

> Action in the world requires an acknowledgement of weakness. Its strength *is* its weakness, as Paul might say. Such a conception of action might be called tragic, or better, tragicomic… In Paul's picture the human condition is constitutively torn between faith and law or love and sin, and it is only in the strife that divides us that we are defined. It is only a being who is constitutively impotent that is capable of receiving that over which it has no power: love.

Notes

1. Žižek (1999, p. 297) of course borrows, expands and creatively reworks—through, as I will show, a Schellingian detour—Lacan's (2007) insights on the four psychoanalytical discourses of the master, the university, the hysteric and the analyst (see also Evans 1996).
2. A point Žižek insists on is that Schelling's account is mythological but needs no demythologisation á la Bultmann (1984). What is plainly 'wrong' from a materialist point of view is nevertheless 'true' exactly because it is mythological. Žižek's debt to the speculative mode of thought is here more visible than ever as, for such an imaginary, true materialism describes the conditions of possibility for the 'empirical' to emerge, i.e the ontological conditions that make appearances possible (see Žižek 2011).
3. As Adam Kotsko (2008, p. 53) playfully remarks, for Žižek, rather than 'creating hell for the curious' as Luther would have it, 'before creating the world, God was *escaping from* hell'.
4. In that sense, the hysteric subject bears similarities with those nihilists in section 108 of Nietzsche's (2001, p. 109) *The Gay Science* who know that God is dead but they still fight with His shadows.
5. Debates on the relevance of theology for a reconceptualisation of the political, but also of the political for the renewal of traditional theology, have lately proliferated. The field of political theology is now an exploding scholarly domain that has attracted some of the

most illustrious thinkers in its midst. See the work of Charles Taylor (2007), Michael Gillespie (2009), Mark Lilla (2007), Jean Bethke Elshtain (2008) and Giorgio Agamben (2011). For a good overview in IR, see Rengger (2013). Lately, there have been published at least three major collections on the subject, see Davis et al. (2005); de Vries and Sullivan (2006); Hammill and Lupton (2012).

6. In that sense, Žižek's engagement with theology can be seen as operating on the distinction made by Mark Lewis Taylor (2011) in his recent book *The Theological and the Political* between 'theology' as the traditional historical discourse on transcendence sustaining and sanctioned by a hierarchical institutionalisation of Christianity, and the 'theological' as what moves along the margins of immanence, in the cracks and fissures of these institutionalised forms, offering a 'transimmanent' perspective of the divine at work within the world (see also Haynes 2012). A similar, yet not identical, imaginary is present in Jean-Luc Nancy's (2008) work on the deconstruction of Christianity and Marcel Gauchet's (1999) pioneering study on Christianity as the religion of radical disenchantment.
7. The claim that this is a wider cultural stance towards European Jewry that lies in the background of the Jewish genocide, was put forward by Jacob Taubes (2004) and a wider revisionist school on the study of Paul led by Krister Stendhal (1977), Daniel Boyarin (1994) and others. The idea, here, is that early Christian attitudes towards the Jews were characterised by spiritual hostility derived out of them being stigmatised as responsible for Christ's death through Paul's letters. Taubes charges Schmitt with falling victim to this misperception that the former traces back to the Marcionite rejection of the Old Testament advanced equally by leading liberal Potestant theologians such as Adolf von Harnack as well as crisis theologians such as Karl Barth. According to Taubes, it is hard to deny that there is no connection between the symbolic annihilation of the people of the old covenant and the physical extermination that became the programme of the Nazis. For an excellent analysis on this point, see Terpstra (2009).
8. As Žižek (2012, p. 498) explains 'in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object*, to *loss itself as an object*'. In striving for an impossible fullness (forced to renounce), desire remains trapped

in its quest for a partial object. Drive, instead, represents more radically the impulse to 'break the All of continuity in which we are embedded'. And yet, drive does not stand for the pacification or elimination of desire; rather, enjoyment is still generated from the very repetition of failure experienced *qua* desire: 'one of the key points Žižek takes from this transition is the transformation that occurs between a failure (desire) and the ability to translate a failure into a success (drive)' (Davis et al. 2014, p. 11). This shifting of perspectives is, for Žižek, the paradigmatic example of how in socio-political terms defeat or failure can be transformed into triumph. As I will subsequently show, this type of nihilism bears resonances both with Benjaminian world nihilism and with recent interpretations of Pauline kenotic meontology.

9. 'Actual' is related to the opposition between *actus* and *potentia*. In the context of Benjamin's messianic it is not an equivalent of real which would carry historicist or positivist connotations, but denotes something that has nevertheless a degree of reality, a lower level of actuality than full actuality and for this reason sometimes more 'real' (see Khatib 2013a, p. 87).
10. Although throughout his entire body of work there are only very few occasions where Benjamin directly refers to the Messiah as a person, these occasions are too important to be ignored or simply metaphorised. Jacob Taubes (2004, p. 70) famously mocked an impersonal understanding of the Messiah in Benjamin: 'There is a Messiah. No shmontses like "the messianic", "the political", no neutralization, but the Messiah.' Taubes (2004, p. 62) insistence on the personal as opposed to an abstract or symbolic conception of messianism is an implicit critique of the depoliticised treatment of the messianic by the 'zealots of the absolute', such as Derrida or Badiou, who seem to have traded a concept that denoted the living participation in an experience of personal and cosmic transformation with an ideal of indeconstructible justice (Derrida) or the impersonal emptiness of a purely structural notion (Badiou).
11. To convey the combined effect of tragedy and comedy of an all-powerful God who in Christ 'freely *identified himself with his own shit*', Žižek (2006, pp. 105, 187) asks: 'is there anything more comical than Incarnation, this ridiculous overlapping of the Highest and the Lowest, the coincidence of God, creator of the universe, and a miserable man?'

12. Žižek's favourite example frequently used to denote divinity's self-alienation and the death of God as a transcendent 'Beyond' is Christ's cry on the cross: 'Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?' For Žižek, the Hegelian transition from Substance to Subject *must* occur within God Himself (see Žižek 2009a, b).
13. While I am close to Taubes' (2010) reading of antinomianism as the inherent logic of the messianic idea, it is important to differentiate it from the tendency of a certain kind of nihilistic antinomianism to stress the absolute distance from the world or the law, to seek the destruction of this world or to perpetuate the dualisms between justice and love, law and grace and so on. While my reading endorses Taubes' insistence on the immanent logic of the messianic idea, the fact, that is, that 'it is not simply the case that messianic fantasy and the formation of historical reality stand at opposite poles' (Taubes 2010, pp. 48–9). Nevertheless, this immanence should not be seen as antithetical to the law and its norms, but rather as an unworking of its oppressive or conformist tendencies. Furthermore, as I will suggest below, Christian messianism operates within an always already 'graced' now. This is, in fact, the limit of Taubes' analysis as he reads messianism as an internal rift within Judaism and refuses to register Christianity's uniqueness. Seen, however, from the perspective of a community born as messianic, messianism is no longer a heretical logic, as in Judaism, that fuels the dialectic between the law and its subversion, but gets transfigured into the eschatological tension between a 'graced already' and a 'not yet' (a redivided antinomianism that cancels false dualisms and introduces the dimension of transimmanence). In that sense, Christianity bears within it the means of its own overcoming and inaugurates a new kind of historical existence, a new life Paul describes as 'in Christ' and which Taubes tends to restrictively reinscribe within a Jewish antinomian logic.
14. In *Old Mirrors, New Worlds*, Moshe Idel (2010) claims that an emphasis on negativity, so fashionable in the intellectual milieu of the German philosophical Jewry (not just Benjamin, but also Scholem, early Lukàcs, Ernst Bloch and Jacob Taubes) is, in fact, not very Jewish at all, but rather strongly influenced by the German-Protestant notion of *Deus Absconditus*, deeply entrenched in reformed Christianity, from Luther via Kierkegaard to Barth and itself exemplifying strong affinities to Marcionite Gnosticism.

Famously, a Gnostic reading of Benjamin is advanced by Wolin (1984). For readings of Benjamin that reject the Gnostic, antinomian interpretation of his messianism, see Poettcker (2010) and Bielik-Robson (n.d.).

15. It should be noted that Benjamin (2007b, p. 124) is, of course, critical of such obscurantism as his quotation of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor shows when cautioning against Kafka's residual attraction to mysticism: 'So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have had the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is neither freedom nor love, but the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow-without reflection and even against their conscience.'
16. Benjamin (2007b) approvingly repeates in his two essays on Kafka included in the *Illuminations* collection Kafka's adage 'hope is not for us'.
17. For a critique of Derrida's messianism for being ineffective 'in an age of global construction', see Beardsworth (2010, p. 23), and his exchange wih Adam Thurschwell, in Bradley and Fletcher (2010).
18. For the homology between the two ethics and their mutual debt to the idea of heteronomy, see Chalier (2002).
19. See also Lilla (2007) for a broader argument that Jewish—and Protestant-inspired political theologies in the twentieth century exhibit Gnostic tendencies of otherworldliness that can be politically conservative and crippling.
20. The term 'Gnosticism' was coined in eighteenth-century France and is usually employed to describe the Gnostic systems of the second and third centuries CE, particularly those of Basilides, Valentinus and Mani. The term *gnostikos* was conferred on those movements largely through Christian heresiomachs, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus and Epiphanius. Gnostic studies have enjoyed a renaissance since the discovery of ancient Gnostic texts at Nag Hammadi in 1945, but recent research on the history of late antiquity have taken issue with the coherence of the term 'Gnosticism', which seems to be more related to twentieth-century religious and philosophical polemics, as opposed to the term 'Gnosis' which is actually mentioned in Ancient Greek and Latin texts. Such a politicised use has prompted some to describe Gnosticism as a 'sick sign' that includes everyone and no one under

a single semantic umbrella (Lazier 2008, p. 32). In this study, I adopt Jonas's understanding of the term as an attitude or stance (*Daseinshaltung*) towards the human condition, and Gershom Scholem's (1971) characterisation of 'Gnosis' as a reproducible structure in religious thought. Instead of a huge bibliography on the topic, see relevant discussions in Jonas (1992), Lazier (2008), Rossbach (1999), Williams (1996) and King (2003).

21. According to the twentieth-century authority on the subject, Hans Jonas (1992, pp. 320–40), the primary aspect of Gnostic thought is a sharp dichotomy between a good transcendent God and an evil world which is the creation of a lesser malicious deity. As a result, Gnosticism introduces a dualism of transcendence (God) and immanence (existence within this world), an irreconcilable division between the 'eternal' and the 'temporal'. Furthermore, given the dichotomy 'true God vs. evil world' (or between 'eternity' and 'temporality'), true 'Gnosis' teaches the alienation of the transcendent God from the world as we know it. The true transcendent God is a hidden divinity (*Deus Absconditus*) who is not the creator of the world and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for the evil in it. Instead, the world is believed to be the creation of a lesser and evil godly power (*Demiurge*), always at variance with the one true transcendent divine entity. Finally, Gnostic anthropology translates cosmic dualism into human nature itself. Human beings are split between worldly existence and a divine, yet hidden, inner essence, stranded between immanence and transcendence, the 'eternal' and the 'temporal'. Humanity's mission, according to Gnosis, is to reignite the divine spark, already dormant in the human spirit, by renouncing worldly existence. As a result, the rejection of the world and temporality is absolute here. Disbelief in the world and estrangement from it are the enduring symbols of the Gnostic existential state of mind in its quest for self-revelation and redemption (see also Rossbach 1999). For a dissenting view that describes the critique of Gnostic dualism as 'Christian heresiophobia', see Versluis (2006, 2010).
22. Agamben (2005, pp. 108–12) backs this claim with a willful reading of Paul's disputed second Letter to the Thessalonians where the apostle describes the contested figure of the *Katechon*. In a counterintuitive reading that supports his *en masse* condemnation of sovereign politics as by definition murderous and inauthentic,

Agamben attributes the mystery of lawlessness (*anomia*) to the Messiah who renders every worldly law inoperative, whereas it would probably be more plausible to identify this mysterious figure with the Antichrist who will appear prior to the *Parousia* of the Messiah. Agamben's reading, however, is symptomatic of his intention to radicalise the distinction between law and life in order to let life shine in its unalloyed absolute detachment from the violence of the law. For an equally antinomian treatment of the Christian concept of glory, at once ambivalently caught in the governmentalities of an economic theology and pointing to the possibility of a 'coming community', see Agamben (2011).

23. For a dissenting view that sees in Agamben's 'perfect antinomianism' not a complete destruction of the law, but rather a reevaluation of life itself, see Zartaloudis (2010, p. 300): 'Perfect antinomianism is a force *internal to the actuality of* the law… thought not internal *to* the law, which inverses the latter's effectiveness; it does not preserve the law as it is nor destroy it, nor does it create a new law to replace the old law, but it instead restores law to the sphere of pure means, and renders it free to common use'.
24. As Sharpe (2009, p. 40.3) helpfully explains according to Gershom Scholem's (1971, p. 3) account: 'There are two strands of messianism which compete within and between rabbinic and kabalistic Judaism…The first is restorative messianism. Herein, messianic hope is 'directed to the return and recreation of a past condition which comes to be felt as ideal'…The second, more radical strand taken up by *kabala* is utopian messianism. This by contrast 'aims at a state of things which has never yet existed".
25. Agamben's Gnostic antinomianism is also heavily pronounced in the final chapter of his *The Open* where he favourably cites the cosmological messianism of the second-century AD Gnostic thinker, Basilides. Reading Basilides 'after' Heidegger, Agamben (2004, p. 90) proposes that in the 'saved night' of the coming messianic time, after we have 'bid farewell to the *logos* and to [our] own history', we might be redeemed in the same paradoxical sense Basilides describes the 'redeemed' as those blissfully abandoned by God in their creaturely reality.
26. It is important to note here that this is exactly the subtle point where arguably the messianic nihilisms of Benjamin and Scholem part ways as their correspondence over the work of Franz Kafka

shows (Scholem 1992). In their quarrel over the precise meaning of the 'Nothingness of Revelation' (*Nichts der Offenbarung*), the crucial point separating them is 'whether the fading of the Law, its receding into nothing, ends the story of revelation (so Benjamin)—or whether it merely marks a point of erasure, a yet another *tsimtsum* of God, which also bears a hope of the revelatory renewal (so Scholem)' (see Bielik-Robson n.d., p. 9). Benjamin's thoroughgoing nihilism may, for this reason, paradoxically and *pace* Agamben (2005, pp. 141, 144), be less susceptible to the antinomian temptation.

27. In his conceptualisation of the act as opening up a space for politics proper, Žižek is influenced by Badiou's theorisation of the Event as the eruption of negativity in the world, an intervention that disrupts and resignifies our symbolic coordinates, see Badiou (2007). For a criticism that the Badiouian Event seems too attached to a purist, romantic notion of total transformation, see Ingram (2005, p. 571).
28. Žižek does not consider democracy to be the indisputable horizon of contemporary politics. He thus castigates liberals and multiculturalists, on the Right and Left alike, for imposing a *Denkverbot*, a prohibition on thinking that excludes any radical questioning of our 'post-political' democracies. In a response to Yannis Stavrakakis, he refers to Lacan to make his point, saying that the early Lacan, stressing the primacy of the symbolic order, is in a way the 'Lacan of democracy'; the late Lacan, however, stressing the drive and the Real (beyond the symbolic), 'points towards a post-democratic politics'. See Žižek (2003b, p. 134).
29. Critchley (2000, p. 23) notes a certain 'heroism of decision' in this Badiouian impulse linked to 'the seduction of a great politics'.
30. The part of late Derrida's (1996), and Critchley's (2008) work influenced by Levinas can be seen in this light. However, see Critchley's (2012) recent conscious shift to a more tragicomic reading of the relationship between ethics and politics, less determined by the absolute priority of the Levinasian ethical demand.
31. See critiques by Laclau (2000a, pp. 195–212, 2000b, pp. 288–301) and Newman (2007, pp. 135–6); see also Stavrakakis (2007, pp. 109–49) and Coles (2006, pp. 68–85), where Žižek is accused of entertaining a dogmatic fixation on lack that issues in a decisionist theory of the act—what Coles chastises as a 'Bing Bang' theory

of democratic agency. Finally, see Boucher et al. (2005) for a collection of essays with a more philosophically disposed criticisms of Žižek charging him with pitfalls ranging from irrationalism and a mystification of the subject to philosophical idealism and unconfessed existentialism.

32. See, for example, Žižek (2012, pp. 292–327), Žižek (1999, pp. 98–103), Žižek (2000b, p. 227) and Žižek (2006, pp. 75–6).
33. It is not a coincidence that Agamben comes close to a similar Bartlebian stance as well as that it is difficult to articulate what exactly this kind of politics is or how it may be enacted. In Chap. 4 of *Homo Sacer* ('The Form of Law'), Agamben reads Kafka's mysterious 'man from the country' in the famous parable of the door of the law as an eminent instance of a new 'passive politics' (Agamben 1998, p. 55) but he remains enigmatic as to what exactly this new passive politics consists in. Agamben's awkwardness in passing from the realm of ontological analysis to that of practical politics is, as we saw, not peculiar to him and should perhaps be seen as the symptom of the persistence of the antinomian temptation in certain quarters of the post-Heideggerian Left.
34. The reversal could be said to have been completed by 1302 when Pope Boniface VIII wrote and signed the papal bull, *Unam sanctam*, whereby a shift can be said to have taken place that gave to the Church those mystical powers of communion that were once ascribed to Christ's mystical body in the Eucharist, and thus legitimated the Church's claims to political supremacy: 'As the Church comes to terms with a new historical situation, the earlier emphasis upon the Eucharist constituting the Church as Christ's body gives way to a new political emphasis on the Church making the Eucharist. While the bull ostensibly attempts to staunch or discipline the growing schism between Latin and Greek-speaking churches through the universal primacy of St Peter's successor, it also represents the *caesura* between the sacramental origins of the term *corpus mysticum* and the new exclusively ecclesial and institutional/political meaning by introducing the *possibility* of detaching the Church from the Eucharist' (Pecknold 2010, p. 83).
35. In that sense, de Lubac's take on the mystical body is closer to the *theurgical* tradition of neo-Platonism that harks back to the teachings of Iamblichus and Proclus up to the mysticism of Denys the Aeropagite. The idea is that rather than relying, as Plotinus did,

only on contemplation (*theoria*) to approach the One, theurgical practices that brought together the contemplative and the material (plants, animals, entrails, magic potions, etc.)—that is, the visibile and the invisible—were more likely to be effective (see Louth 1981, pp. 161–3).

36. And again, here, the meaning of the term 'mystical' transforms the whole idea of how we should conceive the 'symbolic' or 'figural'. In de Lubac's terms, if it is understood in a fully dynamic performative sense, it does not signal an evacuation of spiritual values or efficacy, but rather a paradoxical union-in-difference of transcendence and immanence (see also Rust 2012, p. 119), that is, put in the terms of this study, a kind of fidelity to political difference, not as a perennial gap, an inexorable bad infinity or a necrophiliac abhorrence to the movement of temporality, but, as I will show below, as the necessary formal condition for a phenomenology of nihilistic existence *in the temporal*.
37. There is a characteristic awkwardness in some quarters of post-Heideggerrian thought in dealing with this idea of a transcendence mystically embodied in immanence. For example, Derrida's (2005a, pp. 295–6) objection to Nancy's proposal to read incarnation as the opening, the spacing-out to such an experience of *transimmanence*, is that such a thought might be construed as another effort to touch the intangible, to domesticate this dimension of exteriority that touching has first to appropriate in order then to come to contact with. Derrida's suspicion can be seen as the antinomian symptom of a kind of Jewish negative theology—in the tradition of the *Bildungsverbot*, i.e the prohibition of images—that opposes the kind of Hellenism rehabilitated by Nancy's (1991, p. 139) vision of incarnation. The latter should not be seen as the materialisation of an invisible Idea or Spirit, but as the impossible concurrence of relation and separation, 'neither fusion nor differentiation, but a single place of subsistence or presence [*hypostasis*], a place where the god appears entirely in man, and man appears entirely in god'. This *hypostatic* perspective, which I am closer to defending here, can be called *panentheistic* as opposed to pantheistic which is the temptation the 'weak God' (Vattimo 2012; Caputo 2006; Kearney 2001) and 'God after God' (see Kearney's *Anatheism* (Kearney 2011) and Manoussakis 2006) philosophers tend to fall into. Vattimo, for example, is indeed right to read the

history of nihilism as, in a sense, the effect of the Christian interruption of the Western metaphysics but, no less than Žižek on that matter, he misinterprets that interruption as a mere inversion of the priority of transcendence and immanence, rather than the 'raising of the finite into the infinite' (see Hart Bentley 2003, p. 419). It seems, then, that Western post-metaphysical thought oscillates between a 'Jewish' antinomianism and a pantheistic divinisation of immanence.

38. For an extensive and illuminating discussion of the nominalist turn in modernity, see Gillespie (2009). Gillespie traces the ontological premises of the modern transition from a preoccupation with politics as a natural phenomenon to one which is based, as Michael Oakeshott would say, on 'will and articife'. Rather schematically, nominalism stands for a late medieval approach to the status of universals that denies them having any real essence. For nominalists, universals, e.g. humanity, justice, or 'redness' (the property of being red), are simply names that do not pre-exist (as realists would have it) but only follow after (*post-res*) the existence of particular entities which are the only ones considered real. See also Rengger (2013).
39. The idea, here, is that one can describe the properties or nature of God using words that are directly homologous to ones used to describe properties in nature. The opposing idea is that talk about God can furnish valid knowledge about Him but only *analogically*, that is, God's goodness can only be analogically (preserving the difference in kind) conceived by reference to human goodness. For proponents of Radical Orthodoxy, the abandonment of analogical theology and the adoption of the idea of univocity of Being since Duns Scotus's nominalist theology has been the prelude to the subsequent nihilism of modernity (see Cunningham 2002; Milbank 2006).
40. Critchley (2012, p. 201) is helpfully crystal clear on this: 'there is an ultra-Protestantism at work in Heidegger's reading of Paul which is crypto-Harnackian in its refusal of the influence of Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic philosophy, and in its attempt to recover an *Urchristentum* against the dogmatic system of Catholicism'. However, Critchley is also quick to add that any lurking antinomianism is tempered by Heidegger's nihilist dialectics 'between the authentic and the inauthentic, between the *kairos*

of the moment of vision and the slide back into falling' (Critchley 2012, p. 206).

41. Ironically enough, knowing Heidegger's failure to live up to the demands of his own insight in his endorsement of the Nazi cause. However, Heidegger's failure can also be seen as a confirmation of this insight to the extent that nothing guarantess the success of political action and nothing compensates for the anguish and necessity of making choices and taking sides. Peter Trawny (2015) has recently argued, rather convincingly, that Heidegger was committed to a conception of thinking and acting as freedom to fail, meaning that whoever dares to think the truth of being freely exposes oneself to the danger of epochal errancy. Once again, the insight furnished here is that failure or tragedy or disaster may be inevitable but it is not necessary. Whether the absence of a 'right' course of action condemns one to an inability to regret or apologise, lest it be seen as a retrospective betrayal of temporality and action's fundamental undecidability, is another rather controversial matter.

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CHAPTER 7

Epilogue: The Politics of (Im)pure Criticism

An investigation as probing and open-ended as this one can hardly own up to a conclusion. The best one could offer in lieu of a conclusion is an epilogue in the hope that the reader won't be overly frustrated by the lack of a systematic, step-by-step recapitulation of this book's argumentative achievements nor would she interpret it as a sign of false humility. And yet, a sort of 'conclusion' will be offered to the reader that should preferably be seen—rather oddly as it is placed at the end of this intellectual journey—as a 'preface' to the kind of politics that may issue from the reflexive position adopted in this volume. What this book has tried to achieve—sometimes in a daringly wide-ranging and, thus, inevitably selective manner—through an immanent critique of a variety of approaches to the ontological status and normative value of pluralism in world politics—ranging from liberal neutrality and post-liberal particularism to critical dialogism and post-structuralist agonism—is to offer a radical hermeneutics of critical self-reflexivity in international political thought. From the outset, we associated the temptation of depoliticisation lurking in their treatment of difference and diversity with the adoption of a particular understanding of ontology either as 'in the last instance' ground or pure exceptionality as opposed to the version of political-as-formal ontology that we have defended here.

The liberal preference for neutral or consensually agreed principles to ground the just accommodation of difference was initially found wanting

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for resting on an assimilative understanding of universality that undermined the impartiality, and ultimately the fairness, of liberal tolerance. The priority accorded to a conception of justice conceived as neutral, context-transcending universality relied on hidden liberalism-friendly ideological and anthropological assumptions that remained uncontested and non-negotiable. The transition from a subject-based to a language-based ontology brought with it a healthy recognition of the aforementioned liberal illusions but, in many ways, reproduced the symptoms of an ideological treatment of difference as recalcitrant, yet assimilable—this time grounded on a post-Cartesian sensitivity to language as the ontological horizon of communication. Agonistic ontologies were found no less immune to the foundationalist fantasy of 'ontology as ground' by implicitly or explicitly raising antagonism, difference and multiplicity to the status of new unequivocal *archai* of the political, that is, turning their ontic valorisations into ontological axioms. Connolly is right to argue that every theory has to be candid about relying on an ontology as a matter of conviction. Yet, it is this vision of ontology as invoking deep beliefs about the nature of reality and human beings that we have put to question for issuing into an unproductive and rather arbitrary oscillation between identity and difference, unity and diversity, the universal and the particular. If political liberalism and some forms of critical dialogism are underpinned by an ontology that tends to prioritise the universal over the particular, post-Nietzschean political theory and radical democracy seem to be tempted by an ontology that programmatically celebrates diversity at the expense of unity, perpetuating the deadlocks of Western metaphysics.

What, however, became apparent from the critique of the above approaches was not some hidden objective truth or 'verifiable' reality that they were all missing and which we claim access to from a neutral, disengaged position. Rather, in an authentic act of criticism, as Rex Butler (2005, p. 126) suggests, one does not seek to oppose the other but, rather, bring out a certain 'internal contradiction'. In a sense, repeat all that the other is saying but for an entirely different reason. The purpose of this critique is not to detect cracks in otherwise well-built arguments, but to interrogate that which in them can be otherwise than it is, the excess that their omissions, suppressions or silences generate. Eventually, the critical act is not in what is being said but in the 'cut' between what is said and in the saying, between the content and its form. In that sense, the critical act

constitutes the 'cut of the cut', as Walter Benjamin (1999, p. 470) would put it,[1] that is, an act of engaged criticism that simultaneously problematises its own position in order to maintain an effective but self-cancelling distance from its object of criticism.

Political difference as formal ontology, then, arises as exactly the kind of 'methodology' that sustains such a politics of (im)pure criticism authorising a simultaneously engaged and reflective perspective. In its uncompromising double tension between politics and the political, it at once refuses to allow genuine innovation or 'whatever being' to be settled into some proper order (as a cure to the disease of sovereignty and self-mastery) *and* stresses the necessity of adhering to some form of order in the end (sovereignty as the disease that cures from the purist fantasies of either passive detachment or messianic destructiveness).[2] Although it is in and of itself only an encounter with a limit-experience and expresses no content, it is a limit both internal in its being recognised *and* external in its stubborn refusal to be domesticated. It is this productive logic of a void negativity—pregnant with potentialities in its empty form—that political difference as formal ontology denotes although as such it is never encountered in the ontic world. Not because any inclusion in the order of signification is necessarily an act of betrayal (as if the gap between genuine novelty or interruption and lived word order is by definition unbridgeable *á la* Laclau or Derrida), but because (and both possibilities have to be accepted as real) its phenomenological 'embodiment' may take both the form of the refusal of its productive double impotence and that of its projection as a weak messianic force.

Despite the distinct antinomian tendencies in his work, Agamben has recently provided a very good description of this double hermeneutics that we have described as tragicomic and that foregrounds a kind of messianism that avoids both the allure of exceptionalism and the pessimism of world-negating catastrophe. In March 2009, Agamben was invited to speak in Paris' Notre-Dame Cathedral in the presence of the bishop of Paris and a number of other high-ranking Church officials. References in this speech to messianic forces that are juxtaposed to the law are still present and scornfully indignant against the Church's capitulation to the powers of this world. Equally unyielding remained his understanding of economic theology as by definition caught up in the 'infernal' legalistic and biopolitical governance that permeates our world. However, surprisingly enough, he also seemed to suggest a new direction, one that seeks to

maintain a dialectical tension between canonical forms of politics and their messianic nullification:

> By placing origin and end in contact with one another, this force endlessly fulfils and ends time. Let us call this force Law or State, dedicated as it is to economy, which is to say, dedicated as it is to the indefinite—and indeed infinite—governance of the world. As for the second force, let us call it messiah, or Church; its economy is the economy of salvation, and by this token is essentially completed. The only way that a community can form and last is if these poles are present and a dialectical tension between them prevails. (Agamben 2012, pp. 34–5)

Two contradictory imperatives are implied here whose paradoxical confluence suggests a dynamic relationship between action (politics) and judgement (critique). On the one hand, reflection on and respect for difference and diversity seems to run contrary to the imperatives of successful political action. Indeed, success in politics is usually associated with the active and uncompromising promotion of ideas, interests and beliefs that are held to be substantially true, not only instrumentally so. On the other hand, in our cynical postmodern, post-ideological societies strong convictions in politics are almost automatically equated with the politics of extremity as exemplified at the moment by the rising forces of populist xenophobic Right or the equally exclusivist and militaristic politics of Islamic fundamentalism. The antidote offered by the postmodern Left to these politics of cultural *ressentiment* and racist ultra-violence is the recognition that the prerequisite for entering into a dialogic or agonistic conversation with diverse others is the ability to relativise one's own commitments. Dialogic or agonistic faith is not the unshakable ground for resolute action, but a form of self-censoring, a capacity to acknowledge the contestability of one's visceral, deep-seated beliefs, eventually an attitude of self-distancing. Yet, this latest incarnation of the Enlightenment's (Kant's really) call for maturity (*Mündigkeit*) itself relies on an act of exclusion: 'we the enlightened or (Rorty's) ironic liberals who can cultivate inner doubt and reservation' as opposed to the barbaric fundamentalists, utopian revolutionists or conservative doomsdayers that are still plagued by their fantasies of radical transformation or nostalgic parochialism.

To exit this suffocating constellation of philosophical, cultural and political blackmail, this book proposed a version of Žižek's Badiouian politics of militancy—itself a species of Heidegger's reading of Pauline

faith as enactment—supplemented by a proper participatory understanding of Paul's messianism and incarnational Christology, one that would not try to deny or erase the tragic element in messianic nihilism nor would submit to a passive nihilist reading of it. It is, rather, one that 'happily'—in the Benjaminian as well as in the Christian sense of 'happy sorrow' (*charmolupē*)—reflects on the tragicomic incarnational structure of Christian hope refusing to relax the eschatological tension between the 'already' (history as already carrying the 'disease'—that is, the death of death [*thanatō thanaton*]—that heals it) and the 'not yet' (the promise that acts as condemnation of every totalitarian closure of history and as indictment of worldly idols).

The key concern of Žižek's Badiouian anxieties is a rearticulation of universalism stripped of the notoriety ascribed to it by the post-structuralist suspicion towards its homogenising effects and re-equipped with the ability to mobilise passions and reinstate a proper dimension of truth in politics. For Žižek, true universalism is the militant attachment to a divisive struggle and involves the defence of a truth that forces us to take sides in a struggle. The division it mobilises is not the division between different cultures, groups and subgroups, but a Pauline 'division of division itself' which runs across and through the social and cultural fault-lines, between those who recognise themselves in this truth, and those who deny or ignore it. True universality is, in that sense, a new form of solidarity that does not rest on pluralism as the recognition of a neutral space of transcultural communication, or a hermeneutic horizon of cosmopolitan communication or an agonistic terrain of respectful interfaith or ideological competition but, rather, on the violent experience of how, across the cultural, religious, social and political divides, human beings share the same 'vertical' antagonism, this dark and uncanny excess or drive that, as Freud (2010) would say, goes beyond the pleasure principle. According to Žižek (1999, p. 127), this evil enjoyment, gained from missing one's target rather than from fulfilling one's wish, should be strictly differentiated from the surplus excitement derived out of Nietzsche's self-affirmative will overcoming life-dissipating nihilism:

> [W]hat Nietzsche denounces as the 'nihilistic' gesture to counteract life-asserting instincts, Freud and Lacan conceive as the very basic structure of human drive as opposed to natural instincts. In other words, what Nietzsche cannot accept is the radical dimension of the death drive—the fact that the excess of the Will over a mere self-contended satisfaction is always mediated

> by the 'nihilistic' stubborn attachment to Nothingness. The death drive is not merely a direct nihilistic opposition to any life-asserting attachment; rather, it is the very formal structure of the reference to Nothingness that enables us to overcome the stupid self-contended life-rhythm, in order to become 'passionately attached' to some Cause—be it love, art, knowledge or politics—for which we are ready to risk everything.

This fundamental ambivalence of the death drive is the cause of human beings' simultaneous demise and splendour since the failure to project any effective self-mastery and control over the world is the very same presupposition to have any life worth living for at all.[3] The transition to the messianic nihilism of double kenosis—Žižek's 'christianisation' of the Lacanian register of the drive—is simply a redoubling of that experience of loss or, else, the act of persisting on that very same void that remains inscrutable, indiscernible and, yet, inescapably embodied not only in the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and the downtrodden of this world, that is, the outcasts of the social order, but also in the 'weak part' that resides in every power structure, governance apparatus or biopolitical instrumentality—usually comically exposed in the way these huge Leviathans of neo-liberal biopolitical governance, such as the global financial system, the humanitarian-military intervention machine or the complex Eurozone structures of sovereign-debt monitoring, not only fail miserably to deliver their self-proclaimed objectives, but are also often clueless about how to address the unintended consequences their own actions ceaselessly generate, ultimately revealing that, in fact, the 'Emperor is naked'.

None of this is to deny the absurdities, destruction, corruption and often oppressive moralising that accompany the operation of sovereign authorities and neo-liberal biopolitical structures, especially in their collusion with the religion of humanitarianism and the gospel of capitalist modernisation and one-track economic development with its deleterious effects of natural resource depletion and ecological degradation. Equally, it is no doubt tragically insane that we have organised our lives in such absurd ways that well over 800 million people do not have enough to eat, 783 million do not have access to clean water, almost half a billion 'groan' in sweatshops and degrading labour conditions while, even in the so-called developed world, millions of middle-class citizens have seen their living standards drop sharply and their lives stuck in unending debt and austerity cycles. But the knowledge and unequivocal recognition of these tragedies

are not there to justify any responses driven by dreams of mastery, control and utility-maximisation, exactly because a properly messianic perspective recognises the lure of depoliticisation and disaster behind visions of self-mastery or what Camus would call the 'sovereign logic' as well as the logic of autoimmunity that renders the exercise of nihilistic, fundamentalist or revolutionist ultra-violence the mirror image of sovereignty's 'productive intelligence' (Camus 2013).

Messianic meontology, however, does not only alert us to the dangers of submitting to worldly gods, but also reminds us that true nihilism is a form of re-enchantment of our political imagination by traversing the void, that is, seizing the very same opportunities (*aphormai*) the law inherently affords, not for its subversion (that would refuel the mythic cycle of order and its transgression, the logic of sovereignty and its revolutionary reproduction), but for rendering inoperative its economy of utility and commandment. Such a re-enchanted imaginary, forces us (indeed, in that sense, messianic nihilism is no less violent) to recognise that our sufferings and failures are no natural disaster, but a result of the impoverishment of our imagination and of our inability to think and commit to alternative visions of political (see, e.g. Milbank 2014) and social (see, e.g. Srnicek and Williams 2015) organisation based on criteria alternative to utility, interest or security, such as beauty and charity. Milbank's *Beyond Secular Order*, a postmodern proposal for a post-liberal, post-sovereign organisation of international political order based on neglected 'socialist' values such as the nobility of creativity and the beauty of virtuous hierarchies and Srnicek and Williams' vision of a post-work, hyper-modern capitalism based on a political demand for full automation and technological innovation in *Inventing the Future*: *Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, may initially appear as odd bedfellows. As it seems, however, in addition to their common opposition to liberal humanism and the neo-liberal economic consensus, they share enough in their diversity to be employed as examples of what a re-enchanted 'already' might look like, especially in their daring to think of the 'now' as already 'graced' or pregnant with repoliticising possibilities. Notwithstanding their significant differences, especially in their diverging attitudes to modernity and technology, both projects focus on replacing the current exploitative logic of global capitalism with an environment in which different values will be prioritised, including a redefinition of the value of labour; a re-enchanted materialism; an openness to difference, not as something to be tolerated, but as having a productive, creative logic of its own; a common appreciation of decen-

tralised, yet hierarchical (a virtuous vanguardism) political networks and, not least of all, the mobilisation of love as political category, expressed not as cheap sentimentality or another humanistic ideal, but as an affective commitment to enacting different visions of the world.

And yet, such confident enterprises can never be an excuse for not fully assuming the risks, failures and wreckages of political life in the current, mixed, impure, mutually held 'third city' where we all live our lives (see Rose 1996, p. 26) or for embellishing the dramas, evils and horrible destruction that make up the stuff of our past nightmares, our current misrecognitions and possibly our future regrets too. On this account, a sense of the tragic is never eliminated:

> Political action is caught in a strictly context-dependent double bind that negotiates between responsibility for the commandment of non-violence and the responsibility of being drawn into a situation in which that commandment might have to be violated. (Critchley 2012, p. 17)

As Gillian Rose (1992, p. 284) put it in an almost Heideggerian/Pauline way, 'without anxiety, how could we recognize the equivocal middle?' Or 'without examination of the *broken* middle' from which both possibilities of holiness and unfreedom arise, how can we avoid reifying both? Similarly, the messianic tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' reminds us that any vision of transformation or solidarity that does not submit to the anguish and mystery (i.e. the structure of the enactment of proclamation) of a subjectivity constituted in powerlessness is liable to end either in resignation or in self-destructive Prometheanism. Such a tragicomic subjectivity discovers in impotence the death of its most precious certainties, even of those born in faith and piety (as some notion that virtue will be rewarded with happiness).

I will close with a counter-intuitive image of beauty that is perhaps ideally suited to convey the picture of such a powerless, yet invincible, *politeuma* (the Greek word for constitution, not merely as a collection of laws and institutions, but also as a way of life). In Greek-Orthodox temples—in a beautiful short-circuit of the events of crucifixion and resurrection—the icon of the crucified Jesus is accompanied by a crowning inscription that implies the only existence, as Paul would say, messianic subjects can be boastful of. Above the hanging, mutilated, humiliated and wretched body of a condemned Christ—an outlaw for the Roman state, a scandal for His own community and a fool for Greek philosophers—the sign paradoxically declares: *Ὁ Βασιλεὺς τῆς Δόξης* ('The King of Glory') (Fig. 7.1).

Fig. 7.1 © robertharding/Alamy Stock Photo

Notes

1. In his commentary on St Paul, Agamben (2005, pp. 62–8) refers to the 'cut of Apelles' mentioned by Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The phrase alludes to the possibility of a line divided within itself and experiencing its 'partition from outside itself'. The idea is similar to the Lacanian notion of 'extimacy' and denotes the impossible condition of possibility, the parallax view that structures our access to symbolic reality. Apelles was perhaps the most celebrated painter of antiquity famous for his shading technique. The anecdote which explains the metaphor, also handed down to us by Pliny, refers to Apelles' ability to draw lines of extreme thinness, thus permitting him to redivide a dividing line already drawn on a painting between two colours.
2. For the importance of the concept of disease (*nosos*) for this double hermeneutics as the other of politics that is simultaneously what causes the destruction and effects the healing of the body politic, see Papagiannopoulos (2016); and for its homology, especially in its ambiguous enactment and effects, with the 'death drive' or what has been called in the Western ethical experience 'the voice of conscience', see Ojakangas (2013).

3. This idea of the 'death drive' as the self that finds itself in its own annihilation can also be read through the Derridean notion of the movement of autoimmunity. When the self's immunity system becomes so strong that threatens its life, the latter—in order to stay alive—attacks its one immune system, its own system of self-protection. In a sense, since the self can remain itself only if it destroys what protects it from alien elements, it seems that, paradoxically, it can only 'preserve' itself by being radically open to the non-self that threatens to destroy it. The lesson here is that pure immunity (absolute security) is the death of the self, while the death of that illusion is its life. This aporetic movement of 'selfhood' is more complicated than suicide since the self finds itself (its life) in losing itself (see Derrida 2005b, p. 45; Arfi 2012a; Esposito 2013; compare with John, 12:25: 'He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal').

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