

**Democracy Against:
The Antinomies of Politics**

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Abstract

How should democracy be thought? How do we go about organising its concept? On what basis? And to what end? Rather than confine democracy to an ancient political constitution or modern system of government, this dissertation pursues a conception of democracy often concealed by the customary institutional analysis. Written as a sustained appraisal of the often antagonistic encounter between philosophy and politics, as a strategy to reframe democracy an emancipatory, transformative agency of the demos, it is proposed that the topic of democracy be initiated according to what democracy is against. This approach serves to entirely reconsider the question of democracy, engendering a renewed interpretation of what the “power of the people” can mean. Through a series of detailed studies of Jacques Rancière, Claude Lefort and Miguel Abensour, it is argued that democracy invariably appears as a counter or objection to an established social order in which a spectrum of familiar modes of domination are already in place. As the initiation of a unique political controversy and dispute, democracy is presented as an unprecedented challenge to unrestricted and arbitrary rule, concentrations of authority, strategies of inequality and hierarchies of all kinds. It is identified with the forces that seek to expose, contest and transform oppressive and exclusionary

arrangements and practices from below, from the outside, from a minoritarian positionality. Ultimately seeking more inclusive, participatory and egalitarian institutions and relations, democracy is consequently conceived as the perpetual democratisation of society.

After a preliminary reflection on the Hellenistic roots of politics itself, the dissertation undertakes an extensive analysis of what is determined to be democracy's most general form: its being-against the *archê* (the underlying principle that divides governor from governed, ruler from ruled). It then proceeds to consider two contemporary theoretical models that uncover the against in more distinguishing terms: Rancière's democracy against the police and Abensour's democracy against the State. It concludes that contrary to its long tradition since Plato, philosophy can enhance and embolden an emancipatory politics, as Lefort demonstrates, when it ventures to advance a radical, "savage" conception of democracy organised to critique the here and now.

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A project such as this cannot be completed in isolation. As Cornelius Castoriadis would remind us, the lesson of democracy is that *one cannot be wise alone*. I would like to therefore take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all those who played a role in its realisation.

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Introduction

The trials of thinking against

Thunder on! Stride on, Democracy! Strike with vengeful stroke!
-Walt Whitman

Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* is often read as a sustained, undeviating chronicle tracing the punctuated democratisation of Athens by a succession of prominent reformers from Solon to Cleisthenes to Pericles. This reading lends itself to the view that the formal institution of Athenian democracy may largely be attributed to a few exceptional visionaries whose unrivalled status and influence permitted the dramatic transformation of the Athenian political landscape *from above*. And yet, interwoven with this familiar narrative, fragments of another may be extracted and assembled from Aristotle's text. This is the narrative of a vibrant, vocal and discontented demos whose persistent, often tumultuous activity played a decisive role both in the creation and preservation of the democratic institutions of their city. Let us consider but a single example. While the profound achievements of the Cleisthenian reforms rightly occupy a pivotal place in Aristotle's account of the constitutional evolution of the city, the unique series of events that would place

Cleisthenes in the position to realise such reforms is far from overlooked in the text. As Aristotle recounts, with the demise of the tyranny of Hippias (510 B.C.E.), a bitter struggle for control of the city would unfold between Isagoras, a notorious Athenian aristocrat and Cleisthenes of the distinguished house of Alcmaeonid. Although Cleisthenes had won great support of the demos, vowing to transfer the seat of government to them, Isagoras' alliance with Cleomenes soon brought the Spartan king, accompanied by an armed entourage, to Athens to help secure the uncompromised rule of his long time ally. With the backing of Cleomenes, Isagoras successfully forced his rival Cleisthenes into exile, proceeded to dispossess hundreds of prominent Athenian families of their homes and poised to install himself as tyrant, moved to dissolve the citizen's administrative council (*boule*) established by Solon himself. However, according to Aristotle, in a moment of remarkable fortitude, the council resisted the assault and the people of Athens, although without a leader or organisational direction, nevertheless assembled in opposition to Isagoras, declaring their unwavering support for the council. The spontaneous revolt forced Isagoras, Cleomenes and his band of Spartan forces to retreat to the Acropolis where they were besieged for two days by the insurgency. On the third day, a truce was negotiated, Isagoras and Cleomenes were permanently expelled and Cleisthenes was summoned to return to the city. Only then did Cleisthenes, remaining true to his commitment to the demos, proceed to introduce his historic reforms that would ultimately come to mark a new era of Athenian democracy. As Aristotle remarks: "The people had taken control of their affairs, and

Cleisthenes was their leader and champion of the people [...].”¹

While the significance of Cleisthenes’ monumental reforms remains undisputed both historically and politically, the question of how to incorporate such direct emancipatory acts of the demos in a broader theoretical construction of democracy often receives far less consideration. Are examples of such defiance, confrontation and opposition merely illustrative of the revolutionary prelude or “democratic excess” of a properly instituted democratic constitution from which we must ultimately derive its concept, or do such events remain indicative of something essential to the meaning of democracy itself? Echoing this somewhat alternative reading of Aristotle’s *Constitution*, in a series of writings that aim to reevaluate the legacy of democracy’s often discordant, “fugitive” character, Sheldon Wolin certainly wishes to remind us that beyond the accomplishments of the great reformers, Athenian democracy was considerably shaped by the regular disruptions and interventions of the demos. From recurring class conflicts to disputes over exclusion to campaigns against those with extraordinary influence in the assembly (*ecclesia*), Wolin maintains that the perpetual democratisation of Athens was the result of a succession of popular uprisings that would repeatedly challenge the limits and conventions of existing institutions and relations. Far from the fixed or settled constitutional form we find in the political philosophy of Plato or Aristotle, Wolin sees the story of Athenian democracy as one of a dynamic and ever evolving

¹ Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 225. Also see Josiah Ober, “The Athenian Revolution of 508/7 B.C.E.: Violence, Authority, and the Origins of Democracy,” *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*, eds. Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

political culture that not only culminates in the popular control of its major institutions of government, but also includes those intermittent acts of social upheaval as well. It is from these resurgent moments of defiance and dissent, however episodic or ephemeral, that the political or libertarian spirit of democracy is collectively renewed and regenerated. For this reason, Wolin suggests, perhaps democracy must ultimately be understood more as a *force* than as a *form*.²

It is precisely these democratic forces or agents that Claude Lefort's extraordinary allusions to "savage" democracy invite us to consider. Although at times Lefort is presented as merely contributing a formal theory of the democratic society,³ his work will prove invaluable in the philosophical exercise of constructing a concept of democracy capable of tracing or mapping its more creative and transformative dimensions and capacities. Scattered across his later writings, Lefort's recurring reference to a savage democracy, although never defined, will tend to evoke those revolutionary moments in which democracy, hardly reducible to a form of government or set of institutions, manifests as a profound challenge to oppressive, hierarchical and exclusionary arrangements and practices in society. Perhaps less a description of democracy than an experimental strategy for thinking about it, Lefort's savage democracy not only functions to open up the concept of

2 Many of these themes cut across Wolin's writings on democracy. See "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy," *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), "Fugitive Democracy," *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and "Postmodern Democracy: Virtual or Fugitive?," *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

3 For example, this is how Slavoj Žižek evaluates Lefort in his Afterword to Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 73.

democracy so that it may be considered in entirely new ways, it challenges us to explore the limits and potentials of what the *power of the people* can mean. As the “libertarian idea” of democracy, it calls into question everything about how democracy is typically represented, interpreted, perceived. Thinking democracy savage demands that we distance its concept from those mitigated, domesticated representations of democracy so ubiquitous today, allowing us to rediscover the radical imperative that remains at the root of democracy itself. It compels us to conceive democracy in terms of what it can do, what it can become and what it can transform. Accordingly, what Lefort’s savage democracy may ultimately seek to liberate is the way we venture to think about democracy and the process through which we come to organise its concept philosophically.

It is for this reason that Lefort’s savage democracy, however unconventional, provides an ideal vehicle through which we may pursue a conception of democracy formulated according to those moments of contestation and dissensus, according to what it counters and disputes, according to what it renders irreducibly politically problematic, according to what it posits itself *against*. If democracy can be understood to represent an unprecedented political challenge to unrestricted and arbitrary rule, concentrations of authority, strategies of inequality and elaborate exclusionary practices, it is because democracy contains within it the agents of an against, an against which is not simply a consequence of democracy, but forms the basis and substance of its very politics. Despite its neglect by many of even the most exhaustive studies of democracy, this against remains integral to its

constitution, orientation and institutional expression. It is what propels democracy forward, what informs its targets and objectives, what galvanises its unyielding resolve towards a more participatory, more egalitarian society. Perhaps this is how democracy's *power of the people* should be understood.

Why is it that democracy invariably appears in the form of an against? Contrary to Tocqueville, who discovers the epitome of the natural conditions for democracy in the open and unobstructed plains of the uncultivated American landscape,⁴ historically, democracy is never constituted in a void, but manifests in a dense social field in which various orders of rule, modes of domination and hierarchies of all kinds are already very much established. Democracy emerges as a particular response, an emancipatory act, a transformative agent in society. It initiates a unique political controversy and dispute. It renders the foundations of a given social order or system of rule intrinsically problematic. Consequently, democracy's very form may be understood to be determined by the context of its inception, by the particular social order which it comes into being to confront and dispute. This is why it is possible to identify, in different places, at different times, the manifestation of a *democracy against oligarchy*, a *democracy against monarchy*, a *democracy against patriarchy*, a *democracy against colonialism*, a *democracy against capitalism*. If democracy cannot be isolated from the objects it appears against, it is because those objects form the basis of its particular incarnation, its particular mode of *being-against*. What democracy is against is never extrinsic or

4 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), chapter 1.

secondary to democracy itself. What it is against remains immanent to its very form.

It is precisely the nature of this against that interests us here: its logic, politics and broader social and philosophical implications. Moreover, given that the bibliography of sources which consider such questions is in fact quite limited, this is a theme that will naturally draw our research to a very particular body of literature. And yet, this study is not a monograph of any single author, nor does it ultimately locate its theses within the conceptual framework of any single theory or work. Instead, it is composed of a series of immanent critiques, extracting, developing and evaluating particular concepts, arguments, analyses and terminologies from a selection of authors whose work will serve to illuminate various facets of this larger topic. Although the question of democracy will be situated in the broader context of the history of political thought, I will primarily be drawing from the writings of three figures in contemporary continental philosophy whose work has only more recently begun to be considered by a rigorous Anglo-American scholarship: Jacques Rancière, Claude Lefort and Miguel Abensour. While their projects differ considerably and conform to no single tradition, perhaps what their respective theories of democracy all have in common is something of a shared heritage. The mature work of Rancière, Lefort and Abensour would emerge from a quintessentially French, anti-totalitarian, post-Marxist, post-May '68 environment in which a generation of young philosophers, political thinkers and activists would put their entire inherited tradition of the left (from the PCF to

Trotskyism to Althusser to Marx himself) into question.⁵ One of the many consequences of this experience, it would appear, was a renewed interest in the question of democracy. And yet, of those who would go on to pursue a more rigorous and sustained theoretical evaluation of democracy—Rancière, Lefort and Abensour included—many would come to reject its standard “Statist” definition which tends to confine its meaning to a collection of institutions, periodic elections, rule of law and the rights of man. Furthermore, perhaps more problematic, it was clearly recognised that any proposal for an alternative, more nuanced conception of democracy would inevitably have to confront and contradict an entire discourse that since the second world war had regularly employed the term “democracy” to engineer and organise consent, justify often violent imperialist policy abroad and expand capital’s uncompromising dominion over society. Finally, given democracy’s rather contentious position in the history of political thought since Plato, the proponents of the so-called “return to political philosophy” in the 1970s and 1980s—insofar as it described a contemporary return to the established practices and attitudes of its orthodox tradition—could not be entrusted to deliver the concept of democracy from this precarious status.⁶ In this regard, if Rancière, Lefort and Abensour can be read collectively, perhaps what their work serves to demonstrate is that democracy is a question that necessitates an altogether different

5 Consider for example Cornelius Castoriadis, “Marxism: A Provisional Assessment,” *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), Claude Lefort, “The Contradiction of Trotsky,” *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) and Jacques Rancière, *Althusser’s Lesson* (London: Continuum, 2011).

6 See Miguel Abensour, “Pour une philosophie politique critique?,” *Pour une philosophie politique critique* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2009), 265-7. Also see Jacques Rancière’s comments in “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 42-4 and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 92-3.

approach. Carefully navigating both history and the history of philosophy, their writings provide us the necessary theoretical tools to effectively disentangle its concept, so that it may be radically reconstructed, engaged in new ways and placed against a prevailing order that limits and confines its powers and potentials. Indeed, the emancipation of democracy *in thought* is precisely what Lefort elicits with savage democracy. Therefore, perhaps we may decipher something of an against inscribed in their very approach: a certain resistance or objection to both the State's appropriation of a compromised, domesticated democracy on the one hand and a philosophical tradition that abandons it a disruptive, disorderly and degenerate form on the other. By positing a figure of democracy that refuses this position, perhaps it is this approach that would ultimately yield the first of traces of democracy's own being-against.

We shall begin our analysis in Greece, organising our preliminary questions and basic theoretical framework largely according to the context, terms and experience particular to ancient democracy. Throughout Part One it is Plato who will dominate our attention. Although Plato's criticisms of democracy are well known, often regarded as the archetype of what would prove to be philosophy's rather consistent appraisal of democracy throughout its long history, particularly when expressed in a somewhat veiled allegorical form, his disparaging portrayal of democracy will prove to reveal far more. While often directed at its more epistemological, sociological and psychological implications, Plato's persistent attacks on what he identifies as democracy's underlying "anarchic" condition, its

lack of any proper foundation or principle, will not only inform the basis of our approach to democracy more generally, but inadvertently uncover what is essential to the meaning of politics itself. *Politics is not the foundation upon which one rules another. It is the condition in which the foundation of rule is called into question.* This revelation will serve to initiate a necessary preliminary analysis of politics right from the start. Revisiting the Hellenistic roots of this ancient term (*politikos*), we will pursue its basic ontology not according to any philosophy primarily, but as prompted by Hannah Arendt, through a predominantly historical account of its cultural origins.⁷ This will provide something of a consistent conceptual background which the more specific interpretations of politics particular to Rancière, Lefort and Abensour may all interact and negotiate with throughout the course of this study. Inextricably bound to the Greek invention of politics, a condition we will find unique to democracy alone, keeping with our analysis of Plato, we will then encounter our first substantive example of democracy's against in what will be determined to be its most universal or general form: its *being-against the archê*. As Arendt and Rancière both develop through close readings of Plato's *Laws* and *Republic*, the archê represents the underlying theoretical principle that functions to simultaneously establish and justify the essential divide that separates governor from governed, ruler from ruled.⁸ Whether it installs the rule of the king

7 I will largely rely on Christian Meier's monumental study *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

8 This problem is discussed across many of their political writings. See for example Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics" and *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007), as well as Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

(*monarchy*), the rule of an opulent minority (*oligarchy*) or the hypothetical rule of the wisest among us (Plato's own ideal city), the logic of the *archê* is the same. In all its forms, it is this very logic that democracy will render intrinsically problematic wherever and whenever it appears. As Plato clearly recognises, not only does democracy itself lack an *archê*, its defiant claim of an *anarchic* equality operates to undermine those very hierarchies, divisions and social conventions constructed upon the foundations of the *archê* itself. Therefore, contradicting philosophy's rather monotonous catalogue of constitutional forms, unlike monarchy, oligarchy and the philosopher's own imagined utopian city, democracy does not simply represent yet another regime of rule. Instead, it represents an unprecedented challenge to the very division between ruler and ruled. This is the basis of its politics.

Building upon these arguments, we will return to this line of inquiry in Part Three, drawing on more modern implications of democracy and broadening our analysis considerably. While democracy always appears against the *archê* that underlies so many regimes of rule, this in no way exhausts the objects it can be understood to reject, dispute and render politically problematic. Although the forms of its against likely remain innumerable, here we will advance two theoretical models that formulate democracy's being-against in more distinguishing terms: Rancière's *democracy against the police* and Abensour's *democracy against the State*. While not entirely compatible, these two models will serve to inform and enhance the basis of our critique substantially, introducing new terms, broadening

our perspective and clarifying our theses. We can only briefly survey their core arguments here. First introduced in his volume *Disagreement*, Rancière will clearly posit a concept of democracy in direct opposition to what he outlines generally as the “order of the police.” Largely drawing from Foucault’s late work on governmentality,⁹ Rancière understands the police in its most comprehensive definition, much closer to its original meaning in 17th and 18th century Europe. Conceived as a vast set of rationalities, institutions and processes that govern over both the organisation and representation of a community, covering everything from the distribution of roles, functions and spaces to the exercise of authority itself, for Rancière, the police is emblematic of the ubiquitous practice of social ordering, of implementing the proper order of society without interruption and without dispute.¹⁰ For this reason, Rancière sees the police as intrinsically hostile to the agents of politics. Inversely, he identifies democracy’s logic of equality as an analogous counter to the logic of the police. It is this tension, nexus or point of intersection between democracy and the police that Rancière will position at the very centre of his political theory. In this context, Rancière elaborates democracy’s against in terms of a defiant act of *subjectivation* in which the manifestation of a political subject initiates a polemical scene challenging the categories, identities and classifications of the police distribution, frustrating its basic symbolic representation of society.¹¹ Therefore, beyond his indispensable analysis of the

9 See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Picador/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

10 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 28.

11 Ibid., 35-42.

archê, what Rancière contributes to a theory of democracy's against is a description of the principal agent through which this against tends to be expressed: the political subject. By inventing new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking about the community, its parts, places and roles, democracy's act of subjectivation creates new possibilities for both the organisation and representation of the community itself. Likewise, at the very same time as Rancière juxtaposes democracy and the police, Abensour will develop a theory of democracy that explores its inherently antagonistic relation to the State. Working primarily through Marx's early critique of Hegel¹² and therefore revisiting the somewhat heterodoxical question of Marx's own contribution to democratic theory, Abensour's appropriately titled volume *Democracy Against the State* perhaps represents the most sustained theoretical assessment of democracy's formal opposition to the principles of the State. Situated against the backdrop of Lefort's Machiavellian conception of the political, through a series of close textual readings of the young Marx, Abensour extracts and develops that enigmatic reference to "true democracy" in which Marx postulates the formal disappearance of the State itself. Reading Marx, if Abensour understands democracy and the State as fundamentally antithetical, antagonistic and ultimately irreconcilable, it is because he identifies the State-form as the political alienation of the self-determination of the demos, as the formal separation of the constitution of the social from the originary subject that institutes it. Democracy is the agent that resists this operation. Accordingly, Abensour interprets true democracy as the

12 Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'," *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

permanent *reduction* of the State as an abstract constitutional form.¹³ It is what blocks or obstructs the State as a unifying, totalising principle. It is what generates social forms other than those mediated by the State. Hence, through a rather idiosyncratic examination of Marx, Abensour is not only able to untangle and distance the concept of democracy from that of the State, but at the same time, to bind it categorically to the perpetual struggle for social emancipation. For Abensour, a democracy against the State conceives a democracy that cannot be defined by a constitutional form, but testifies to the “always possible emergence of human struggle.”¹⁴ To this struggle, he will at times give the name “insurgent” democracy.

Finally, located at the heart of the dissertation, Part Two, structured like something of an intermezzo, will be dedicated to those larger philosophical questions initiated and set in motion by Lefort’s savage democracy, particularly centred around the pivotal theme of the French Revolution. In part, to conceive democracy according to its being-against is an attempt think democracy *anew* or think democracy *otherwise*. In this regard, perhaps the underlying problem that occupies us throughout this study is one that ultimately remains philosophical in nature. In its simplest formulation, we are concerned with a series of very basic questions, but questions that often go overlooked nevertheless: *how should democracy be thought? How do we go about organising its concept? On what basis? And to what end?* If we accept Lefort’s most elementary position that modern

13 Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), chapter 5.

14 Ibid., 100.

democracy's symbolic displacement of the body of the king opens to a condition of *indeterminacy*, lacking any fixed or absolute foundation, then we must likewise accept that insofar as democracy remains inextricably bound to this condition, there is no immutable basis from which we may definitively derive its concept. Democracy is a phenomenon that deposits our concepts in a place of radical uncertainty and thus compels a mode of thinking characterised by a persistent and interminable questioning. No doubt, this explains why philosophy discovers its origins with ancient Greek democracy. According to Lefort, philosophy strives towards that "unlocalisable and indeterminable question," animating a form of interrogation that must likewise remain just as indefinite and open-ended in scope.¹⁵ This is precisely what Lefort incites with savage democracy. As Abensour demonstrates in his own analysis, the *savage* not only functions to keep the question of democracy unsettled and unresolved in any absolute sense, urging us to push our thinking of democracy ever further, it simultaneously orients that concept towards its most uncompromised and resilient incarnation: its political acts of emancipation, its endless capacity for conflict and contestation, its enduring momentum towards a more democratic society.¹⁶ This is imperative for thinking the against. Therefore, tracing those savage democratic moments across his writings and interviews, it is with Lefort that we will ultimately bind and intersect what is most imperative to our

15 Claude Lefort, "Philosopher?," *Writing: The Political Test* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 248-9. Also see Oliver Marchart, "The Machiavellian Moment Retheorised: Claude Lefort," *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 88.

16 See Miguel Abensour's indispensable essay "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy'," *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*.

own conceptual construction of democracy here: the *savage*, the *against* and *democratisation*. It is for this reason that Lefort's savage democracy forms the basis of our approach to the generation of its concept.

Consequently, if this study contributes to the field of political philosophy as opposed to political science is it because it is primarily concerned with democracy at the level of the concept. Throughout, I shall largely adhere to the general formulation of philosophy as expounded by Gilles Deleuze. Following Deleuze, if philosophy does not simply correspond to some vague notion of contemplation, reflection or communication, it is because philosophy is primarily a practical exercise in concept construction. Concepts are given neither by nature, nor by the heavens above. They must be produced, fabricated, composed. This is a creative process. Deleuze sees the history of philosophy as a history of provocations, of encounters in which a series of problems present themselves to philosophy from a place outside of philosophy itself. Philosophy navigates and evaluates these problems by inventing and engineering concepts and relations of concepts through which the contours and complexities of these problems may be thought in coherent and productive ways.¹⁷ For this reason, although concepts may be adopted and developed by later philosophers, they will always bear a trace of the original historical problems that initially provoked them. We will discover one of the earliest surviving examples of such a provocation in the work of Plato. As we shall see,

¹⁷ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), chapter 1. Interestingly, in a rare moment, Rancière appears to identify something of his own method with Deleuze's general approach to philosophy as concept construction. See Jacques Rancière, Max Blechman, Anita Chari and Rafeeq Hasan, "Democracy, Dissensus and the Aesthetics of Class Struggle: An Exchange with Jacques Rancière," *Historical Materialism* vol. 13, iss. 4 (2005): 298-300.

what Plato's epistemology and political philosophy have in common is that they both offer a particular solution to an identical problem, the predominant problem that presented itself to Plato in classical Athens: the problem of *democracy*. Just as his concept of the Forms represents a particular navigation and evaluation of the problem of democratic *doxa*, the condition that appears to circulate opinion infinitely without standard or measure, his concept of the properly ordered city (governed by a privileged class of philosopher-rulers) likewise represents a particular navigation and evaluation of the problem of democracy's radical claim of equality, an anarchic equality applicable to both "equals and unequals alike." Therefore, according to Deleuze, whether it be Plato's *Forms*, Leibniz's *monads* or Bergson's *duration*, concepts are not structured to reference external objects or states of affairs and cannot be evaluated in terms of true and false. Rather, as the basic tools of philosophy, concepts represent ideal constructions that help us map, formulate and think through problems posed to us by our own historical milieu. And yet, for Deleuze, it is not Plato, as something of a reactionary, who grasps the true political potential of philosophy's practice of concept construction, but Nietzsche. Reading Nietzsche, Deleuze explains that if philosophy does not strive to represent the world in thought, it is because its first task is to organise concepts that act upon the world, that counter the world in its present form and help us to *think against it*.¹⁸ This is precisely what Nietzsche understands as philosophy's critical or "untimely"

18 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 107. Also see Bryan Nelson, "New Earth, New People: Deleuze, Democracy and the Politics of the Future." *Movements in Time: Revolution, Social Justice and Times of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 79.

vocation. In the foreword to the second essay of his own *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche distinguishes an untimely philosophy as: “acting counter to our time, and thereby acting on our time, and let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.”¹⁹ In Nietzsche’s view, it is not enough for philosophy to simply represent the present in thought; it must *resist* it. As Deleuze reiterates: “This is why philosophy has an essential relation to time: it is always against its time, [a] critique of the present world.”²⁰ An untimely philosophy is one that realises its capacity to resist, to think against, to critique the present world as we find it and as we have inherited it. This is the use of philosophy. *This is when philosophy becomes political*. Properly speaking, political philosophy is not a genre or category of philosophy; it is not the philosophy that reflects on the topics of politics. Rather, in the spirit of Nietzsche, philosophy only becomes political when it renders itself *untimely*, when the concepts it generates are created to counter, to challenge the conditions of the present time, in the hopes of changing them, of participating in shaping a new and better world than the one we have today.²¹ In this respect, as a philosophy devised not only to interpret, but to engage and critique our present conditions, perhaps Deleuze’s general take on political philosophy will not be found dissimilar from what Abensour, drawing not from Nietzsche, but from Arendt and Lefort, will describe as a *critical political philosophy*.²² Perhaps, in our own time, such a critical political engagement begins with a new concept of democracy.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60.

20 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 107.

21 Nelson, “New Earth, New People: Deleuze, Democracy and the Politics of the Future,” 79-81.

22 See Abensour, “Pour une philosophie politique critique?”

Therefore, building a concept of democracy need not be concerned with devising a blueprint for the “perfect” democratic society, a democracy only suitable, as Rousseau has it, for the gods.²³ Nor should we concern ourselves with deconstruction’s messianic promise of a transcendent “democracy to come,” a pure, untarnished democracy posited in an ideal horizon and perpetually projected into a future that never arrives.²⁴ Rather, a critical, untimely or “political” philosophy is the one that creates its concepts in the present time, for its time, and following Nietzsche, *against* its time. As Lefort repeatedly submits in his monumental work on Machiavelli, the point of departure for any exercise of political inquiry must always be the problems and dilemmas particular to the “*here and now*” (*hic et nunc*). Clearly, such an approach to philosophy is imperative for our study of democracy here. For what we shall postulate as democracy’s being-against, its challenge to what it objects and disputes in society, is neither arbitrary, nor an end in itself; it makes no promises, projects nothing into the future, but is concerned only with the *democratisation* of the present, the ongoing battle for more participatory and egalitarian institutions and relations. This is very much the democracy that we discover in the theories of Rancière, Lefort and Abensour.

For this reason, this study cannot claim to offer a “complete” theory of democracy. In many ways, it remains fundamentally incomplete. Important questions regarding the nature of democracy’s own institutions have largely been

23 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 114.

24 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 81.

placed aside and postponed. This does not intend to disregard these institutional problems, but simply attempts to initiate and frame the question of democracy in a different way, from a different starting place. For example, what Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens* appears to demonstrate is not so much that democracy simply resides in a particular set of institutions, but that it is something that plays a decisive role in shaping them. Accordingly, although I will maintain that democracy remains *irreducible* to its institutions, this does not intend to imply that democracy is contrary to them (a concept of democracy that remains incompatible with institutions really must be considered futile and counterproductive from the start—Rancière is occasionally interpreted in this manner).²⁵ However, if democracy does remain irreducible to its institutions, however assembled or arranged, this does suggest that the problem of its institutions does not logically come first, but second. Here, we are interested in those questions that *precede* the problem of democracy's institutions, questions that, if addressed beforehand, will undoubtedly recast those institutional problems in a very different light.

In all likelihood, this study will be approached as a topic of radical democracy.²⁶ But as Abensour reminds us, what terms like “radical” democracy, “savage” democracy, “insurgent” democracy all share in common is that rather than narrow or specify the meaning of democracy, they call on us to resist its ideological appropriation and to prevent its confusion with very different problems, however

²⁵ Rancière will respond to this criticism in *La méthode de l'égalité* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2012), 216.

²⁶ See C. Douglas Lummis's helpful clarification of this term in *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24-5.

important in their own right (such as representative government or rule of law).²⁷ Therefore, as adjectives, as qualifiers, the *radical*, the *savage*, the *insurgent* appear to have a very unique function: unlike “liberal” democracy or “social” democracy, they do not intend to modify, adjust or redirect our concept of democracy in any particular way, but only to draw us towards democracy *in itself*, towards its truly exceptional nature, its powers and potentials.

Against all those shrewd, bickering politicians, against all the apathy he witnessed around him and against all the hostility and bloodshed it was claimed to justify, it is this democracy, turbulent, resilient, that Walt Whitman captures in the poem *Rise, O Days From Your Fathomless Deeps* (1865): “Thunder on! Stride on, Democracy! Strike with vengeful stroke!”²⁸

27 Miguel Abensour, “Insurgent Democracy and Institution,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, xxiii. Also see his comments in Miguel Abensour, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, “Instances démocratiques,” *Vacarme* vol. 48 (été 2009).

28 Walt Whitman, “O Days From Your Fathomless Deeps,” *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 2004), 318.

Part One | Dissolution of the archê

1

Towards democracy's anarchic condition: allegorical origins

...it is a delightful form of government, anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality to equals and unequals alike.

-Plato

The whole political project of Platonism can be conceived as an anti-maritime polemic.

-Jacques Rancière

“Imagine, then, that something like the following happens on a ship or on many ships.” With this Socrates momentarily suspends dialogue with his small, but acquiescent congregation and once again turns to allegory to elucidate his argument. In what follows, Socrates proceeds to narrate a short tale set upon the deck of a naval vessel at sea. What he describes is a vulgar scene of ignorance, bickering, deception and brutality. A bitter rivalry, the many sailors on board, none who have any experience with navigation, quarrel amongst themselves regarding who should take the helm and captain the ship. They boast that navigation is not a teachable skill, that sailing requires no understanding of the seasons, the skies, the stars, the winds, but rather remains a task that anyone can perform. Dismissing the

philosopher a mere stargazer, the sailors clash amongst themselves, throwing each other overboard and threatening to cut one another into pieces. Socrates continues: “I don’t think that you need to examine the simile in detail to see that the ships resemble cities and their attitude to the true philosophers, but you already understand what I mean.”¹ Indeed, the allegory of the State as a ship would not be unfamiliar to his interlocutors, the trope having already appeared both in the lyric poetry of Alcaeus and in the opening speech of Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*. But in Plato’s account in Book III of the *Republic*, this chaotic scene, described in vivid detail by Socrates, in which the wisdom of persecuted philosophers is undermined by a savage band of drunken sailors who blindly rule an aimless vessel in choppy seas, is intended to represent a particular constitution, one which would be well known to his fellow Athenians: a democracy.

What is it about democracy that evokes this image of the sea? As Rancière astutely observes, this is not the only occasion in which Plato’s political philosophy will include such allusions to the maritime experience.² Is it an implicit reference to democratic Athens, the coastal city with an unmatched naval fleet whose economic prosperity, imperial rule and glorious victory over the Persians at the battle of Salamis depended so considerably upon its intimate proximity to the Aegean Sea?³ Or does the seascape allude to something more ontological: a shifting surface in

1 Plato, *Republic*, III, 488a-489d. All references are to Plato, *Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

2 Also see *Gorgias* and the *Laws*.

3 M. I. Finley argues that in many respects, the success of Athenian democracy was contingent upon its imperial power which itself relied upon its naval capabilities at sea. See *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 87.

constant motion, a great depth upon which no foundation can be established, a vast abyss which cannot be mastered or contained, a wild, unpredictable experience of changing winds and turning tides which lacks all the stability and security of dry land?⁴

Perhaps every appraisal of the *Republic*'s objections to democracy will be struck by how little Plato offers in terms of any substantial institutional analysis of the spaces and operational practices that facilitate public participation in the governance of the city. Instead, according to Rancière, what we encounter (not unlike the famous study by Tocqueville) is something which resembles more of a sociological evaluation of the culture and personality discovered in a democratic society: "Plato is the first one to invent that mode of sociological reading we declare to be proper to the modern age, the interpretation that locates underneath the appearances of political democracy an inverse reality: the reality of a state of society where it is the private, egotistical man who governs."⁵ Consequently, it would appear that the object of the ancient philosopher's vehement attacks is less democracy as a set of institutions than as a state of society, a style of life, a psychological orientation. And in this respect, the conduct of the sailors aboard Socrates' allegorical ship will in many ways anticipate Plato's more sustained

4 It is often argued that every political theory implicitly or explicitly alludes to an underlying ontology. See for example Carol C. Gould, "Ontological Foundations of Democracy," *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91 and Alexandros Kioupkiolis, "Keeping it Open: Ontology, Ethics, Knowledge and Radical Democracy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 37, no. 6 (July 2011): 692.

5 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007), 35-6. That Tocqueville offers a "sociology of democracy" is a position supported by Castoriadis as well. See "What Democracy?," *Figures of the Thinkable* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 120-1. For a more substantial analysis of the sociological basis for Plato's rejection of democracy see Thanassis Samaras, *Plato on Democracy* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), chapter 2.

criticisms of what he calls “democratic man” subsequently in the dialogue.⁶

Plato assumes a certain isomorphism between a city’s constitution and the psychology or sensibilities of the inhabitants who dwell there. In an oligarchy we find the oligarchic soul, in a timocracy the timocratic soul, in a tyranny the tyrannical soul, each psychological type corresponding to a particular organisation of the soul in which a spectrum of values or desires become subservient or subordinate to one: the accumulation of wealth (the oligarch), the pursuit of honour (the timocrat), the aspiration for authority and dominion (the tyrant).⁷ But when the discussion inevitably turns to democracy—which so often seems to maintain something of an exceptional status throughout philosophy’s rather monotonous exercise of constitution classification—the problem becomes less straightforward. While Plato will regularly cite equality as democracy’s most distinguishing attribute, it is not some egalitarian sensibility that his psychological typology ultimately understands to dominate the democratic soul, but rather something which remains unnameable: a certain *undecidability*. According to Plato, democracy is distinct from every other political regime in that it represents not a single constitution, but a constitution of constitutions, a “supermarket of constitutions” where one may consume political ideologies as if commodities on the free market.⁸

“For Plato, democracy is in its essence a system of variety, and this applies equally

6 Particularly Book VIII.

7 Gerasimos Santas, “Plato’s Criticism of the Democratic Man in the *Republic*,” *The Journal of Ethics* vol. 5, iss. 1 (2001): 67. For a more general account of the essential relation between constitution and psychology in Plato’s *Republic* see G. R. F. Ferrari, *City and Soul in Plato’s Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapter 3.

8 Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 557d. Also see Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy,” *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 50.

well to what is on offer politically: democracy, he says, is not a constitution, but a bazaar filled with all possible constitutions, where anyone can choose to perceive whichever variety they please.”⁹ In a society in which each may arrange his own life as he sees fit, each according to his own personal constitution, it is here where Plato claims to encounter the greatest variety of dispositions and temperaments. The democratic city is one plagued by an exaggerated, hyperbolic individualism. And yet, even more problematic, beyond this system of variety particular to the democratic constitution as a whole, Plato finds this confused orientation to remain the defining psychological characteristic of each individual democrat. What democratic man lacks, Plato charges, is a consistency of character: he is fickle, erratic, mercurial, temperamental. Just as democracy supposedly ascribes a certain equality to the demos, distributing to each citizen an equal share of rule, the psychology of the democrat is one inflicted by an isomorphic equality of desires.¹⁰ Experiencing his many appetites, motives and inclinations with equal force and immediacy, pursuing the satisfaction of each desire as it arises within him as if selected by lot, unlike the oligarch, timocrat and tyrant, the democratic psyche is distinguished precisely by the *absence* of a dominant desire or consistent teleological orientation; like the infant of psychoanalysis whose reality principle is yet to develop, he lacks both the capacity to organise and coordinate his impulses as well as a stable framework of judgement to evaluate beneficial ends from harmful

9 Jacques Rancière, “The Uses of Democracy,” *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 42.

10 Santas, “Plato’s Criticism of the Democratic Man in the *Republic*,” 62.

ones.¹¹ Infantile, politically and intellectually immature, democratic man is therefore destined to confuse courage with impudence, excellence with extravagance, liberty with anarchy.¹²

Indeed, according to Plato's moral psychological diagnosis, the democrat suffers from a chronic anarchy of the soul, a condition in which the precept of equality proper to democratic politics infects, like a contagious disease, all spheres of life and depths of the soul. Conceived as such, this *undecidability*, this anarchy of the soul, may be interpreted as the direct psychological consequence of a society in which equality is perceived to dictate over all relations and things, extending itself indefinitely to domains where it does not belong. The problem with democracy, Plato contends, is that it is arrogant enough to attribute its radical conception of equality to both the "equal and unequal alike," inverting all forms of social relations in a single movement. This is why Plato's critique of democracy includes that farcical caricature of the democratic city in which slaves live as free as their masters, sons discipline their fathers, students contradict their teachers, the young openly disrespect their elders, resident aliens feel as entitled as citizens and even domestic animals assert their own savage equality by roaming proudly through public streets.¹³ Quite simply, for Plato, democracy is the name of the society which, more than any other, expresses the *need* to be governed.

11 Plato will certainly mock democracy for its infantile psychological tendencies. See Alain Badiou, "The Democratic Emblem," Giorgio Agamben et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 11-12.

12 Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 560d-e. For Plato, this confusion eventually leads to democracy's inevitable degradation and downfall. See Dick Howard, *The Primacy of the Political: A History of Political Thought from the Greeks to the French and American Revolutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 55.

13 Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 562d-563d.

Self-interested, ignorant of the common good, disrespectful of authority, concerned only with his own inclinations and immediate desires, “ungovernable” by nature, although this more extensive assessment of the democrat only appears much later in the *Republic*, is this not a fitting summation of the reprehensible state in which we find the sailors of Socrates’ narrative? Are we not placed on board the ship of democracy precisely to bear witness to the wild anarchy symptomatic of a mass democratic hysteria in which the ungovernable govern the ungovernable? The metaphor is quite appropriate in more ways than one. For while the most famous of the Greek philosophers generally emerged from the aristocratic classes, as Moses Finley reminds us, in the Athenian navy, ships were invariably manned by oarsmen composed of the demos.¹⁴ Therefore, just as Rancière will appeal to the shoemaker to symbolise the poor,¹⁵ it is equally befitting that the sailor personify the demos of democratic Athens. Secondly, while the allegory of the ship clearly draws our attention to the deplorable behaviour of the democratic sailors, obviously intended to underscore their utter incapability of self-governance, if we consider the maritime backdrop of the narrative more thoroughly, perhaps it may suggest a more nuanced reading. For beyond the rather superficial treatment of the psychology of the democrat, whose disposition could no doubt be reformed (or simply repressed) under the proper order of a new regime, is there not a more profound evil to which Plato’s allegorical seascape alludes? Perhaps it is not so much the chaotic scene of drunken sailors which unfolds on deck, but what lies beneath the hull that will

¹⁴ Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, 87.

¹⁵ In *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

reveal so decisively what Plato cannot tolerate about democracy: not so much the psychology of democratic man, but rather the boundless sea of politics through which they sail, that vertigo-inducing experience indicative of a radical indeterminacy, a groundless ontological condition particular to democracy and democracy alone.

Insofar as the *Republic* prescribes the erection of an immense hierarchical edifice ruled by an exceptional class of guardian philosophers, the infrastructure of such a regime cannot be established in the murky Mediterranean waters far from shore. The open sea will provide no foundation for the architectonics of Plato's ideal city.¹⁶ Much like Hobbes, who hulls in his massive leviathan from great depths so to lay down the sovereign ground of his absolutist State, Plato must first secure the infrastructure of his own city far from the "great beast of the populace" encountered on ships at sea. For Plato, the sea represents a place of unpredictability and volatility. For Plato, the sea represents the place of *politics*. Perhaps it is for this reason that in the introduction to his appropriately titled volume *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière will contend that: "The whole political project of Platonism can be conceived as an anti-maritime polemic."¹⁷ According to Rancière, Plato's entire political philosophy may be appreciated as an imperative against politics, as the refoundation of politics which is at the same time its effective dislocation: "The sea smells bad. This is not because of the mud, however. The sea smells of sailors, it

16 John McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* vol. 3, no. 1 (2009): 129-30.

17 Jacques Rancière, "Introduction," *On the Shores of Politics*, 1.

smells of democracy. The task of philosophy is to found a different politics, a politics of conversion which turns its back on the sea.”¹⁸ It thus becomes the first objective of Plato’s political philosophy to displace politics, to extract politics from its life at sea so to lay it down upon *terra firma*, upon the solid ground or archê principle of philosophy itself.¹⁹ This operation is precisely the basis of what, in *Disagreement*, Rancière will denounce as *archipolitics*: a philosophical programme designed to eradicate the threat of politics from the start by instituting a community that aspires towards the complete realisation of its archê, an underlying principle which distributes the proper relations of rule without remainder and without excess.²⁰ What Plato’s political philosophy intends to neutralise is the polemics of the polis, the exercise of making the city and the organisation of the city a matter of controversy and dispute. For on the stormy seas of democracy, the problem is not only that the demos, much like sailing a ship, completely lacks the proper tools and insight required to navigate the monumental task of governing a city.²¹ “It is that at the people’s assembly, any mere shoemaker or smithie can get up and have his say on how to steer the ships and how to build the fortifications and, more to the point, on the just or unjust ways to use these for the common good.”²² When Plato disavows democracy for its profound ignorance of justice and the common good,

18 Ibid., 2.

19 Ibid., 1-2. Also see Gilles Labelle, “Two Refoundation Projects of Democracy in Contemporary French Philosophy: Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Rancière,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 27, no. 4 (2001): 88.

20 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 65-70. Also see Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 43.

21 Labelle, “Two Refoundation Projects of Democracy in Contemporary French Philosophy: Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Rancière,” 88.

22 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 16.

essential to his charge is the contention that as a social or cultural phenomenon, democracy appears to lay out a plane of equivalence in which anyone can lay claim to anything in a space dictated only by the rule of *doxa* and *agon*.²³ And yet, while the purely epistemological implications of this experience are vast, for Plato, the problem surrounding democracy extends deeper still. At its core, perhaps Plato's real concern with democracy is that with regards to the order of the city, with regards to the question of its very constitution, democracy undermines the authority of the experts at the same time as it undermines the authority of oligarchs and kings. What democracy unapologetically denies is that there is a proper order of society and indeed, a privileged class of rulers who possess knowledge of such a society. In this respect, when associated with ancient Greek democracy, this is precisely how the politics of *doxa* and *agon* should be understood: beyond the still predominant Platonic interpretation which reduces these terms to mere rhetoric, circulation of opinion and the interminable contest of debate, the formal institution of *doxa* and *agon* remains a testament to democracy's uncompromising position *against* the notion that there somewhere exists an accessible and decipherable underlying truth of society, that gods sanction the divine right of kings, that mystical sages possess an esoteric knowledge of the nature of society.²⁴ Rather, what ancient democracy's very institutions unmistakeably imply is that the problem of the organisation of the

23 Gilles Deleuze, "Plato, the Greeks," *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 137.

24 According to Castoriadis, democracy is founded upon *doxa*, upon the public circulation and legitimate refutation of ideas. See "Intellectuals and History," *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7. Likewise, Chantal Mouffe will emphasise the role of the *agon* in democracy, the rivalry, contest and conflict essential to the institution of political deliberation. See "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

social is a problem destined to remain unresolved in any absolute sense. As Castoriadis reminds us, democracy demands that the polis absolve itself of the claim that its limits may be determined in advance. There is no abstract model of society to be provided by nature or revealed by the gods. There is no ultimate closure to the question of what constitutes justice and the common good. Consequently, democracy is perceived to open up a vast gulf, an infinite depth which annihilates the claim of a final word or ultimate authority.²⁵ The meaning of politics is intrinsically bound to this condition.

To supplant the sea of politics with the ground of wisdom: this is the dream of the Platonist. Government must be sheltered from politics, from its lack of foundation, from the perils immanent to its condition. Politics can have no place in the just city. And yet, set on the decks of ships far from shore, does not Plato's portrayal of democracy inextricably bound to his absurd sociology of democratic man inadvertently conceal the depth of the real scandal at hand, the scandal of *politics* itself? On the contrary. The fact that Plato remains entirely disinterested in any substantial political analysis of democracy only demonstrates that its often comical depiction merely intends to present a problem to be resolved, a sickness to be cured, a social inversion to be righted. As Rancière suggests, is there not a certain reassurance, a certain solace to be taken from Plato's portrait of the disordered, upside-down world of democracy in which all relations from governor

25 This is one reason why Castoriadis will proclaim democracy a *tragic* regime. Democracy possesses no ground beyond itself. Accordingly, Castoriadis sees democracy as perpetually at risk, perhaps even of its own undoing. See for example "What Democracy?," 123. Also see Nathalie Karagiannis, "Democracy as a Tragic Regime: Democracy and its Cancellation" *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* vol. 11, no. 1 (2010).

and governed to father and son have capsized at once? For this appears to attest to the fact that all these relations are of the same nature, that all these subversions are indicative of the same inversion of the proper order of society and therefore could all be corrected by the application of the same principle or set of principles.²⁶ Although democracy is equated to the overstuffed marketplace, what Plato's moral diagnosis indisputably reveals is that the disease which afflicts the regime is not in fact one of abundance, but rather one of lack. As demonstrated by the allegory of the ship, for Plato, it is precisely democracy's lack of an *archê* which provides all the evidence for the *archê*'s necessity and effectiveness in the composition of the well ordered society. With respect to democracy's anarchic condition, what the *Republic* posits so unequivocally is not so much an argument for the rule of the philosophers, but for the necessity of the principle which dictates that it is the philosophers and the philosophers alone who constitute the proper rulers of the city. And thus, however trivial its presentation, the *Republic*'s very solution to the problem of democracy, namely, the institution of a government of philosophers, the founding of a rational social order grounded upon a new *archê* principle, will certainly render the substance and magnitude of the problem entirely transparent. As long as Plato formulates politics and philosophy in antithetical terms, the rule of philosophy will necessarily entail the negation of politics. Plato allows for no reconciliation. Therefore, far from a philosophy of politics, what Plato's political philosophy must properly describe is an anti-politics, a contempt for the

²⁶ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 38.

irreducibility or infinite depth that is intrinsic to its experience. And in this regard, the very structure of Plato's solution to the problem of democracy corresponds to what the subsequent history of political philosophy will inadvertently reveal: "The term 'political philosophy' does not designate any genre, any territory or specification of philosophy. Nor does it designate politics' reflection on its immanent rationality. It is the name of an encounter—and a polemical encounter at that—in which the paradox or scandal of politics is exposed: its lack of any proper foundation."²⁷ At least in Rancière's estimation, political philosophy is predicated upon the supposition that there is a rational means to order the roles, spaces and functioning parts of a community. This is precisely what animates a theoretical project intent on discovering a set of normative principles that both ground and justify a given order of rule.²⁸ The name of such a principle is what we shall call the *archê*. When the logic of the *archê* is operative in the organisation of the social, the condition of politics, its lack of any proper foundation, is effectively obscured.

But if it is Rancière's conclusion that Plato's political philosophy is emblematic of philosophy's suppression or effacement of politics, he will not be alone in his evaluation. In his own assessment, Castoriadis argues that Plato's very ontology inaugurates a political philosophy which ultimately rests upon the concealment and closure of the political question (the self-institution of society).²⁹ In stark contrast to Presocratic philosophy bound to the project of autonomy

27 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 61.

28 Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology," *Theory and Event* vol. 6, no. 4 (2003).

29 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce. 1 D'Homère à Héraclite* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 288.

extending from the early sophists to Socrates himself, Plato is the figure who, according to Castoriadis, betrays philosophy's inherent political character, turning its back on society's explicit self-instituting capacity, in order to facilitate the invention of an imagined city outside history governed not by its citizens, but by a new class of philosopher-kings who dictate laws from above.³⁰ Likewise, although Arendt's entire authorship could be said to be instigated by the problem of totalitarianism, compelling her formulation of a new concept of politics that draws heavily from the Greek democratic experience, she will repeatedly disavow what she understands as the tradition of political philosophy which finds its inception with Plato.³¹ According to Arendt, Plato identifies the public sphere of speech and action—the being-together of citizens in common—as a realm of darkness, confusion and deceptive appearances which the philosopher must escape and overcome in order to discover the clarity of eternal ideas, ideas which would otherwise remain corrupted by the unprejudiced circulation of a public *doxa* without standard or measure.³² Arendt discerns Platonism as the introduction of a new model of sovereignty specific to the philosophers, one which first dissolves the integral bond between thought and action, theory and praxis, only to reassemble them in a hierarchical relation that imposes a certain governance of philosophy over politics, *bios theorêtikos* over *bios politikos*. Far from signalling a productive alliance, Arendt maintains that as long as political philosophy engenders the

30 Castoriadis, "Intellectuals and History," 7-8.

31 Claude Lefort, "Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political," *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 46, 50-1.

32 Hannah Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 17.

subordination of politics by philosophy, the tradition can only be approached and evaluated according to this deepseated tension between these two terms.³³

Let us retain our proximity to Arendt for a moment longer. For the charges she levels against Plato will not only anticipate those of Castoriadis and Rancière, but at the same time, also serve to completely reorient the concept of politics for the purpose of this study. This predominance of philosophy over politics, thought over praxis begins, for Arendt, with another Platonic allegory: the well known allegory of the cave.³⁴ Here, we will follow Abensour's interpretation in our reading of Arendt.³⁵ While there is no need to retell the familiar narrative here, Abensour argues that if we follow Arendt, what the cave allegory indisputably describes in mythological terms is the origins of philosophy's representation of itself as diametrically opposed to the politics of the polis.³⁶ For Arendt, this exercise of situating philosophy *against* politics would have a profound effect on the destiny of the western philosophical tradition and its capacity to adequately grasp the problems specific to politics itself. According to Abensour, by not only isolating the allegory of the cave as the centrepiece of Plato's political thought, but by emphasising the heroic figure of the philosopher at the centre of the narrative, Arendt reads the allegory as symbolic for the necessity of the philosopher's withdrawal from the shadowy world of social affairs in order to discover an

33 This remains a predominant theme in Arendt's posthumous *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

34 Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514a–520a. Also see Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age," 17.

35 I will largely follow Abensour's analysis in his essay "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," *Social Research* vol. 74, no. 4 (Winter 2007). Also see Abensour's *Hannah Arendt contre la philosophie politique?* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2006).

36 Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," *The Promise of Politics*, 130-1. Also see Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 957.

absolute standard of measure, a transcendent yardstick according to which the organisation of the city may be apprised and evaluated *from without*.³⁷ It is this discovery that will ultimately serve to qualify the philosopher as the proper governor of the city. For it is not that the Platonist desires the arbitrary rule of the tyrant who occupies a place beyond the law. What he seeks to establish is a government of wisdom, a new form of legitimacy constituted by a new authority: the authority of the philosophers. However, this authority will be generated neither by strategies of coercion or persuasion (according to Arendt, this is not at all what authority means). The philosopher's authority remains entirely distinct from the violence and hegemony exercised by the oligarch, timocrat and tyrant respectively.³⁸ Rather, the authority of the philosopher will ultimately be drawn from his claim to wisdom, a claim which is itself indicative of his own privileged relation to the Forms, to truth itself (*aletheia*), that which remains unquestionable, unobjectionable, undeniable, that which remains structurally impervious to dispute, debate and public challenge.³⁹ And yet, the basis of such an authoritarian model of society, Abensour continues, is one which would have been entirely unknown to the Greeks until Plato.⁴⁰ While authoritarianism need not always be Platonic in

37 Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," *Between Past and Future*, 109. Also see Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 970 and Andrew Schaap, "Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics," *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, eds. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum International Publishers, 2012), 150.

38 Arendt employs the term "authority" with a great deal of precision. According to Arendt, authority refers to a relationship of obedience organised through a hierarchical structure in which the source of its legitimacy is located in a realm beyond politics itself.

39 See Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *Between Past and Future*.

40 Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 960.

character, it is Plato who introduces this unique authoritarian framework to the ideal of the well ordered polis. This is what is entirely new. While the Greeks certainly possessed an understanding of unrestricted rule under the name of tyranny, the *Republic's* promotion of a privileged class of rulers located at the apex of a rigid hierarchical structure that discovers the source of its unchallengeable authority in a publicly inaccessible transcendent field would have been entirely foreign to the Greek political imaginary.⁴¹ This is largely why Arendt maintains that Plato must acquire the blueprint for his model of government precisely in a series of extra-political relationships: the shepherd and his sheep, the physician and his patient, the master and his slave, the captain and his crew, each example specifically extracted from what she identifies as the private sphere of life.⁴²

Insofar as the allegory of the cave recites the manner in which, through his discovery of the Forms, the philosopher distinguishes himself from the rest of the community and identifies the proper order of the city as the one that transcends political relations, Arendt understands the narrative as the originary model of philosophy's defiant position against politics. Moreover, given the *Republic's* exemplary status in the larger tradition, Arendt appreciates the allegory to produce vast consequences for the subsequent history of political thought. It is here, Abensour contends, where her reading remains unique from other interpretations of the allegory. For as Arendt demonstrates, not only does it provide the model which

41 Arendt, "What is Authority?," 104, 110.

42 Ibid., 104, 108. Also see Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 960-1. Plato will repeatedly reference such dyadic relations of authority, not only in the *Republic*, but in the *Statesman* and *Laws* as well.

sets up the essential opposition between politics and philosophy, *doxa* and *aletheia*, it offers a detailed narrative description of philosophy's discovery of the means to overcome politics altogether, providing the basis for a theoretical reconstitution of the city specifically designed to cancel out the emergence of politics from the start. And while, following Plato's description, Arendt clearly recognises the conditions of the cave (heads fixed towards the shadows, all conversation forbidden) as indicative of a definitively apolitical space—lacking in speech and action—she will nevertheless insist that the political implications of the cave allegory are all too often overshadowed by its far more apparent epistemological dimensions, a problem which may be immediately forestalled when placed side by side with the allegory of the ship already examined. Rancière will already draw a formal comparison between the two: "The cave is the sea transposed beneath the earth, bereft of its sparkling glamour: enclosure instead of open sea, men in chains instead of rows of oarsmen, the dullness of shadows on the wall instead of light reflected on waves."⁴³ Although the epistemological problem of the cave is well known, if we extrapolate from Arendt's strategically political reading, what the narrative structure of the allegory unmistakably implies is that it is just as essential that the philosopher escape from the indeterminable sea of politics (the ship) as it is from the epistemological prison of illusion and *doxa* (the cave). For if the allegory of the ship represents not only the psychology of the demos, but as I have suggested, something of the ontology of politics itself—its lack of foundation—the allegory of

43 Rancière, "Introduction," *On the Shores of Politics*, 2.

the cave will represent with far greater clarity the mythological origins of philosophy's quest to overcome the very condition of politics in order to acquire an absolute standard in which the proper organisation of the city may be accurately measured and evaluated. Just as the cave concerns the problem of *doxa* which discovers its solution with the advent of the Forms (the ultimate basis for the philosopher's claim to wisdom), the ship concerns the problem of politics' anarchic condition which discovers its solution with the advent of the archê principle (the ultimate basis for the proper relations of rule). Both in the cave and on the ship, what is discernibly lacking is a social order governed by a Platonic notion of truth, a truth located at the limit of politics just as it is at the limit of *doxa*. In order to affirm the authority of the philosophers, which itself forms the basis of the institution of the proper order of rule, Plato must first establish the philosopher's privileged relationship to truth. As demonstrated by Arendt, beyond the problem of epistemology, this is the primary objective of the allegory of the cave.

And yet, although the philosopher must escape the bonds of the cave—as if a chained oarsman in the bowels of a sea vessel—to bear witness to the radiant Forms in the clear sky above, according to Abensour, what particularly interests Arendt is that the philosopher must inevitably return to the cave in order to *realise* the Forms in application.⁴⁴ Until that time, the Forms will remain purely aesthetic, purely theoretical, their practical social function only manifest when the philosopher returns to the city and *transforms* it according to this transcendent

44 Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 964-5.

standard discovered beyond the realm of politics and public *doxa*.⁴⁵ For Arendt, there is nothing inherently political about the Forms in themselves. As observed often enough, Plato's recourse to the Forms can simply be taken to resolve a problem that remains purely epistemological: in the democratic city where every statement appears equally reducible to the order of *doxa*, how are we to establish the ultimate criteria in which we may evaluate the veracity of each statement, their relative proximity to truth? But as soon as philosophy concerns itself with the larger social function of the Forms, as soon as it subjects the organisation of the city to an entirely alien set of abstract ideas which shall serve as the absolute standard to evaluate the basis of its structural model, political philosophy, as Arendt understands the term, is born.⁴⁶ This is precisely what we discover with Plato's *Republic*. And in this respect, the *Republic* is unique among the Platonic dialogues in that it is the text which will most explicitly address this distinctively practical application of the Forms: it concerns their social function as much as it concerns their epistemological merit.

Therefore, although the *Republic* is often considered the archetypal work of political philosophy, Arendt must conclude, as will Castoriadis and Rancière, that the dialogue's principal concern is not at all a question of politics, but rather its eclipse and obfuscation. Plato can only arrive at the correct form of government—the rule of the philosophers—through the disintegration of politics, its substitution

45 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 226.

46 Arendt, "What is Authority?," 112-13. Also see Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," 972.

with a new model of authority made possible by the dramatic discovery of the abstract Forms. And while this brief sketch of Arendt's critique of Plato merely intends to illuminate the allegorical origins of philosophy's rather consistent disavowal of politics itself, perhaps more importantly, from her conclusions we may extract a more general postulate that will not only throw the customary theoretical approach to politics into question, but at the same time, provide the background for its conceptual reconstruction against which we may consider the principal authors examined in this study from Rancière to Lefort to Abensour. Insofar as her analysis of Plato compels a distinction between the rule of the philosophers on the one hand and politics on the other, Arendt's critique will correspond with one of her most important theses, one that will be consistently encountered throughout her extensive authorship: *politics remains irreducible to rule*.⁴⁷

Perhaps this simple affirmation represents one of Arendt's most profound contributions to modern political thought, its significance witnessed from her monumental analysis of totalitarianism to her critical evaluation of the tradition of political philosophy from Plato to Marx. According to Arendt, it is the fundamental error of political philosophy to affix the concept of politics to a general framework dictated solely by the problem of rulers, governors, sovereigns and kings. Interestingly, in a somewhat obscure reference in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault seems to share a similar concern, lamenting political philosophy's apparent inability to think beyond the limits of this rather myopic theme: "In political thought and

47 Parchen Markell, "The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê and Democracy," *The American Political Science Review* vol. 100, no. 1 (Feb., 2006): 3.

analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king.”⁴⁸ This preoccupation with rule—which for Arendt, is more of a consistent strategy than a perpetual oversight—creates considerable complications for thinking about politics in its own right, functioning not only to obstruct and conceal its wider meaning, but by displacing the problems of politics for innumerable theoretical models of rulers and ruled, ultimately becomes the basis for the outright cancellation of politics itself from philosophical inquiry. Here recall a passage from *The Human Condition* so pertinent that it must be repeated at length:

Escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order has in fact so much to recommend that the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether. The hallmark of all such escapes is the concept of rule, that is, the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey.⁴⁹

Beyond Plato’s particular appeal to models of authority and transcendent Forms, what Arendt argues more generally is that political philosophy’s underlying fixation with rule already constitutes the basis of its simultaneous rejection of and escape from politics altogether. Consequently, the author of *The Human Condition* will clearly recognise that her own phenomenology of human praxis (which ultimately seeks to conceive politics in a manner which binds visibility, equality and autonomous activity in the public sphere) must inevitably confront and contradict this entire tradition accordingly. Rather than negotiate a conception of politics

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 88-9.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.

predominantly drawn from theories of government, sovereignty and the affairs of the State from Plato to Hobbes to Schmitt, Arendt's own theoretical project will immediately circumvent this entire tradition for a more historical analysis of the Greek polis, particularly democratic Athens.⁵⁰ Therefore, in many respects, it is Arendt's endeavour to unbind politics from a restricted reference to rule that will ultimately incite her appeal to the Greeks. In a decisive attempt to recover something of the Hellenistic roots of *politikos*, Arendt insists that the central problems of politics cannot be confined to various models of rulers and ruled, however assembled or arranged. Moreover, with specific reference to the Greek concept of *isonomia*, when compelled to articulate her own understanding of freedom—which for Arendt is always a *political* freedom—she will only do so according to what she calls the “conditions of no-rule” expressed in terms of the explicitly absent division between governor and governed, ruler and ruled.⁵¹

This strategy is entirely justified. For in his landmark historical study *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, Christian Meier will delineate the Greek understanding of politics in a manner which largely supports the basic framework of Arendt's essential claim. As concisely as possible, let us consider some of his core theses. Often with explicit reference to Athenian democracy, Meier underscores that for the Greeks, politics intended to designate what pertains to the polis, that is, what is

50 Although *The Human Condition* offers no systematic analysis of democracy, outlining her concept of politics without explicitly employing the term, Arendt's later work, particularly *On Revolution* and *Crises of the Republic*, will offer a more direct engagement with democracy, now associating it with her notion of *praxis* in a more apparent manner.

51 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 20. Also see her “Tradition and the Modern Age,” 18-19 where she explicitly identifies the Athenian polis as functioning without the division between ruler and ruled.

public (*dimosios*), what specifically addresses what is common in society (*koinos*, *xynos*) or what concerns the community as a whole.⁵² It could be said that politics was perceived as the invention of a field which functions to intersect or cut across what would otherwise be restricted as the private or exclusive or enclosed, facilitating a notion of a political community that effectively delimits traditional filiations and alliances (birth, caste and class). And yet, politics was not conceived as something universal or ubiquitous, did not describe the relations between cities (international relations), did not simply correspond to authority, domination or the exercise of power and was carefully distinguished from examples of absolute rule (tyranny was not deemed political, just as Arendt will not deem totalitarianism political). Politics, rather, in the broadest sense, was a term reserved to express what constitutes a political community (*politeia*): it was understood as that which identifies or affiliates a political or citizen body (*politai*) with the polis itself, namely its participation in the sphere of society that is public and thus described the citizen's activity in the affairs of the polis accordingly.⁵³

And while politics and rule certainly collide and intersect in a number of ways (Meier reminds us, for example, that oligarchic rule could be understood to be *politicised* when it was challenged and increasingly broadened to include more and more public involvement),⁵⁴ his research certainly provides the historical basis to conceptually reframe the idea of politics in a manner that is no longer dominated by

52 Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 13. In the most general sense, Meier defines *politikos* in terms of what is "appropriate to the polis."

53 Ibid., 20-1.

54 Ibid., 13.

references to acts of government, State administration and the authority concentrated in a small and exclusive circle of rulers or professional politicians. Indeed, while Meier considers the question of government (the very question of “who is to govern?”) as essentially political in nature, rather than the exercise of rule or the nature of the relationship between ruler and ruled, he will tend to associate the Greek conception of politics with the *politicisation* of rule itself, the making of rule a political problem, the ever widening of the community’s inclusion in the affairs of the polis, the emergence of a political body that encounters itself as a political body through its unique relation to that which is political.⁵⁵ Thus, for the Greeks, politics was equally bound to both subject and city through this distinct nexus between the two: politics renders those who were once simply ruled a political body by exposing the problems of the polis (that which concerns the whole community) to a political field so that the meaning of the polis becomes synonymous with the political body itself via its participation in the matters which concern the whole community.⁵⁶

The implications of such a concept for Greek society were considerable. It meant that for the first time the polis could be represented in a manner that was not possible before. As the polis became envisaged as something set out against any natural or preordained order of society, as the destiny of the polis became appreciated as something to be shaped by the praxis of citizens as political agents,

⁵⁵ The notion of *politicisation* is a prominent theme throughout Meier’s book. See 4-5, 50, 84-5, 166-7, 170-6. For Meier, the meaning of democracy remains inextricably bound to this process of politicisation.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

the very constitution of the community could be interpreted as a problem specific to politics itself. This is the double movement that we tend to encounter with politics: as soon as the problems of the polis become political, the very constitution of the polis itself becomes a political problem. In this regard, the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, which initiates an analysis of the polis via a detailed comparison of constitutional forms, already arrives on the scene too late.⁵⁷ For politics is located not in the distinct governments discovered in various constitutions, but in that which renders the constitution a problem of politics in the first place. This is precisely what Meier discovers with ancient Greek democracy:

For the first time in Greek history—and world history—the civil order as a whole was placed at the disposal of the citizens: it had become a matter of controversy, hence a political issue. For the first time in history men were presented with a clear alternative, the starkest alternative that is possible within civic communities [...]: Should the governed (that is, those who were not professionally engaged in political life) be granted a decisive voice in civic affairs [...] or should they not? It was no longer simply a question of whether or not there should be some kind of public order or of who should have the right to govern (either a monarch or an aristocracy) [...]. The question was now: Given the alternative constitutions that differ fundamentally, which should be chosen? Should government be in the hands of the nobles or of the people?”⁵⁸

For Meier, not unlike Castoriadis, what is significant here is the ability to explicitly pose the question, the ability to discern the polis and the government of the polis as something *controversial*, as something problematic, a question no longer simply allocated to the jurisdiction of monarchs, nobles or the rich. Politics declares that

⁵⁷ Sheldon Wolin argues that Plato and Aristotle do not so much offer a philosophy of politics as a philosophy of the constitution or of the *constitutionalisation* of politics. See “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy.”

⁵⁸ Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, 84.

the question regarding the order of the city is not prescribed and not settled. Politics is that which not only raises the question, but maintains that the question itself is political in nature. Consequently, for the Greeks, when there was politics, there was no longer simply *rule*.

Therefore, insofar as we follow Arendt's example and maintain a certain fidelity to the ancient Greek origins of the term, it becomes possible to conceive politics in a manner that resists its appropriation by a dominant theoretical model that confines its meaning to various arrangements of rulers and ruled. For politics does not reference the problem of how a defined set of rulers are to exercise their rule over a community. From what is common (*koinos*) to what is public (*dimosios*) to what constitutes the political community itself (*politeia*), politics references an entirely different set of problems first expressed institutionally *as political problems* by a small number of cities scattered across the Greek peninsula. In ancient times, such cities were typically known as democracies. Quite distinct from the apparatuses, strategies and dynamics of rule, politics is that which collides with rule; it is what makes rule problematic, what puts rule into question as a given or unequivocal relation. Politics initiates a *polemics* of the polis. It undermines the closure of political problems at the same time that it denies their enclosure—their becoming private or exclusive—so that the problems of the polis, its constitution and subsequent parts, roles and spaces, remain political, which is to say, they remain problematic and ultimately irreducible. Politics is the exercise of making the polis political. It does not describe the governance of the city itself, but what

engenders the city and the government of the city a political problem. Perhaps it is for this reason that when Rancière outlines his own concept of politics, he will do so according to acts of *dissensus*, the very process in which the organisation of the community becomes an object of dispute: according to Rancière, the community is only constituted a *political* community when it is divided by a fundamental disagreement (*la mésentente*) regarding the nature of its partition of parts, roles and spaces.⁵⁹ For Rancière, such disagreement is the essence of politics. Likewise, when Lefort conceives politics (*la politique*), he will do so not simply according to social conflict and division (which is everywhere in society and hardly worthy of the term), but with respect to what makes conflict legitimate, visible and intelligible: politics is that which brings conflict in society to the fore, institutes this conflict and gives it a political expression.⁶⁰ Just as totalitarianism strives to conceal and deny the manifestations of social division, thereby attempting to resolve the complications of the political society, by framing politics according to the inception of an irreducible forum in which conflict and division may be politically expressed, Lefort understands politics itself as the permanent contestation of the very question of what governs the relations of self and other at every level of social life.⁶¹ For Lefort, such contestation is the essence of politics.

Therefore, in many respects, by revisiting the historical generation of the

59 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 38-9. Also see Rancière's interview with Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritics* vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000), as well as Paulina Tambakaki, "When Does Politics Happen?," *Parallax* vol. 15, no. 3 (2009): 102-3.

60 See for example Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," *Democracy and Political Theory*, 18. Chantal Mouffe also makes this point. See "Democracy, Power and 'the Political'," *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000) 33-4.

61 Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," 18-19.

term, Arendt's writings demand that modern political thought entirely reevaluate its prevailing approach to politics. And yet, while this is not the occasion to elaborate her own, more nuanced phenomenological understanding of politics which cannot simply be equated to the ancient understanding of the term, if we accept the essential non-identity between *politics* and *rule* as Arendt maintains, we may proceed to draw two significant inferences that will prove imperative to this study, even if it means effectively suspending our conceptualisation of politics for the time being. Firstly, after Arendt, a theory of democracy can no longer be initiated by virtue of the question: *when is rule democratic?* Against familiar accounts such as those theorised by Joseph Schumpeter and others, democracy cannot be degraded to the condition whereby a community selects its rulers through free and periodic competitions.⁶² *Democracy is that which challenges the very division between ruler and ruled.* Secondly, after Arendt, political philosophy can no longer organise its conceptual framework around a series of topics that ultimately concern the proper foundations for one man to rule another, the few to rule the many: the abstract criteria or first principles according to which the authority of a government is rendered legitimate or the order of a society deemed just. *After Arendt, political philosophy must become something else altogether.* Perhaps it is for this reason that in the very same essay discussed above, Abensour (who unlike Rancière, never abandons the emancipatory potential or utopian promise immanent to philosophy itself) will argue that Arendt's very critique of the tradition of political philosophy

62 See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1950).

makes “another political philosophy” possible.⁶³ But instead of pursuing an endless investigation of the proper foundations, criteria and standards of rule, the first task of this new political philosophy—one now constructed to resist its very tradition—would be exactly the opposite: a decisive attempt to conceive and express politics as *the very absence of any foundation of rule*.⁶⁴ The profound implications of such an exercise should not be overlooked. For as Castoriadis repeatedly explains with broader, more anthropological connotations: “If the human world were fully ordered [...], if human laws were given by God or by nature or by the ‘nature of society’ or by the ‘laws of history,’ then there would be no room for political thinking and no field for political action and no sense in asking what the proper law is or what justice is [...].”⁶⁵ Politics opens the polis and the representation of the polis to a condition which lacks any such ontological closure. When the problems of the polis become *political*, that is, when the problems that concern the whole community are exposed to a political field and articulated against a horizon of *doxa* and *agon*—without closure, without finality, without truth—so that the problem of the common *becomes common*, the problem of the public *becomes public* and ultimately the very constitution of the polis itself is rendered an irreducible object of controversy and

63 Abensour, “Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt’s Reading of Plato’s Cave Allegory,” 979-80. Also see Patrice Vermeren, “Equality and Democracy,” *Diogenes* vol. 55, no. 4 (2008): 58. Like Rancière, Abensour is certainly opposed to political philosophy in the Platonic tradition as denounced by Arendt, but he does promote a *critico-utopian* or *critical political* philosophy that at once binds a persistent critique of domination to a self-reflexive utopian theory of emancipatory struggle. See chapter 5 below.

64 Miguel Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy,’” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 117.

65 Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 104. Also see Jeff Klooger, *Castoriadis: Psyche, Society, Autonomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 31.

dispute, politics will reveal what Lefort could describe as a radical indeterminacy: a vast abyss, an infinite depth, a groundless ontological condition without foundation, without principle, without *archê*. Beyond the psychology of democrats, this is precisely the condition that Plato discovers with the democratic city. This is precisely what instigates his hatred of democracy.

2

Democracy against the archê

Democracy first of all means this: anarchic 'government', one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern.

-Jacques Rancière

The democratic kratein, the power of the people, is first of all the power to foil the archê and then to take responsibility, all together and each individually, for the infinite opening that is thereby brought to light.

-Jean-Luc Nancy

To posit an absolute foundation of rule implies the unequivocal closure of politics. Therefore, beyond the problematisation of rule, beyond the politicisation of the polis, the putting into question of the order of the city and its subsequent parts, places and roles, politics may also describe a condition, the very condition that is indicative of politics itself: the lack of foundation. As the name of a city, a regime, a particular constitution, this is the condition which has long been associated with democracy, especially by its many detractors. Even more than the scandal of a government of the demos, the poor, those who have no entitlement to govern, perhaps this is what so often accounts for its denunciation as disordered, precarious, *anarchic*.

Democracy has always meant the *power of the people*, but this power (*kratos*) does not intend to found a new principle of rule in society. As often observed, democracy contains no archê within it and never testifies to the archê of the demos.¹ On the contrary, according to Rancière, the power of the demos is the power of those that no archê entitles them to exercise.² The *kratos* of the *demos* does not signify the power of a defined body, class or number,³ but all those who have no archê to which they may appeal, all those who fall short of every standard, every criterion which would entitle them to participate in the government of the community: “The power of the people is not that of a people gathered together, of the majority, or of the working class. It is simply the power peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit.”⁴ Consequently, as the power of those who lack all entitlements to govern, the *power of the people* may be interpreted as the power that undermines the archê itself, the very principle which references a special entitlement or qualification in the rule of the city. Democracy is exceptional within the ancient catalogue of constitutions in that it posits itself *against* the archê, against any underlying principle from which a proper set of rulers may be determined and a proper order of society may be ascertained. Therefore, the

1 See for example Jean-Luc Nancy, “Finite and Infinite Democracy,” *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 65. Also see Jacques Rancière, “Democracy Corrected,” *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 94-5.

2 Jacques Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 52.

3 Josiah Ober argues that it is in fact the *arkhê* that references a notion of power bound to number (*monarchia*=power of one, *oligarchia*=power of the few), while *kratos* refers to more of a qualitative power as the capacity to act. Therefore, for Ober, *demokratia* does not imply the power of the demos as a majority, but as a substantive or collective body. See “The Original Meaning of ‘Democracy’: Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule,” *Constellations* vol. 15, no. 1 (2008).

4 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2007), 46-7.

precise meaning of the *power of the people* should not be understood as the rule of the people as opposed to the rule of the oligarchs or the rule of a monarch. This remains a common misconception. Rather, before anything else, democracy's *power of the people* means this: the power to subvert and destroy the archê of every other order. It means the destabilisation of the very foundations upon which oligarchs and kings may isolate themselves from the community and claim a certain privilege in the distribution of the relations of rule. Democracy rejects any principle from which a special entitlement to rule may be established. Democracy not only lacks any such principle itself, but it is from this lack that it draws its conviction and strength.

What is the basis for one man to rule another, for the few to rule the many? Democracy's reply is as uncompromising as it is scandalous: there is no basis. Accordingly, democracy must consider every initiative to establish such a basis, to discover and secure some principle which functions to ground the division between ruler and ruled and supply an account of that division, to be *a priori* false. Democracy assumes a sceptical attitude towards any inherent criteria to govern in the same way that it maintains a sceptical attitude towards the legitimacy of any order of rule founded upon a first principle: whether it be God, nature, history, nation, truth, the leader, the party or even the name of the people itself.⁵ Perhaps this is why in the preface to his monumental history *The Life and Death of*

5 John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 852.

Democracy, John Keane will introduce the topic of democracy in terms of the *denaturing* of power.⁶ “Democracy required that people see through talk of gods and nature and claims to privilege based on superiority of brain and blood. [...] It implied that the most important political problem is how to prevent rule by the few, or by the rich or powerful who claim to be supermen.”⁷ Since its earliest institutional experiments in the cities of ancient Greece, democracy has offered a profound rejection of the rule of the nobles, the rich, the best (the aristocrats) and those who know (the philosopher-kings). What it unabashedly disputes is the bedrock upon which any such privilege or entitlement to rule may be ultimately established and in doing so, functions to expose the sheer contingency of every social order. “The exceptional thing about the type of government called democracy is that it demanded people see that nothing that is human is carved in stone, that everything is built on shifting sands of time and place [...]”⁸ Whether it be the rule of the prophets or the rule of kings, democracy is that which undermines the very claim of an absolute foundation of rule. And while Keane may prefer the image of shifting sands to stormy seas, the implications of his chosen metaphor are very much the same: from the beginning, what democracy reveals so convincingly is that every form of government, every system of rule, is intrinsically artificial, historical, *human* and never given or absolute, never carved in stone.⁹ Regardless of birth,

6 Ibid., xii.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Likewise, for Lefort, what emerges with democracy is a representation of society as a *human* society. See “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism,” *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 304.

wealth, seniority or expertise, democracy is that which disputes the grounds of a privileged status in the rule of the community. Democracy makes the claim of a special criterion, qualification or entitlement to rule inherently problematic. Of this claim we may give the name *archê*.

On the relatively undertheorised problem of the *archê* (*arkhê*), which we may now delineate with greater precision and detail, it is arguably Arendt and Rancière who, across many of their writings, will most directly and exhaustively examine both its logic and social function in the rule of the community. Look for it and you will find it. In every claim of a natural order, in every claim of birthright or heredity, of divine sanction, of privilege or priority, of a proper order of society, a proper allocation of parts and roles, it is there: the *archê* principle. Those in possession of the *archê* are those who possess the power to elevate themselves over the rest of society. The power of the *archê* is precisely the power to deny the ordinary voice.¹⁰ As soon as the proper rulers of the community are identified with birth, wealth, expertise or any other entitlement to govern, the *archê* is established.¹¹ As soon as the exercise of rule carries with it a principle that distributes the community according to a predetermined set of criteria, the logic of the *archê* is active.

Although Rancière offers no single, integrated or systematic theory of the *archê*, the problem reappears again and again in his most substantial writings on

10 Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Rethinking Emancipation* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 99.

11 Jacques Rancière, "Against an Ebbing Tide: An Interview with Jacques Rancière," *Reading Rancière*, eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 238.

democracy. Government, Rancière suggests, simply by virtue of governing, always seems to require an account of itself, which is to say, an account of what determines the distribution of roles in its relation of rule, that which grounds and justifies why some occupy the position of rulers and others the position of those who are ruled.¹² Thus, although rarely articulated by government itself, it appears that alongside the actual exercise of rule, government also requires a principle of itself, a rationale for how one comes to rule another. In many respects, we will encounter a somewhat analogous perspective with anarchism, the tradition which adopts a position against the archê in its very name.¹³ According to Noam Chomsky, it is anarchism's most rudimentary position that unless substantially proven otherwise, any order of rule in society, any structure of authority—including government, ownership and management, relations between men and women, parents and children, etc.—must ultimately be deemed illegitimate and systematically dismantled.¹⁴ “That is what I have always understood to be the essence of anarchism: the conviction that the burden of proof has to be placed on authority, and that it should be dismantled if that burden cannot be met.”¹⁵ Although the context of these remarks (Rancière's and

12 Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” 51.

13 The question of Rancière's relationship with anarchism has been raised on numerous occasions, particularly with regards to the topic of the archê. In an interview Rancière summarises his position as follows: “At a fundamental philosophical level my position can be called anarchist *stricto sensu* since I hold that politics exists insofar as the exercise of power does not rest upon any *arkhê*.” See “Against an Ebbing Tide: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” 238. Also see Rancière's interview with Todd May, Benjamin Noys and Saul Newman, “Democracy, Anarchism and Radical Politics Today: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” *Anarchist Studies* vol. 16, no 2 (2008). Much of Todd May's recent work attempts to establish with greater precision this underlying connection between the anarchist tradition and Rancière's political thought. See “Rancière and Anarchism,” *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, eds. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum International Publishers, 2012), as well as his volume *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), especially chapter 3.

14 Noam Chomsky, “Anarchism, Marxism and Hope for the Future,” *Chomsky on Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 178.

15 Ibid.

Chomsky's) are entirely distinct, what we immediately discover in both views is the assertion that rule is never self-legitimizing, never self-authorising or self-validating, that in addition to rule something else is required, something other than rule itself, which however valid or invalid, claims to justify that rule and the social arrangement that configures its relations. The legitimacy of government is never self-evident. The source of its justification is always supplemental to the apparatus and empirical exercise of rule itself. The diagram of rule is never one dimensional.

The issue at hand is not the cultivation of a practical strategy in which we may ascertain which authority can be determined legitimate and which cannot (although Chomsky certainly maintains that there are examples of legitimate authority however rare).¹⁶ Nor is it the quintessentially modern question concerning the precise relation between right and power (scrutinised so meticulously by figures like Spinoza).¹⁷ Rather, the issue at hand is that every system and strategy of rule seems to require a supplement, an account or justification of itself which is never reducible to rule in its most immediate or empirical manifestation. What must be established is that rule, once it is distinguished from mere coercion and brute force, organises a logic which intends to bind the empirical organisation of a community to an imperceptible principle that determines the basis of its social relations. Therefore, what we identify as the archê must be located beyond what would

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Even when Spinoza, for example, maintains that right and power are coextensive, his Latin clarifies that power in this respect (*potentia*) qualifies something essential and non-abstractable: a potential, ability or capacity, while the power typically associated with rule, authority, privilege and control (*potestas*) remains something of another matter. See *Political Treatise* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), chapter 2.

normally be identified as the immediate exercise of rule in its most apparent incarnation. It is the principle that at once identifies, selects and divides so that a classification of rulers may be distinguished from that of the ruled at the same time as it provides a frame of reference for which a justification of these classifications and the distinction between them may be established. Determining the underlying bases for the division between governor and governed and the authority of one to rule the other is essential to the meaning of the *archê*: it is for this reason that Rancière will identify the presence of the *archê* in every order of the police and Abensour in every State-form.¹⁸ The logic of the *archê* serves to transform the multiplicity and contingency of the social into a means in which a special class of rulers (those who exercise the *archê*) may be isolated from the rest of the community (those who submit to its authority). It operates by selecting a particular element from the social (such as birth or wealth) and renders this the decisive grounds for the justification of some to govern others.¹⁹ In short, the *archê* offers a solution to the problem of *qualification*, of who is entitled to rule.

To demonstrate this in the most succinct manner possible, Rancière, on more than one occasion, will draw our attention to Plato's *Laws* where the ancient philosopher most explicitly offers his own systematic enumeration of possible qualifications or titles (*axiomata*) required to rule another.²⁰ Here, in the voice of an

18 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chapter 2. Miguel Abensour, "Of Insurgent Democracy," *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), xl-xli. See chapters 4 and 5 below.

19 Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (London: Continuum International Publishers, 2011), 53.

20 Plato, *Laws*, III, 690a-690c. We will find Rancière's critique of Plato's seven qualifications in "Ten Theses on Politics," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 30-1, "Does Democracy Mean Something?," 50-1, and *Hatred of Democracy*, 39-41.

unnamed Athenian, Plato lists seven in number (although his catalogue should in no way be considered exhaustive), but for the moment, let us address only the first six, the seventh remaining something of an exception. Without the slightest hesitation, Plato will draw no distinction whatsoever between the government of a city and the authority devised within entirely different social relations (such as the family). That cities, much like families, elevate those with authority over those who must submit to that authority on the basis of some inherent quality or position is simply assumed and entirely naturalised. Accordingly, the first of the titles to be listed are those purportedly closest to nature: those positions that are determined directly by birth (those who are “born before” or “born otherwise”). The census begins with the control that parents exercise over their children. This is followed by the entitlement of those who are highborn (the aristocrats) to govern those of no account. Next is the authority that elders possess over the young (seniority). The fourth concerns the dominion of masters over their slaves. But then our criteria is modified slightly. Although Plato insists that the following two qualifications should likewise be considered in accordance with nature, they can arguably no longer be said to be directly related to birth as the preceding four. These consist of the rule of the strong over the weak (which the Athenian does not fail to identify as the dominant principle throughout the animal kingdom) and the only title that Plato himself holds to be ultimately valid: “But it looks as if the most important claim will be the sixth, that the ignorant man should follow the leadership of the wise and obey his orders.” Hence, deep within the *Laws*, we finally appear to arrive at the explicit articulation

of the principle that the *Republic* so desperately requires: the principle that declares that the wise shall rule the ignorant. And while the cogency of declaring wisdom a “natural” property akin to birth or strength could very well raise objections, Plato’s Athenian, perhaps anticipating such objections, will entertain no rebuttal: “I’m certainly not prepared to say that it is *unnatural*.” Regardless, while the essentially unchecked philosopher-kings of the *Republic* make no appearance in the *Laws* (which concerns itself with an extensive range of more practical constitutional matters), it is nevertheless with the sixth qualification that we discover the principle which intends to justify their rule. As with any other title, this too is simply posited as given and axiomatic. Even in the *Laws*, the Platonic text which perhaps more than any other seems to gesture towards rule of law, that the wise are entitled to rule requires no more explanation than that of a parent’s authority over their own children.

Again, let us suspend the question of the validity of each of these qualifications. Whether seniority actually represents a legitimate criterion to govern those who are younger and what exactly it means to be “the stronger” is certainly subject to debate, but it brings us no closer to understanding the logic of the *archê* itself. Rather than assess the specific content of each qualification, what interests us here is the formal structure of the *archê* as it appears in Plato’s thought. Via kinship, age or by virtue of some other quality, with each of the cited qualifications we encounter a familiar formal binary relation (parent/child, noble/common man, elder/young, master/slave, wise/ignorant) configured into a clearly defined

hierarchy of roles. More importantly, Rancière demonstrates that Plato understands each distribution of roles, who occupies the position of ruler and who occupies the position of the ruled, to be determined entirely according to *disposition*, that is, according to some inherent or natural difference among men. It is Plato's supposition that what each hierarchical relation unequivocally reveals is that just as there is a natural disposition to rule, there is a natural disposition to be ruled, just as there is a natural disposition to act, there is a natural disposition to be acted upon: "The logic of *arkhê* thus presupposes that a determinate superiority is exercised over an equally determinate inferiority."²¹ Such dispositions are simply presumed to be self-evident and in many cases, are already established and available to observe throughout society: "All these qualifications relate to objective differences and forms of power already operative in society and can all be put forward as an *arkhê* for ruling."²² This reference to *objective difference* marks the archê's necessary return to the empirical, when the archê engineers a strategy so that it may interact with the sensible world once again. As a principle which divides the categories of ruler and ruled, the archê remains abstract, imperceptible. But this alone is not enough. The archê must simultaneously devise a scheme in which real existing bodies may be identified, distinguished and distributed according to clearly observable traits and characteristics. Within each power relation there must be exhibited certain inherent properties which inform one's proper place within the hierarchy. Therefore, despite their expression in a social field, insofar as Plato's

21 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 30.

22 Rancière, "Does Democracy Mean Something?," 51.

initial six entitlements ultimately rely upon disposition, his positing of the archê must indeed be understood as an appeal to nature (*physis*): each qualification to rule and its complementary counterpart compose a particular hierarchical arrangement which claims to maintain a certain continuity with some purported natural law:

Each of these titles fulfils two prerequisites. First, each defines a hierarchy of positions. Secondly, each defines this hierarchy in continuity with nature: continuity by the intermediary of familial and social relations for the first four; direct continuity for the last two. The former titles base the order of the city on the law of kinship. The latter assert that this order has a superior principle: those who govern are not at all those who are born first or highborn, but those who are best.²³

Hence, it is not with tradition or convention, *nomos* or *mythos*, but rather with nature that Plato appears to discover a series of normative principles that function to determine various sets of social relations in a manner that cannot be easily challenged. Within each catalogued relation, Plato attributes a latent archê principle which, expressed by the complementary dispositions of those who occupy either side of the hierarchy, governs that relation and accounts for the harmony of its natural order. So just as the criticism of our infamous democratic man of the *Republic* dwells so persistently upon his psychological disposition—a disposition which may now, in light of the *Laws*, be appreciated simply in terms of the *natural disposition to be ruled*—Plato declares that the philosophers of the city will likewise exhibit the essential attributes indicative of their own natural qualification to rule. This is a logic which remains very consistent with Plato's perception of

²³ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 40. Also see John McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* vol. 3, no. 1 (2009): 119.

democracy as the upside-down world described in the *Republic*: for Plato, democracy represents the society in which those with the natural disposition to be ruled, rule collectively, a scenario played out symbolically on the allegorical ship of democracy. Quite simply, democracy is the agent that effectively inverts the natural order of the proper relations of the social. As I have argued, the allegory of the ship not only intends to demonstrate the ignorance and savagery of the demos, but more importantly, invites us to bear witness to the dynamics of a regime in which no operative archê is in place. For Plato, democracy is that which overturns every archê at once.

Incidentally, this appeal to nature, to the disposition of the philosopher, also offers an explanation for why so much of the *Republic* is devoted to the topic of education.²⁴ For if only the wise, those with the natural disposition of the philosopher (the rational soul), are entitled to govern, it is imperative that Plato's ideal city establish an institutional strategy to ascertain *who* exactly in society possesses such a disposition naturally fit to govern. More importantly for our purposes here, the archê's reference to nature will likewise account for why Plato himself will privilege the qualification of wisdom over all other titles. For even if many of his respective depositions to rule remain pervasive throughout society and readily observable, it is nevertheless the philosopher and the philosopher alone, we can only assume, who may claim knowledge of the underlying natural laws purported to govern their relations and thus, the philosopher who assumes the role

24 See Nickolas Pappas' discussion of education in *Plato and the Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995), 47-52.

of articulating the social significance of these natural laws to the larger community. For example, the principle that the strong shall rule the weak may very well be, as our Athenian of the *Laws* maintains, a principle ubiquitous throughout nature, the principle of principles, the archetype for all principles to follow, but as we discover developed more substantially in the *Gorgias*, without the philosopher to elucidate what exactly constitutes the meaning of “strength” and “weakness,” this principle may very well remain socially indeterminable.²⁵ Therefore, necessary to Plato’s model of the archê is precisely the philosopher who renders the laws of nature intelligible, who grasps their meaning and social function for the community. In this regard, Plato may be understood to posit the philosopher as the guardian of the archê at the same time as he is the guardian of the city.

And yet, if we wish to ascribe a certain consistency across Plato’s larger formulation for the rule of the philosophers, the problem becomes more complicated still. While it is no doubt his intimacy with the Forms that ultimately constitutes the philosopher’s wisdom and hence, his exceptional nature compared to those who are ignorant, it is imperative to recognise that in terms of assuming his proper place in government, the wisdom of the philosopher alone remains insufficient. To establish his position as governor, to be entitled to govern, Plato also requires a principle which dictates that it is the wise who shall rule the ignorant and not the reverse or some other arrangement altogether. Such a principle cannot be said to be provided by the Forms themselves. This is an important detail that

²⁵ Plato, *Gorgias*, 488c+. Also see Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 39.

Arendt's critique of Plato's cave allegory appears to overlook. The Forms may certainly account for the nature of the philosopher's disposition and claim to wisdom, but such a disposition only becomes a basis to rule when it is stipulated by the appropriate *archê* principle. Although integral to his political philosophy, the *archê* remains supplemental to the Forms and according to Plato, is discovered in nature, not in the heavens above. Just as Plato thematically associates the Forms, wisdom and the sky, he will likewise bind the *archê*, qualification and nature. Whereas the Forms provide an absolute standard or measure to evaluate the organisation of the proper order of the city under the name of justice, the *archê* provides the basis for the proper relations of rule under the name of natural law. Both in substance and in function, the logic of the *archê* remains entirely distinct from that of the Forms in Plato's thought. Although both the Forms and the *archê* pose similar theoretical questions to the philosopher (how the imperceptible relates to the perceptible and how the perceptible relates to the imperceptible), as the Forms represent transcendent ideas of eternal essences which intend to solve the problem of *doxa*, the *archê* represents a principle attributed to nature which intends to solve the problem of politics. The Forms may provide the theoretical grounds for the philosopher's claim to wisdom, but it is only the *archê* principle (autonomous from the Forms) that renders wisdom a qualification, that grants the wise his proper place as governor of the city. In this regard, if one of political philosophy's traditional objectives is indeed to justify and rationalise a particular order of government as Rancière maintains, Plato's political works certainly remain a

testament to the degree of sophistication that such a theoretical exercise may entail.

As we have seen, each specified archê outlines a particular criterion to rule ultimately drawn from nature, a strategy clearly organised to circumvent the problem of politics from the start. Accordingly, if we were inclined to attack the validity of Plato's qualifications, it would no doubt be here, at the level of their reliance upon nature. For what Plato attempts to coordinate is a *nomos* that perfectly coincides with *physis*.²⁶ When this identity is achieved, the possibility for a distinctively political relation is foreclosed. And yet, the charge that Plato's initial six titles enumerate a series of hierarchies that ultimately represent *sociological* relations as opposed to natural ones is not the point. We can certainly doubt that Plato's qualifications may actually be drawn from nature as he claims, but that they may function *as* qualifications is something that cannot be so easily discredited. Instead, following Rancière's analysis, what should be extracted from Plato's appeal to nature, his reference to disposition, is the second dimension which constitutes the anatomy of the archê: the archê not only represents the principle which grounds the division between ruler and ruled (commandment), but at the same time, arranges its distribution of hierarchical roles according to an anticipatory origin or temporal beginning (commencement). As Rancière encapsulates in *Hatred of Democracy*:

Arkhê is the commandment of he who commences, of what comes first. It is the anticipation of the right to command in the act of commencing and the verifying of the power of commencing in the exercise of commanding. The ideal is thus defined of a

26 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 70. Also see McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," 115. For a more extensive analysis of the relation between *nomos* and *physis* in Plato's political thought see Robert W. Hall, *Political Thinkers: Plato* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1981), chapter 2.

government which consists in realising the principle by which the power of governing commences, of a government which consists in exhibiting *en acte* the legitimacy of its principle. Those who are capable of governing are those who have the dispositions that make them appropriate for the role, those who are capable of being governed are those who have dispositions complementary to the former.²⁷

Insofar as it binds ruling and disposition (or disposition and destination), the *archê* contains within it a logic of *priority*. Beyond establishing the necessary structural divide between ruler and ruled, the *archê* serves to distribute a social body across these categories according to a *predetermined* or *predefined* set of qualities and attributes. For what the *archê* ultimately seeks to demonstrate is that only those who rule possess the inherent capacity to do so. By qualifying that rule is anticipated by the disposition that is essential to what it means to be a ruler, by placing the presence of rule in direct relation with its beginnings, or the conditions of its beginnings, the *archê* functions to justify that order of rule in advance. For example, when oligarchy declares that it is the wealthy who represent the proper rulers of the city, what it claims is that only the wealthy possess the capacity to govern and by extension, that it is precisely the conditions of wealth which give rise to such a capacity. Likewise, in modern times, when capital declares that it is only the capitalist class that is capable of managing our financial institutions and means of production, what it claims is that only this particular class embodies the integrity, ingenuity and insight necessary to manage a productive, stable economy and that it is precisely the conditions that make this class what it is that imbue it with these

²⁷ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 38-9.

essential attributes. Hence, according to the logic of the *archê*, what the exercise of rule actually expresses is the infinite process of discovering its own legitimacy in the origins of what it is that constitutes the appropriate ruler of the community in the first place. When rule references the *archê*, what it references is the past of itself. Rule always anticipates itself in a time that comes before. It is precisely this anticipation of rule that government calls forth and rehearses in the present act of ruling another. This is indicative of the somewhat circular logic that the *archê* appears to set in motion: just as the exercise of rule enacts or recalls the source of its origins, these origins claim to confirm and verify that rule in advance by virtue of the exercise of rule itself. This circularity forms the basis of Rancière's most succinct definition of the term:

An *arkhê* is two things: it is a theoretical principle entailing a clear distribution of positions and capacities, grounding the distribution of power between rulers and ruled; and it is a temporal beginning entailing that the fact of ruling is anticipated in the disposition to rule and, conversely, that the evidence of this disposition is given by the fact of its empirical operation.²⁸

Plato's specific reference to nature clearly corresponds to this second dimension of the *archê*, but that the concept composes a formal unity of these two sides (commandment and commencement) would have remained quite consistent with the ancient understanding of this rather perplexing term.²⁹ This is something that does not escape Arendt (and for his part, Rancière certainly does not fail to reference Arendt in his own nuanced discussions of the *archê* developed here).³⁰ In

28 Rancière, "Does Democracy Mean Something?," 51.

29 For a brief but precise account of the Greek understanding of *arkhê* both as ruling and beginning also see Ober, "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule," 5-6.

30 See for example Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 38.

The Human Condition and a number of other texts, Arendt is perhaps one of the first political theorists to recognise that our conventional translations of *arkhê* and *archêin* as “rule” and “to rule” in English and “herrschaft” and “herrschen” in German often serve to eclipse the significance of this second dimension of the Greek term (which according to Arendt’s research, may actually have been its primary meaning).³¹ Consequently, throughout her writings which consider this theme, Arendt will repeatedly emphasise that in addition to its allusions to rule, *arkhê* will also signify “to begin,” “to initiate,” “to lead,” and even “to set in motion” and it is for this reason that she tends to associate the term with her own theory of political activity in the public sphere (*praxis*): for Arendt, politics is the order of equals who possess the power to initiate action in the polis, to set the polis in motion; to participate in the polis is therefore to participate in the power of the archê, to at once take initiative, partake in the affairs of the polis and govern it collectively.³² Quite opposed to Rancière, it is in this context that she will describe the polis in terms of the public distribution of the archê.³³ Likewise, when Arendt defines revolution as a *new beginning* or *beginning again* (as opposed to its more customary associations of insurrection and social upheaval), it is likely that she is

31 Parchen Markell, “The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê and Democracy,” *The American Political Science Review* vol. 100, no. 1 (Feb., 2006): 2, 4.

32 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177, 189. Also see her various discussions of the concept in *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 45-6, 91, 114, 126.

33 There is indeed a historical basis for Arendt’s position here. With reference to Cleisthenes’ reforms, J. P. Vernant writes: “The polis was a homogeneous whole, without hierarchy, without rank, without differentiation. *Archê* was no longer concentrated in a single figure at the apex of the social structure, but was distributed equally throughout the entire realm of public life [...]” Quoted in Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996), 52.

thinking along the lines of this forgotten dimension of archê as commencement once again.³⁴ For essential to Arendt's concept of revolution in the modern age is the experience of a return to the origin, of a new beginning bound to the idea of freedom.³⁵ And while her own theoretical engagement with the concept may at times be found to accentuate this commencement of the archê—as the initiation of action or the action that initiates—at the expense of its reference to rule, this will only sharpen her grasp of Plato's particular application of the term as it appears in his own political philosophy:

it is decisive for Plato, as he says expressly at the end of the *Laws*, that only the beginning (*archê*) is entitled to rule (*archein*). In the tradition of Platonic thought, this original, linguistically predetermined identity of ruling and beginning had the consequence that all beginning was understood as the legitimation for rulership, until, finally, the element of beginning disappeared altogether from the concept of rulership.³⁶

According to Arendt, in the Greek polis, what the archê originally represented, both linguistically and conceptually, was the formal conjunction of these two ostensibly unrelated terms (commandment and commencement, ruling and beginning). And yet, she maintains that the precise relation between these terms should in no way be thought to be limited to Plato's particular arrangement of the concept. For in contrast to her own theory of praxis, the basis of which she clearly attributes to the politics of the Greeks, Arendt insists that it is Plato (appearing once again to establish something of a precedent for the tradition of political philosophy) who

34 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 10. Also see Claude Lefort, "Hannah Arendt and the Question of the Political," *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) and Markell, "The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê and Democracy," 5-8.

35 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 19.

36 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 224-5.

discovers in the archê a first principle for rule.³⁷ If Arendt's argument is correct, Plato's theoretical manoeuvre here is not difficult to retrace. In his own research, Rancière locates a very early illustration of the archê in Homer: Odysseus, publicly reaffirming Agamemnon as the sole chief of the Greek army, declares Agamemnon the one in possession of the archê, implying that Agamemnon takes the lead and walks ahead while everyone else must inevitably walk behind.³⁸ But at least since Anaximander, ancient philosophy consistently employs the term *arkhê* to express a metaphysical first principle, the substance, source and immutable nature of an existing thing which preserves the essence of its origin in all subsequent transformations and expressions.³⁹ Therefore, when Plato indiscriminately applies this distinctively Presocratic conception of the archê to a theory of government, what he is able to extract from the archê, as Arendt acutely observes, is precisely a first principle in which the legitimization of rule is located at the beginning of rule itself, at its origin, at the conditions of its origin. As we have seen, as the commandment of what commences, of what comes first, the archê organises a logic in which rule anticipates itself in the disposition that comes before, the disposition that is demonstrated and confirmed by the very exercise of rule itself. Therefore, insofar as the concept appears in the tradition of political philosophy under the guidance of Plato, the archê locates the legitimacy of rule in an immemorial past. It

37 Andrew Schaap, "Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics," *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, eds. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum International Publishers, 2012), 150. This certainly supports Rancière's claim that *archipolitics* discovers its origins with Plato.

38 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 30.

39 See Constantine J. Vamvacas, *The Founders of Western Thought: The Presocratics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 36 and William Keith Chambers Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, Vol. 1: The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77.

organises a temporality which privileges a time past, a time which perpetually precedes politics, anticipates its disruptions and intends to hinder them from the start.

This explains why Rancière's general approach to the problem of the *archê* deviates substantially from that of Arendt's.⁴⁰ As Arendt's theory of praxis presumably endeavours to reestablish what she purports to be the *archê*'s original political relation to the collective activity of the polis, Rancière's various discussions of the *archê* suggest that the predominance of the relatively unchallenged Platonic interpretation of the concept has so eclipsed its meaning throughout the history of political thought that it must simply be critiqued and evaluated on Plato's own terms, any residual pre-Platonic connotations seemingly futile to salvage. Likewise, this distinction will account for the apparent disparity between Arendt and Rancière's respective conclusions on the topic. While Arendt contends that politics represents the collective possession of the *archê* equally distributed across the polis, Rancière maintains that politics represents the *archê*'s uncompromising dissolution. For irrespective of Arendt's excavation of traces of its original political formulation, the vast implications of what Plato conceives as the *archê* appear to extend well beyond the limits of philosophy itself: as long as governments isolate a body of rulers from those who are ruled, they will likewise require a general framework in which the community may be distributed according to these two categories. As we have seen, this is precisely what Plato attributes to

40 Andrew Schaap will offer a helpful juxtaposition of the concept of the *archê* as it appears in Rancière and Arendt. See "Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics," 155-6.

the archê. In many respects, this is also consistent with what anarchism appears to associate with the concept as well. And while figures such as Foucault and Deleuze could very well object that power relations require no such archê, that power remains self-actualising and self-validating in its own right, as soon as political philosophy embarks upon a project that seeks to posit various theoretical principles which intend to account for the legitimacy of those powers by appealing to the extra-political conditions of its origin, the problem of the archê only reappears once again.⁴¹ Consequently, if we wish to locate the archê with a greater degree of precision, perhaps it could be said that while the objective elements, forces and relations that constitute the archê are always already there in the very structure of government itself, in the very power to arbitrarily determine and distribute the community from a privileged position, the logic of the archê as an *a priori* principle of rule only appears fully formed when it is realised by a philosophical expression that intends to articulate and verify the legitimacy of that government subsequently. Wealth, blood, class or brain: whenever it is declared that only the exceptional among us possess the inherent capacity to govern, the logic of the archê is set in motion. Whenever the justification for that government is referred to the anticipatory conditions of its origin, the objective of the archê is achieved.

Therefore, in the broadest strokes, what can be extracted from Plato's model of the archê? The archê fosters a representation of society in which its primary task

41 Although it is possible to interpret a dimension of Foucault's early *archaeology of knowledge* to be, in part, an attempt to unearth and dispel subtle references to the archê that haunt particular discourses of power. Here, Foucault situates his own method against both the *archê* of the philosophers and the *archive* of the historians. See Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, "Risked Democracy: Foucault, Castoriadis and the Greeks," *Radical Philosophy* no. 166 (March 2011-April 2011): 31.

is to become identical with itself, to engineer its institutions of government so that they may coincide with its most essential principle. Once the *archê* is posited theoretically, the organisation of the community is interpreted as a rational problem as opposed to a political one. According to Rancière, this explains its long appeal to philosophy. The *archê* inaugurates a project of discovering the grounds, the underlying principles, which claim to justify various social hierarchies and relations of rule, some already established throughout society, some remaining purely hypothetical (Plato's philosopher-rulers). Predicated upon the postulate that there is a nature of the social, the *archê* identifies the basis for the proper order of rule in the proper relations of the social. This intends to obstruct politics, or the potential for politics, by claiming that the regulation of society remains consistent with natural rules. Under the guise of nature, of capacities and the conditions of those capacities, the *archê* introduces a principle of the social in order to dictate its basic organisation and relations of rule. Accordingly, as Rancière will underscore, the *archê* binds particular bodies to particular roles, functions and spaces by virtue of their inherent capacities purported to be self-evident.⁴² Some are destined to exercise the *archê*, others destined to submit to its authority. Hence, as soon as the logic of the *archê* is established, the complications of government become substantially simplified to one of how to institute the community according to the principle which dictates these basic relations.

One of the consequences of such a representation of society is that it denies

42 This is the basis of what Rancière often calls the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*).

the ability of the polis to be expressed as something to be shaped by its citizens' activity as political agents.⁴³ As an appeal to the archê intends to lay out an absolute foundation of rule, when the logic of the archê is operative, the field of politics is effectively dissolved, its condition covered over. The political is reduced to the social and in turn, the social is reduced to an imperceptible principle that claims to perpetually anticipate it. The archê therefore offers to government the gift of rule without politics and community without political subjects. To posit an archê of the community is to posit the potential of the polis to achieve harmony with itself, to realise its proper order so that its model of rule repeats its most essential principle. The ideal realisation of the archê is therefore the government that perfectly coincides with its principle in institutional form.

But when democracy appears, the entire logic of the archê becomes compromised. Democracy not only puts into question the grounds upon which governors distinguish themselves from those they govern, it serves to problematise the very division between ruler and ruled altogether. What is it that makes democracy's challenge to the archê so compelling? Democracy represents the exception to every other regime in that it does not reproduce the logic of the archê by founding a new criterion for which a new form of government may be established. It does not strive to institute a principle of the demos to combat those corresponding principles which facilitate the rule of oligarchs and kings. Rather, the ingenuity of democracy is that it discovers a way to undermine the very logic of the

43 Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology," *Theory and Event* vol. 6, no. 4 (2003).

archê itself. By disrupting the foundations upon which the rulers of the community elevate themselves, democracy reveals the intrinsic artificiality and arbitrariness of every hierarchical relation. By exposing the essential groundlessness upon which the organisation of the social is ultimately constructed, democracy reveals the sheer contingency of every social order. When this occurs, the edifice of rule begins to crack and crumble, its justification rendered untenable. This is something perhaps first articulated by Tocqueville who observes, somewhat disconcertingly, that what democracy appears to dismantle is precisely the conventions of aristocracy (democracy exposes aristocracy's conventions for what they are: conventions and nothing more).⁴⁴ As Keane develops with broader connotations: "Democracy skewered talk of stern necessity through the heart. It highlighted the contingency of things, events, institutions, people and their beliefs. The originality of democracy lay in its challenge to habitual ways of seeing the world, to thoughtless regard for power and ways of governing people, to living life as if everything was inevitable, or 'natural'."⁴⁵ Perhaps this is why Lefort will claim that as soon as notions of natural inequality and fixed, transhistorical hierarchies are eliminated, society is already in some manner *democratic*.⁴⁶ What democracy introduces to the city is the problem of politics. By rendering the polis a political problem, by complicating the bases which dictate its social relations, the content of the archê is effectively denaturalised, its power stripped of its effectiveness. Democracy means confronting

44 Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 71.

45 Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 51.

46 Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 69.

the archê with a notion of society in which the order of the community lacks any such foundation. It means denouncing a representation of the polis in which the legitimacy of government may be expressed in terms of its formal correspondence with an underlying principle. If we follow Rancière: “politics is not the enactment of the principle, the law, or the self of a community. Put in other words, politics has no archê, it is anarchical. The very name *democracy* supports this point. As Plato noted, democracy has no archê, no measure.”⁴⁷ It is for this reason that democracy cannot simply be appreciated as a constitution like any other. Democracy contains no archê within it and always appears in the form of a *democracy against the archê*. Therefore, just as the *Republic* may be read in its entirety as one long argument against democracy and its lack of foundation, as a critical strategy, the topic of democracy may likewise be initiated with respect to its own *being-against* what the *Republic* so unabashedly promotes: in the most general, what democracy is against is the archê of society. By problematising the foundations of a given social order, by rupturing the logic which distributes rule to a select few, democracy locates the radical indeterminacy at the root of every regime of government. It demonstrates that even our most established and most sacred institutions are not given by nature or sanctioned by the gods, but are rather founded upon nothing but their own contingency. Likewise, when democracy fashions its own institutions, it can only do so according to this anarchic condition that it so boldly uncovers. Thus, “democratic” government, insofar as we may employ the term, can never claim to

47 Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” *October* vol. 61 (Summer 1992): 59.

achieve identity with itself as the very foundations of democracy ultimately remain irreducible, a condition experienced institutionally in the infinite expressions of *doxa* and *agon*. Democracy, it could therefore be said, is the regime that remains perpetually opened to difference.⁴⁸ In this regard, if democracy has a foundation at all, it is the condition of anarchy itself: the foundation of rule that lacks a foundation. This is the very condition that we have called *politics*.

Let us return to our analysis of Rancière. Rancière's fourth thesis on politics establishes democracy not as a regime of rule, but as a rupture in the logic of the *archê*.⁴⁹ Here Rancière introduces a problem that will be developed in greater detail in *Hatred of Democracy*: if the demos is the body that possesses no entitlement to exercise the *archê*, if the demos is the body that does not count and has no right to take part, how is democracy, as the purported government of the demos, to be understood?⁵⁰ How are we to resolve the paradox of the government composed of those who by every definition have no right to govern by any account? Certainly, this is the very problem that so profoundly troubles Plato about democracy. But as Rancière explains, this paradox that appears to constitute the very essence of democracy is not indicative of a problem to be resolved, but rather represents the solution to understanding democracy itself. Throughout history, perhaps the two most predominant entitlements to govern have been birth and wealth, the former

48 For an analysis of democracy's unstable ontology as radical difference see Oliver Marchart, "The Absence at the Heart of Presence: Radical Democracy and the 'Ontology of Lack'," *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*, eds. Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

49 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 31.

50 Ibid., 32.

bound to the superiority of kinship, the latter to a privileged position in the organisation of economic production and distribution: “Societies are usually governed by a combination of these two powers to which, in varying degrees, force and science lend their support.”⁵¹ To these two longstanding entitlements, Plato desperately longs to throw wisdom into contention. But to govern the highborn, the rich and the wise alike, democracy must devise a supplementary title, a title which remains specific to all those with no qualification whatsoever, a title for those who have no status or position, entitlement or claim: “Now, the only remaining title is the anarchic title, the title specific to those who have no more title for governing than they have for being governed.”⁵² For Rancière, this *anarchic title* is key to grasping the meaning of democracy in its most general sense. Democracy is neither a predetermined distribution of roles, nor a particular claim to exercise the archê: “Democracy first of all means this: anarchic ‘government’, one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern.”⁵³ According to Rancière, this anarchic title, the title based upon nothing other than the absence of every title to govern, is precisely Plato’s mysterious seventh title included in the *Laws*: “And we persuade a man to cast lots, by explaining that this, the seventh title of authority, enjoys the favour of the gods and is blessed by fortune.”⁵⁴ So after the careful delineation of our initial six qualifications to rule, each positing a particular archê principle, Plato curiously ventures to include a seventh which appears rather

51 Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 46.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 41. Todd May offers considerable analysis of this statement in “Rancière and Anarchism.”

54 Plato, *Laws*, III, 690c.

incongruous from the rest: a claim to rule that is based on no principle at all.⁵⁵ For what grounds this title is not a proper *archê*, but if we follow Plato, something which remains indeterminate: the casting of lots, the arbitrariness of *chance* itself. If the *archê* functions both to divide the categories of ruler and ruled and to distribute the right to rule to those with the inherent capacities of the ruler, this seventh title certainly fails to perform either of these two functions.⁵⁶ The casting of lots, the institution that structurally resists the very logic of the *archê*, that formally recognises all those without title, is emblematic of the right to participate in government in spite of the complete lack of any qualification based on disposition. As pronounced by Rancière's third thesis, this is essential to what it is that politics means: "*Politics is a specific break with the logic of the archê. It does not simply presuppose a break with the 'normal' distribution of positions that defines who exercises power and who is subject to it. It also requires a break with the idea that there exist dispositions 'specific' to these positions.*"⁵⁷ This is precisely what Plato appears to associate with the casting of lots. Lot is that peculiar institution engineered with the greatest degree of precision and calculation for the sole purpose of injecting the element of unpredictability into government.⁵⁸ By blindly selecting members of the community to fill temporary positions in various offices and the administrative council (*boule*), it functions to *select out* the entitlement of those few

55 See Samuel A. Chambers, "Police and Oligarchy," *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2010), 65.

56 Rancière, "Does Democracy Mean Something?," 51.

57 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 30.

58 From the drawing of lots to ballot machines to water clocks, John Keane will make this point regarding many of the institutional mechanisms employed by ancient democracy. See *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 51.

who enjoy wealth, status and privilege. As the archê attempts to isolate those with a special capacity to govern, lot, by its very nature, appears to propose that participation in government requires no special qualification whatsoever. It implies that government is not the discipline of experts or professional politicians, but that the task of governing the community rightly belongs to the community itself, that the disposition to govern is no different from the disposition to be governed. Lot is therefore the ancient institution devised specifically to facilitate this elusive anarchic title, the title for all those without title. It is for this reason that Rancière, in *Hatred of Democracy*, considers lot the very symbol of what is so scandalous about democracy itself: “The scandal of democracy, and of the drawing of lots which is its essence, is to reveal that this title can be nothing but the absence of title, that the government of societies cannot but rest in the last resort on its own contingency.”⁵⁹

To affirm that every government rests only upon its own contingency is, in part, to affirm a radical negation. It is to maintain that there is no ultimate basis for one man to rule another, for the few to rule the many. It is to maintain that there is no necessity to the manner in which social arrangements are organised and coordinated. To affirm the contingency of the social is to reject that there is a nature of society that transcends the bounds of history, custom and convention. It is to refuse the postulate that social relations are intuitive and straightforward and unequivocal. Therefore, perhaps one of the more significant implications of the democratic project is that as a general category “the social” must necessarily be

⁵⁹ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 47.

understood according to the infinite series of contingencies that constitute the substance of its relations.⁶⁰ Against Plato, the social is in no way indicative of an organic system of relationships from which various orders of government may be isolated and advanced theoretically. There is no formula or foundation for government to be discovered in the extra-political relations of the social already composed and arranged in innumerable ways. To Arendt's point, the proper order of the city can be drawn neither from examples of the captain and his crew, the shepherd and his sheep, nor from any of the six models of authority outlined in the *Laws*. There is no nature of the social which dictates one's proper place in a complementary relation of rule. However established and ingrained our various social arrangements appear to be, the social offers no principle, no constant, no blueprint for government to repeat and express in institutional form. *The social is already instituted from the start*. Although rarely considered a thinker of institutions, this is something that Rancière never allows us to forget. The *social*, the *historical*, the *contingent* are terms which can never be opposed. There is no static social space to be uncovered beyond the artifice of institutions themselves. Divided, episodic, segmentary, discordant, if the social can be articulated in general terms at all, for Rancière, it is only as a domain dominated by the universality of its perpetually conflicting forces.⁶¹

60 For an analysis and evaluation of Rancière's general position on the social see Michael J. Shapiro, "Radicalizing Democratic Theory: Social Space in Connolly, Deleuze and Rancière," *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition*, eds. David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). For a more critical appraisal of Rancière's conception of contingency see Jodi Dean, "Politics Without Politics," *Parallax* (vol. 15, no. 3, 2009): 31-2.

61 Shapiro, "Radicalizing Democratic Theory: Social Space in Connolly, Deleuze and Rancière," 198, 202.

Therefore, if politics may be conceived in terms of an absence of foundation, it is only because the social itself lacks any stable or immutable basis upon which the organisation of the community may ultimately ground itself. Indeed, for Rancière, politics can only be said to take place when the organisation of the community or the distribution of the social is thrown back on its own inherent contingency.⁶² Politics involves a radical exorcism of the natural from the social, so that for the first time the social appears *as the social* and irreducibly social, as something entirely onto itself. This is not to suggest that the social and the political remain indistinguishable conceptually, but that part of what politics entails is the demonstration that the social is always particular, instituted, historical. The social is the *object* of politics and politics is something that *happens* to the social. Politics is the name of that which prevents the few, the rich, the highborn from transforming the contingencies of the social into various titles for ruling. It reveals the immeasurable gulf which separates these contingencies from any inherent right to rule.⁶³ Politics may not be an exercise as modest as simply juxtaposing nature with convention or as hubristic as claiming to represent “the truth” of the social, but what it does, if we follow Rancière, is render problematic the assertion that from the nature of the social an archê which determines the proper governors of the city may be ascertained and put forward as a foundation for rule. The very lack of such a nature of the social is precisely what makes politics possible: “Politics exists simply

62 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 101. Also see Shapiro, “Radicalizing Democratic Theory: Social Space in Connolly, Deleuze and Rancière,” 216.

63 Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction*, 54-5.

because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society. [...] [A]nyone who wants to cure politics of its ills has only one available solution: the lie that invents some kind of social nature in order to provide the community with an *arkhê*.”⁶⁴ As we have seen, the reinstallation of the *archê* is Plato’s only viable solution to the scandal of democracy, the regime perceived to be grounded only by the indeterminacy epitomised by the casting of lots. In order to combat this condition, Plato’s only recourse is to attempt to cover it over once again by claiming to establish a new foundation of rule via the discovery of a new *archê* principle. Anticipating his later studies on democracy, this procedure is precisely what Rancière, in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, will encapsulate as “Plato’s lie.”⁶⁵ The principal theme of the *Republic* may very well be what constitutes the justice of the city, but insofar as its conclusions ultimately rely upon little more than the whim of the city’s architect, the basis for the proper order of the just city remains entirely arbitrary. Plato’s lie is that his ideal city, complete with its guardians, hierarchies and partitioned classes affixed to particular functions and roles, is founded upon nothing more than that which remains contingent still. Plato may claim that his city’s design is thoroughly rational, but rational design in no way cancels out those very contingencies bound up with the ancient philosopher’s own intentions, strategies and preferences. Plato may put forward a model of the city governed by the wise, but he in no way escapes the underlying contingency of the social so

64 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 16.

65 See Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), chapter 1. Also see Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 75.

dramatically exposed by democracy itself. By devising a new entitlement to govern from a fraudulent premise of the social, he merely succeeds in theoretically obscuring this condition once again. Therefore, just as Rancière claims to decipher an essential equality concealed beneath every form of inequality (expressed in terms of even the lowest slave's acknowledged membership to the linguistic community), he likewise identifies an underlying anarchy beneath every model of hierarchy (expressed in terms of the contingency of the social).⁶⁶ Obviously, such a postulate does not deny the existence of hierarchies of all kinds everywhere in society, but what it ultimately intends to demonstrate is that immanent to every hierarchical relation is the always possible means to dismantle it. If democracy has proven successful in this task, it is because democracy discovers a way to undermine every hierarchy at its very foundation, namely, by demonstrating that its foundation is not a foundation at all.

Accordingly, this curious “anarchic title” may be understood as the basis of democracy's unique strategy to topple those given hierarchies associated with various models of rule. In this regard, why exactly Plato chooses to consider the anarchic title among his list of legitimate titles in the *Laws* admittedly remains unclear. For Plato will elaborate upon the content of this seventh title and the reasons for its inclusion no further. Perhaps we should assume that by including it, his intentions are simply to expose that the dominant title of his day—the empty title which facilitates a government of the demos—is the only title based upon

66 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 16-17. Also see Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 79.

nothing at all: merely chance, accident, “the fortune of the gods,” the throw of the dice. Perhaps the incontestable artificiality of the seventh title is only exhibited to substantiate, by way of contrast, the inherent validity of the initial six titles drawn from nature, the institution of lot only referenced to reaffirm the natural order of rule spanning from parent and child to wise and ignorant. If this is so, then just as we have seen with the allegory of the ship, Plato’s only intention is once again to sabotage the government of the demos by demonstrating that in relation to other models of the *archê*, the *archê* of democracy is the only *archê* that is not a proper *archê* at all. Nevertheless, by including the seventh qualification only to discredit it, Plato actually does a great service to the theory of democracy: by identifying the radical indeterminacy upon which democracy must so precariously position itself, he reveals that democratic government is the only government to be founded upon the *absence* of any proper entitlement to govern. Against every other qualification, every other criterion, democracy fabricates a supplementary title for all those who possess no title at all. It is for this reason that the anarchic title, the exception to every other title, is the only title that ultimately remains *political*.⁶⁷ It undermines a given distribution of the social that binds governors and governed to particular qualities, capabilities and conditions. It cuts across the rigid filiations and alliances of birth, caste and class and opens up a field in which traditional identities, roles and relations are broken down—or at least suspended—with respect to the rule of the community, its legislation and occupation of civic offices and juridical posts.

67 Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 47.

Perhaps it is specifically in this context that Cleisthenes' historic reforms must be understood. What is it that makes Cleisthenes' reforms so indisputably monumental for the systematic institution of Athenian democracy? By at once configuring a new model of "tribal" association (*phulai*) and distributing this model across an entirely reorganised regional division of Attica, Cleisthenes discovered a way to formally disrupt the traditional bonds which dictate age-old familial, economic and spatial relations in the rule of the community, fostering the unprecedented emergence of a uniquely political identity intersected by an entirely novel representation of civic space.⁶⁸ Put another way, borrowing the terminology of Deleuze, by *detritorialising* the traditional modalities which govern the spaces and identities of Athens, only to *reterritorialise* those very spaces and identities according to a purely civic conception of the city, Cleisthenes' reforms functioned to obstruct the distribution of rule to a particular title, lineage or class. What Cleisthenes' reforms can be said to have achieved, therefore, is the structural bases (both geographic and identitarian) in which the government of Athens is rendered political, that is, in which the claim to govern is drawn only from the anarchic title and nowhere else. The so-called government of the demos, the rule of those who have no more right to govern than to submit, is only possible when the identities, spaces and relations of government are rendered political accordingly. In 507 B.C.E., Cleisthenes' reforms of the Athenian political landscape represent an unprecedented movement in this

⁶⁸ For a still unequalled analysis of Cleisthenes' reforms see Pierre Lévêque and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Cleisthenes the Athenian: An Essay on the Representation of Space and Time in Greek Political Thought from the End of the Sixth Century to the Death of Plato* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996).

direction.

Hence, the *power of the people* is not the power to exercise the archê. Quite the opposite, the *power of the people* is the power that has become political. In opposition to the government which claims to rest upon a principle of itself, democracy invents the only notion of government which rests upon politics itself, that is, which rests upon the explicit institution of the contingency of the social expressed in terms of the very contradiction of the qualification without qualification, the title that belongs not to a particular class or tribe, that is not bound to capacity or condition, but embodies the empty form of *anyone at all*:

What remains is the extraordinary exception, the power of the people, which is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of governors and of the governed. Political government, then, has a foundation. But this foundation is also in fact a contradiction: politics is the foundation of a power to govern in the absence of foundation.⁶⁹

Far from redundant, what Rancière here calls “political” government is the only form of government to be founded upon the anarchic title, upon the equality to occupy both the positions of governor and governed. Government becomes political when the foundations which prop up the rule of a particular class of governors fall away, so that the right to participate in the deliberation of political affairs may be redistributed to that generic subject traditionally known as the demos: not the demos as a particular class or disenfranchised body, but the demos understood according to the anarchic title, that is, the demos understood as *anyone at all*.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 49.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of Rancière’s “anarchic equality” see Peter Hallward, “Staging Equality: Rancière’s

Therefore, although Rancière will reject Laclau's position that "the demos" merely represents an empty signifier to be filled with various content, he will nevertheless insist, as will Lefort, that what ultimately constitutes meaning of "the people" is destined to remain indeterminate and inherently controversial.⁷¹ The idea of the demos is one imbued with an essential tension or ambivalence. So it is no contradiction when Rancière declares democracy, as the power of the demos, at once the regime of the poor, the excluded, the marginalised (the part without part) and the regime of the people (the part, we could say, that has become indistinguishable from a representation of the whole via the contentious relation between parts).⁷² For when expressed in terms of the anarchic title, the demos is the name that simultaneously represents the particular and the universal: the demos is both a part of the community and the part that becomes analogous to the whole. The channel through which it moves from one to the other is the field of politics itself.

And yet, if one of the implications of Rancière's anarchic title is that it may be positively expressed in terms of the "equality of capabilities" as we see here, his position could very well be said to echo an argument that would not have been unfamiliar to the ancient Greeks themselves. For insofar as Rancière binds his conception of politics to the equality of capabilities, the framework of his argument will remain rather consistent with one of the few ancient philosophical defences of democracy which purportedly survives. If we accept the general account of the

Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality," *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, eds. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2009).

71 Miguel Abensour, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, "Instances démocratiques," *Vacarme* vol. 48 (été 2009). For Laclau's argument see *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

72 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 10.

position espoused by the sophist as portrayed in the Platonic dialogue which takes his name, Protagoras appears to have argued that unlike architecture, geometry and navigation, the capacity for “deliberating on the administration of the city,” that is, the capacity for political judgement (*politike techne*), is not at all a specialised skill, such as those possessed by artisans, but a capacity that remains universal to all people, noble and common, wealthy and poor.⁷³ To explain this claim, Plato has Protagoras recount a myth in which, during the creation of man, Zeus bestows something unique to this rather defenceless species that other animals do not possess: to each individual, Zeus imparts an equal share of *politike techne* so that simply by virtue of living in a city and without any training whatsoever, all people are capable of political deliberation and debate and hence, must be deemed capable of participating in the affairs of city. Therefore, much like Rancière’s celebrated ignorant schoolmaster whose pedagogical strategies are predicated upon the axiom that simply assumes the equality of intelligence (the equal capacity to learn), according to Protagoras, as a professional sophist, the only reason that it is possible to instruct in the art of politics at all is because *politike techne* is already a capacity presumed to be equally possessed by all people from the start.⁷⁴ For Protagoras, it is this inherent capacity—and not the social contract of the moderns—that makes

73 Plato, *Protagoras*, 319a-323a. According to Castoriadis, ancient Greek democracy is predicated upon the notion that there are no experts regarding the affairs of politics, that political wisdom belongs to the community as a whole. Perhaps it is for this reason that Castoriadis famously asserts that the lesson of democracy is that *one cannot be wise alone*. See “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy,” *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 108, 120.

74 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Eric Mechoulam offers a fascinating analysis of some of Rancière’s most central themes in light of Protagoras’ claim. See “Sophisticated Continuities and Historical Discontinuities, Or, Why Not Protagoras?” *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*.

living together in a political community possible. This is the argument that historians will most often put forward as one of the more compelling contemporary defences of ancient democracy.⁷⁵ For if democracy indeed posits that the capacity to occupy the position of governor is nothing beyond the capacity to occupy the position of the governed, then it must be concluded that equality cannot simply be considered an institutional consequence of democracy, but something that is already *presupposed* from the start: just as we discover in the work of Rancière, equality is not the goal, but the very *axiom* of democracy itself.

And yet, as Rancière wishes to remind us, to occupy both the roles of governor and governed is something quite different from *reciprocity*. For whereas reciprocity may still imply to rule and be ruled *in turn* and could be construed as the circulation or exchange of the archê, what the concept of *anarchic* government appears to entail is precisely the government founded only upon this paradoxical status of the qualification of the unqualified.⁷⁶ This may appear a rather subtle distinction, but for Rancière, it is paramount for grasping what isolates democracy from every other regime:

Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhê*. [...] In this logic the specificity of the *arkhê*—its redoubling, that is, the fact that it always precedes itself in the circle of its own disposition and exercise—is destroyed. But this situation of exception is identical with the very condition that more generally makes politics in its specificity possible.⁷⁷

75 See for example M. I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 28.

76 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 31.

77 Ibid.

Democracy is not a regenerated process to circulate or distribute the archê in a manner in which its logic remains intact. This is precisely where Rancière disagrees with Arendt. Rather, it is the specific situation in which the logic of the archê is made to undermine itself through its very form. If the archê may be described as the logic which binds an imperceptible principle to the empirical organisation of the community by grounding the right to rule in a condition or capacity that anticipates that rule in a time that comes before, then democracy describes the operation in which the archê, put through the indeterminacy that constitutes the anarchic title, loses its specific point of reference and returns to itself as an empty form, without referent, without specification, so that the circle which binds rule to disposition and disposition to rule becomes ruptured. In other words, democracy represents a radical break with the logic of the archê, not simply by virtue of its outright rejection of its content, but by inundating its form with an indecipherable reference to *anyone at all*. What distinguishes Plato's seventh title from his preceding six is that formally incapable of isolating the appropriate set of rulers of the community, the indeterminacy that permeates the archê of the demos is forcibly externalised functioning to disrupt the various criteria of every other archê. When this occurs, the justification for the rule of the highborn, the rich and the wise is rendered illegitimate leaving only one title remaining: the only title based upon politics itself. As Rancière concludes: "*Politics* means the supplementation of all qualifications by the power of the unqualified. The ultimate ground on which rulers govern is that there is no good reason as to why some men should rule others. Ultimately the

practice of ruling rests on its own absence of reason.”⁷⁸

Accordingly, the outstanding question of democracy’s own legitimacy is one impossible to evaluate within the given framework as stipulated by the logic of the archê. This is because beyond the order of politics, democracy is able to provide no point of reference to justify its institutional models or claims of equality. Thus, if we wish to remain consistent with Rancière’s general formulation of democracy as “political” or “anarchic” government, government that rests only upon the condition of its own contingency, democracy must consequently be said to be the government that at once *legitimises* and *delegitimises* itself in a single gesture.⁷⁹ For as Abensour will attest, anarchy is that which cannot be sovereign, cannot reign and cannot be expressed as a principle without contradiction.⁸⁰ Democracy can therefore provide no absolution, no proof and no guarantee. It has recourse to no principle or external frame of reference from which its justification may be verified in any unequivocal or absolute manner. Its foundation is inextricably bound with its absence of foundation, its ground with its absence of ground. It is precisely for this reason that from the beginning, we likened its condition to the sea.

In a recent interview, Rancière explains that democracy is that which makes politics thinkable.⁸¹ As long as rule is simply allocated to the rich, the strong, the exceptional among us, there is no need for politics. Rule, in itself, does not require

78 Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” 53.

79 Ibid.

80 Miguel Abensour, “An-archy Between Metapolitics and Politics,” *Parallax* vol. 8, iss. 3 (2002): 16.

81 Jacques Rancière and Eric Hazan, “Democracies Against Democracy,” *Democracy in What State?*, 78-9.

politics and politics is in no way essential to its meaning. Politics, rather, manifests as the exception to rule; it is what puts rule into question, what makes rule the object of controversy and dispute. As we witnessed with the Greeks, when the problems of the polis are expressed as problems of politics, when the very constitution of the community itself becomes *political*, rule and the relations of rule can no longer be understood as a straightforward and intuitive arrangement, the order of the city no longer perceived as a given, natural or unchallengeable formation. As Rancière attempts to illustrate, when politics takes place, the very *sensible* of the community is transformed.⁸²

Politics occurs when the order of the city, its spaces, institutions and relations, is exposed to the order of politics accordingly; it is the process whereby the problem of the organisation of the community is declared to rightly concern the whole community and hence is rendered a political problem. The agent of this process is democracy. For Rancière, before the name of a regime, before a set of institutions, democracy must be understood as a dynamic, transformative force, one that opens a space for polemics and dissensus in the polis.⁸³ When approached and considered according to its most universal form, its being-against the archê, it is precisely this radical transformative agency that will appear with the greatest clarity and salience. Expressed in terms of the anarchic title, the equality of *anyone at all*, democracy can be appreciated to offer an unprecedented challenge to an order of

82 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

83 Hewlett, Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: *Rethinking Emancipation*, 108.

society that categorically divides governors from governed according to an abstract principle of rule. What democracy introduces to government is the complications of politics. As observed by Plato, democracy's subjection of the polis to politics serves to undermine the logic of the *archê* and subsequently expose the organisation of the social to an underlying anarchic condition. As the *power of the people*, democracy is not only committed to the annihilation of the *archê* as such, but also to the task of keeping this condition open. As Jean-Luc Nancy eloquently conveys in *The Truth of Democracy*:

In this sense, democracy equals anarchy. But anarchy commits one to certain actions, operations, and struggles, to certain forms that allow one rigorously to maintain the absence of any posited, deposited, or imposed *archê*. The democratic *kratein*, the power of the people, is first of all the power to foil the *archê* and then to take responsibility, all together and each individually, for the infinite opening that is thereby brought to light.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Truth of Democracy," *The Truth of Democracy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 31. Jean-Philippe Deranty explores a number of thematic similarities between Rancière and Nancy including their understanding of the *archê* and the implications of its refutation. See "Rancière and Contemporary Political Ontology."

Part Two | The use of philosophy

3

To think democracy otherwise: Claude Lefort and “savage” democracy

Democracy has consequently been abandoned to its wild instincts, and it has grown up like those children who have no parental guidance, who receive their education in the public streets...

-Alexis de Tocqueville

It is true that, in a certain sense, no one holds the formula for democracy and that it is most profoundly itself by being savage democracy. Perhaps this is what constitutes its essence...

-Claude Lefort

If an examination of democracy against the archê reveals something essential about what democracy means, it is not only because, as we have seen, democracy and the archê remain inherently irreconcilable, but more generally, because when the question of democracy is initiated according to what it is against, we are obliged to consider something often left concealed by the customary institutional analysis: its emancipatory, transformative potential. Perhaps one feature that the work of Rancière, Lefort and Abensour all share in common is a commitment to a conception of democracy that denies that it may be confined to a

system of government or collection of institutions. Although the scope and objectives of their projects differ considerably and can be integrated into no single framework, in each respective case what these authors help us to think is a notion of democracy as something defiant, adversarial, resurgent. In a Brechtian spirit, their work functions to estrange the concept of democracy from those discourses that perpetuate a mitigated, domesticated representation of democracy officially sanctioned by the interests of capital and the rules of the State so that something that perhaps once appeared so familiar and unequivocal and prosaic may be encountered and engaged in entirely new ways. This is a strategy that unabashedly rejects the kind of sentiment espoused by Slavoj Žižek who ultimately finds the term democracy: “so discredited by its predominant use that, perhaps, one should take the risk of abandoning it to the enemy.”¹ Refusing such a risk, refusing the capitulatory gesture of surrendering democracy “to the enemy,” Rancière, Lefort and Abensour can each be read to propose something far more challenging: the rediscovery of the radical imperative at the root of democracy itself, so that we may reappropriate the term, give it new life and place it against a prevailing order that limits and confines its potentials and capacities. Consequently, what such a theoretical venture will immediately recognise and render explicit is that particularly in the modern age, part of what democracy means is the inevitable conflict over its very meaning. As Rancière will attest most unequivocally, while democracy certainly entails a resistance to the strategies of consensus engineered by

1 Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 123.

our so-called “democratic” States, at the same time, it also inaugurates a struggle over language itself, a struggle over the very word “democracy.”²

Despite Rancière’s persistent scepticism, this is a struggle that philosophy—broadly understood, following Deleuze, as the labour specific to the construction of concepts—can be said to be well disposed to aid and support.³ Although Rancière longs to distance his own work from the discipline, convinced that the history of philosophy has repeatedly confirmed that its only approach to the question of politics is limited to deciphering a rational means to account for the structure and functioning of a given social order, if we follow the example of Abensour, the critical and emancipatory potential of political philosophy can in no way be limited to Rancière’s rather narrow typology of *archipolitics*, *parapolitics* and *metapolitics*.⁴ While Abensour will likewise provide a rather disparaging appraisal of political philosophy in its conventional form, drawing from Arendt and Lefort, what his own *critical political philosophy* boldly demonstrates is that the practice of philosophy can be organised not only to resist the anti-democratic currents that remain so prominent across political thought since Plato, but more importantly, to rethink and reimagine democracy in the context of the challenges and trials particular to the *here and now*.⁵ As we have seen, Abensour praises the political

2 Jacques Rancière and Eric Hazan, “Democracies Against Democracy,” Giorgio Agamben et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 78. Rancière will typically discuss such models of consensus under the name *postdemocracy*.

3 Here I follow Deleuze’s general formulation of philosophy as the creative practice of concept construction. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

4 Archipolitics, parapolitics and metapolitics are outlined in Rancière’s *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chapter 4. For a general analysis of these terms see Bruno Bosteels, “Archipolitics, Parapolitics, Metapolitics,” *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2010.)

5 We will find this approach across Abensour’s oeuvre. In particular, see the essays contained in his volume

writings of Arendt for their decisive opposition to the longstanding tradition of political philosophy which has so often functioned to obscure the very problems and polemics specific to politics itself.⁶ But devised as a *critical* and *utopian* political philosophy, according to Abensour, philosophy can return to the matters of politics themselves, that “burst into the present,” demanding interrogation and renewed critical evaluation. Philosophy is a critique of the present, of the *here and now*. This is its political use. And while philosophy can never itself assume the place of direct political activity, what Abensour’s work appears to advocate is twofold: firstly, that the struggle for emancipation can never be divorced from a permanent critique of modes of domination; and secondly, that such a critique both compels and is enhanced by a constructive theoretical reformulation of the concept of democracy itself, one in which democracy can once again be thought as something challenging, dynamic, an enduring transformative agent in society.⁷ In this regard, beyond a mere war of words, perhaps Abensour could declare one of the objectives of such a political philosophy to be the cultivation of the ability to think democracy *anew* or think democracy *otherwise*. Such an experimental exercise in thought is precisely what Lefort’s savage democracy invites us to peruse. It is for

Pour une philosophie politique critique (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2009). For additional analysis of Abensour’s critical political philosophy see Martin Breugh, “Critique de la domination, pensée de l’émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour,” *Politique et Sociétés* vol. 22, no. 3 (2003) and Gilles Labelle, “La philosophie politique et le ‘choix du petit’ dans le travail de Miguel Abensour,” *Monde Commun* vol. 1, no. 1 (automne 2007). Also see chapter 5 below.

6 Patrice Vermeren, “Equality and Democracy,” *Diogenes* vol. 55, no. 4 (2008): 57-8. In chapter 1 we relied heavily upon Abensour’s essay “Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt’s Reading of Plato’s Cave Allegory,” *Social Research* vol. 74, no. 4 (Winter 2007). Also see his *Hannah Arendt contre la philosophie politique?* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2006).

7 Abensour’s preferred term for such a concept is *insurgent* democracy. See “Of Insurgent Democracy,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011). This concept will be developed in chapter 5 below.

this reason that it will likewise form the basis of our approach to what I have called democracy's "being-against."

To initiate a theory of democracy according to what it is against is to allow the concept of democracy to diverge dramatically from the conventions which tend to restrict it to a variety of government or set of institutions. For what its being-against will immediately affirm and render transparent is that the elemental forces which constitute democracy and propel it forward—the *power of the people*—not only remain irreducible to a particular system of government or institutional framework, they find their most immediate and powerful expression in the form of that specific polemic or controversy that we found to be essential to the meaning of politics itself. Although we cannot speak of a principle or foundation of democracy, if we were to attempt to isolate and identify its germinal or originary impulse, it would unmistakably take the form of an against, an against which is not simply a derivative of democracy, but the basis and substance of its transformative politics. This against does not describe the antithetical consequence of an antecedent form, but instead defines a democracy that appears in the form of an against from its very inception. Therefore, in the most precise terms, to consider what democracy is against is something quite distinct from the more limited question of what democracy simply contradicts or negates. For the object of its being-against does not merely compose an external relation with democracy itself, but remains immanent to its very form. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that historically democracy is never constituted in a void, but invariably appears in the guise of a

counter or objection to an established order of society in which a spectrum of familiar modes of social domination are already in place: unrestricted or arbitrary rule, concentrations of authority, monopolies of decision, strategies of exclusion and marginalisation, *archic* governance. From the beginning, as the initiation of a unique political controversy and dispute, whether a response to oligarchy or theocracy, to the rule of despots or kings, democracy is always generated in the form of an against which at all times remains integral to its constitution, orientation and institutional expression. Consequently, it could be said that democracy reveals exactly what it is against by virtue of its very form. For example, democracy is often declared to be organised around a defiant claim of equality (what Rancière has articulated correctly as an *anarchic* equality).⁸ But what this anarchic equality indisputably reveals is that democracy necessarily contains within it an intrinsic being-against the *archê* that must be considered just as essential to its concept as this positive claim of equality itself. As we have seen, democracy does not simply encounter the *archê* from without, but composes itself in the immanent form of a *democracy against the archê* from the start. This means that democracy does not simply *lack* an *archê*, but more accurately describes a distinct political manifestation *against* it, against both the various orders of the *archê* that it confronts and disputes in society as well as the *archê* that perhaps always threatens to emerge within the walls of its own institutions. Hence, what democracy is against

⁸ Rancière states: “This equality is simply the equality of anyone at all with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of *arkhê*, the sheer contingency of any social order.” See *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 15. This position has already been discussed at length in chapter 2.

—and incorporates and internalises in the form of a *being-against*—is never extraneous to democracy itself, but must be thought to represent a fundamentally inalienable dimension of its very form. As the immanent expression of what it is against, what democracy's being-against therefore intends to signify is the inability of democracy to be formally isolated from that which it counters, contests and renders politically problematic. Accordingly, any conceptual construction of democracy that fails to identify, delineate and punctuate the significance of this indispensable dimension can only be said to offer an impression of democracy that remains limited in scope.

Perhaps, as a formal theoretical model, we can draw our approach to the general structure of democracy's against from the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres. In his seminal study *Society Against the State*, Clastres ventures to discredit an established anthropological position which, until that time, had prevailed over the discipline: just as primitive societies were often understood to lack architecture, scientific inquiry and a written history, the politics of such tribal cultures tended to be examined in terms of an *absence* of politics.⁹ But as Clastres explains, when anthropologists traditionally went looking for signs of politics in primitive societies, their very parameters of what constitutes the political field was entirely subject to a modern western ethnocentric bias inclined to ground politics according to what is perceived to be its proper place in civilised societies and hence

9 Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology* (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 189-90. Both Lefort and Abensour have written on various facets of Clastres' work. Some of their writings appear in Abensour's edited volume, *L'esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

according to precisely what is lacking in tribal communities, namely *the State*: that coercive, hierarchical “command-obedience relationship” in which a distinct apparatus isolates the organs of power from the whole community and consolidates them in the hands of a select few.¹⁰ It is against these parameters that Clastres develops his core theses. Through extensive fieldwork with the Guayaki tribes of Paraguay, Clastres demonstrates that while primitive societies do indeed lack a State as anthropologists have often observed, this is not indicative of the absence of a very meticulous organisation of power in such communities, but rather of our own flawed comprehension of how power may be arranged in Stateless societies. Thus, in the context of tribal cultures, Clastres recognises that if we wish to consider politics at all, the concept can no longer be centred around the relations of the State, but according to the extensive social strategies and institutional mechanisms that specifically intend to *prevent* the State’s emergence.¹¹ What distinguishes primitive societies from our own is an elaborate institutional model designed to retain the organs of power under the control of the whole community. In this respect, we must take the title of Clastres’ volume quite literally. Primitive societies are not simply societies *without* a State, but societies *against* the State, against the very capacity inherent to every community to institutionally abstract the means of authority from the whole community and concentrate them in the hands of the few. Therefore, contrary to the dominant anthropological perspective of his day, Clastres insists that

10 Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, 9-11, 16, 189-90, 203-4. Also see Lefort “Dialogue with Pierre Clastres,” 214.

11 Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, 154, 218.

primitive societies do not represent embryonic cultures momentarily suspended in an inevitable development towards an advanced political society coordinated around the State-form. It is precisely his intention to dispense with such a vapid evolutionist postulate.¹² Rather, what these tribal communities represent to Clastres are societies in which an immanent *being-against* the State determines the basis of their very mode of being: not only does their social organisation lack any semblance of a centralised State apparatus, it embodies a distinctive institutional orientation against the perpetual threat of its appearance. Primitive communities reveal an intrinsic and unextractable against that remains essential to the very foundation of their tribal organisation. For Clastres, it is precisely according to the structure of this immanent being-against that primitive societies must be approached and understood politically.

Hence, although Clastres suggests no intention to exhibit such tribal societies as examples of primitive democracies, his research certainly uncovers a social model that definitively encapsulates the formal structure of the being-against that is so essential to the concept of democracy we are advancing here. Much like Clastres' description of the politics of primitive societies, what democracy is against cannot be regarded extrinsic or secondary to more rudimentary properties that customarily define it. Although often neglected, forgotten or overlooked by many of even the most exhaustive studies of democracy, a comprehensive grasp of its being-against is imperative for a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of what

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 357.

democracy means. When a concept of democracy is constructed with the capacity to identify, distinguish and chart out this against—its logic, objects and orientation—what is uniquely facilitated is a theoretical inquiry far more disposed to establish democracy as an emancipatory agency of the demos. For it is precisely the against that propels democracy forward, that informs its targets and objectives, that galvanises its unyielding resolve towards a more participatory, more egalitarian society. Democracy is not a static entity; it is an active agent. It is not so much a type of society as something that happens to it. Democracy is the name of an unprecedented challenge to modes of domination, strategies of inequality and hierarchies of all kinds. It may be identified with the forces that seek to expose, contest and transform oppressive and exclusionary arrangements and practices from below, from the outside, from a *minoritarian* positionality. In the simplest formulation, democracy is the democratisation of society, of its institutions and relations. It carves out new spaces for democracy, locates social fields where there is potential for greater democracy and confronts obstructions where democracy is blocked, channelled away or refused altogether. This is an attempt to conceive democracy at its most libertarian, its most revolutionary or to employ that rather enigmatic term of Lefort, its most *savage*. Indeed, philosophy need not be conservative with its concepts.

It is in this respect that what Lefort incites as a “wild” or “savage” democracy (*démocratie sauvage*) represents an indispensable moment of thinking

the against.¹³ For the *savage* elicits everything about democracy that challenges the limits and constraints of its accepted concept, urging us to push our thinking of democracy ever further, towards its most uncompromised and resilient incarnation: its political acts of emancipation, its endless capacity for conflict and contestation, its enduring momentum towards a more democratic society. If a theory of democracy's against necessitates a concept of democracy able to incorporate those moments of defiance, objection and confrontation, Lefort's savage democracy, however unconventional, will prove invaluable in the philosophical exercise of organising such a concept. Therefore, while Lefort's larger theory of modern democracy could very well be presented in the context of a democracy posited at once against monarchy and against totalitarianism, our appeal to Lefort here does not intend to extract a particular model of democracy's being-against, but instead pursues, within this context, a way of thinking democracy that illuminates the basis of its transformative politics.¹⁴ Navigated by Abensour's considerable elaboration of this particularly difficult term, Lefort's recurring reference to a *savage* democracy, although never defined, will tend to evoke those revolutionary moments punctuated throughout modern history in which democracy appears as a formidable challenge to that which it contests and disputes in society. Less a descriptive analysis of democracy than an experimental strategy for thinking about it, savage democracy not only functions to open up the concept of democracy so it may be considered in

13 The term *démocratie sauvage* will also be translated as "wild" democracy and "untamed" democracy.

14 Part 3 will consider two theoretical models of democracy's being-against: Rancière's *democracy against the police* and Abensour's *democracy against the State*.

entirely new ways, it also invites us to construct our basic conception of democracy according to its most creative and transformative dimensions and capacities. To think a democracy against is to think a democracy that binds the persistent democratisation of society to that distinct challenge of the *demos* that we have hitherto associated with politics itself. To think a democracy against is to think democracy *savage*.

The heuristic power of savage democracy will be discovered in Lefort's oeuvre in its capacity to revive and reactivate that indissoluble philosophical question: *how should democracy be thought?* Lefort's writings are devoted to many facets of modern democracy that often remain only obscure or marginal themes in comparable theoretical studies: its formal abolition of the generative principles of the *ancien régime*, its political institution of conflict and division, its categorical rejection of the totalitarian solution to the problem of politics. Distancing the question of democracy from the customary topics of government, much of his mature work can be approached as a descriptive phenomenological appraisal of how what democracy renders political is both represented symbolically and experienced socially.¹⁵ His project considers the manner in which democracy radically transforms not only the institutions of society, but the very horizon against which questions of authority, legitimacy, law, justice and knowledge are perceived and

¹⁵ Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), xix-xx. Also see Flynn's essay "Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political," *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martin Plot (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2013).

evaluated. Lefort is often considered a thinker of indeterminacy. Obviously, this view is hardly unjustified. And yet, what is often forgotten, or hastily overlooked, is that beyond democracy's revelation of the contingency of the social, the lack of a stable ontological ground—that which we found to be constitutive of the very condition of politics itself—part of what indeterminacy implies for Lefort is an unequivocal refusal of *mastery*. This represents an indispensable dimension of his broader approach to democracy itself: “It is to dream to think that we possess democracy [...]. Democracy is but a play of possibilities, one inaugurated in a still recent past and about which we still have everything to explore.”¹⁶ As much as Lefort represents a thinker of indeterminacy, he must also represent a thinker against mastery.¹⁷ Perhaps this forms the basis of both his ethical and epistemological critique. From his earliest surveys of bureaucracy and totalitarianism, to his ultimate disavowal of Marxism and the seductive image of the “good society,” to his later acclamations of democracy's subversion of everything that is absolute, certain, fixed, this position against mastery is a theme which extends across almost every facet of his work. It is likewise a theme that may serve to illuminate one of the more perplexing terms to appear throughout his later writings. For when Lefort longs to incite a concept of democracy as something unmasterable and unrestrained, as something that refuses to be pacified, inhibited or

16 Claude Lefort, *Éléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 28 as quoted in Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 109.

17 Alain Caillé, “Claude Lefort, the Social Sciences and Political Philosophy,” *Thesis Eleven* vol. 43, no. 1 (1995): 54. Rancière has likewise been interpreted as adopting an essential position against mastery. See Peter Hallward, “Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery,” *Paragraph* vol. 28, iss. 1 (March 2005).

regulated, he will tend to reference a “savage” democracy, a curious phrase ostensibly reserved to distinguish and chart out democracy’s more unbridled and subversive dimensions and capacities.¹⁸ And while some may find the term to remain rather evasive, it is nevertheless according to this savage democracy that Lefort will identify what is most essential to democracy itself:

It is true that, in a certain sense, no one holds the formula for democracy and that it is most profoundly itself by being savage democracy. Perhaps this is what constitutes its essence; as soon as there is no ultimate reference on the basis of which the social order might be conceived and determined, this order is constantly on a quest for foundations, in search of its own legitimacy, and it is precisely the opposition and the demands of those who are excluded from the benefits of democracy that constitute its most effective wellspring.¹⁹

Deriving its forces from the opposition of those who are most excluded, lacking any formula or ultimate foundation, constantly in search of its own legitimacy, how are we to engage and evaluate this savage democracy that according to Lefort constitutes democracy’s very essence? And moreover, is Abensour, who not only provides the most exhaustive analysis of the term, but who also adopts something of a savage conception of democracy to animate his own theory of a democracy against the State,²⁰ justified in his rendering of savage

18 Martin Legros, “Qu’est-ce que la démocratie *sauvage*? De Claude Lefort à Miguel Abensour,” *Critique de la politique. Autour de Miguel Abensour*, eds. Anne Kupiec and Étienne Tassin (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2006), 96-7.

19 Claude Lefort and Paul Thibaud, “La communication démocratique,” *Esprit* no. 9-10 (septembre-octobre 1979): 34 as quoted in Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy,’” 106-7. Reprinted with minor variations in Claude Lefort, *Le temps présent: Écrits 1945-2005* (Paris: Belin, 2007), 389-90. Also see Newton Bignotto, “Lefort and Machiavelli,” *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, 46.

20 Abensour writes: “In a way, ‘savage democracy,’ in Claude Lefort’s terms [...] could be a plausible figure, a name, for democracy against the State. Indeed, if savage democracy defines itself by the dissolution of the ultimate markers of certainty, by the repeated test of indeterminacy—which implies a way out of metaphysical derivation, an emancipation from a foundational principle—it appears hardly compatible with the State whose existence requires foundation, certainty, and reliance on a primary principle.” See “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxi-xxxii. This position will be further qualified in chapter 5.

democracy as the centrepiece of Lefort's thought and the key to interpreting his larger oeuvre? In a short essay on Deleuze's aesthetics, Rancière will preface his remarks declaring that: "Understanding a thinker does not amount to coinciding with his centre. On the contrary, to understand a thinker is to displace him, to lead him on a trajectory where his articulations come undone and leave room for play."²¹ With respect to Lefort, perhaps this holds especially true. For while one could hardly locate savage democracy at the "centre" of Lefort's work, if we follow Abensour's compelling exposition, when interpretations of Lefort venture to take his thought to its most challenging and distinctive point, perhaps it is indeed savage democracy that represents its "necessary outcome."²² For as Abensour explains in his indispensable essay "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy'," what the adjective *savage* first intends to signify—as a qualifier opposed to a demarcation—is the indetermination bound up with the very question of democracy itself; it is what raises the question over and over again, keeping the idea of democracy unsettled and perpetually open.²³ If Lefort ultimately understands philosophy itself as interminable questioning, indefinite and open-ended in scope, savage democracy certainly sets such an exercise into motion.²⁴ Unbinding the concept of democracy from the constraints that so often circumscribe its limits and determine its reference, what savage democracy will immediately refuse is precisely the authority to definitively master its formula and monopolise its meaning once

21 Jacques Rancière, "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?," *Qui Parle* vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 1.

22 Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy'," 102.

23 Ibid.

24 Claude Lefort, "Philosopher?," *Writing: The Political Test* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 248-9.

and for all. Thus, in the broadest sense, savage democracy may be introduced as the idea of democracy at its most unshackled, its most *detrterritorialised* and therefore may serve as a vehicle to propel our thinking of democracy in unprecedented new directions, exposing it to entirely new possibilities. In this regard, if savage democracy remains one of the more difficult terms to decipher in Lefort's work, it is because rather than proposing a proper concept of democracy, it functions to throw the concept into question, challenging our basic attitudes and underlying suppositions. Perhaps less a description of democracy than an experimental strategy for thinking about it, at the same time as qualifying democracy itself, the savage also qualifies something of our own thought: *what savage democracy demands is that we think democracy in a savage way*. It is for this reason that Lefort can be said to provide an extremely effective strategy to emancipate democracy in thought. By evoking everything that is revolutionary about democracy, Lefort discovers a way to release the concept from all the snares that so often entrap, limit and confine what democracy can be and what it can mean, allowing us to reimagine it anew according to its most creative and transformative dimensions and capacities, however unconventional or provocative. This is imperative for thinking the against. Therefore, although this rather peculiar phrase may only be encountered at the margins of Lefort's writings, perhaps Abensour is profoundly correct to suggest that central to understanding Lefort is an understanding of savage democracy and likewise, central to understanding savage democracy is an understanding of something that is essential to democracy itself.

In this respect, at the same time as Lefort's savage democracy raises a whole series of questions about our interpretation of democracy, it also gives us cause to reflect upon our interpretation of Lefort himself. For this savage conception of democracy will often remain omitted or diminished in various surveys of his work. It is largely only Abensour's rather unorthodox reading that grants it such prominence across his larger oeuvre.²⁵ But as Lefort illustrates in his own highly original discussions of hermeneutics outlined in his colossal work on Machiavelli, the art of interpretation is not ultimately a question of mastering a text or uncovering some indisputable truth regarding its author, but an attempt to open up a world of thought through a horizon of the work that perhaps the author holds together, but given the particularity of the interpretation, remains irreducible to the reconstruction of his doctrines and lends itself to ever renewed possibilities and powers.²⁶ Thus, with Lefort, interpretation could very well be elevated to a political act in itself. According to Lefort, the mode of interpretation that escapes the limitations of ideology and raises itself up to the demands of politics is precisely the one that binds the particularities of our own interpretation to the conditions of the "here and now" (*hic et nunc*), not only so that our present experience may inform the critique of the work, but also so that the work itself may inform the critique of

25 In contrast to Abensour, Isabelle Garo reads Lefort, for example, as seeking a third option that carefully negotiates between the requirements of market capitalism on the one hand and the radical democratic currents of savage democracy on the other. See "Entre démocratie sauvage et barbarie marchande: A propos de Claude Lefort, *Le temps présent – Écrits 1945-2005*," *La Revue internationale des livres et des idées* no. 3 (janvier-février 2008).

26 See Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), Parts 1 and 5. For a general introduction to Lefort's theory of interpretation see Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, chapter 3.

our present experience.²⁷ This is what is essential for a political philosophy. Accordingly, perhaps there is something of our own conditions, our own present experience, our own *here and now*, that for Abensour calls for a concept of democracy that strives to rejuvenate everything that is radical about what democracy can mean. For when Abensour reads Lefort, his own strategic approach appears to be twofold: he not only locates the most radical democratic moments in Lefort's thought, he simultaneously interprets Lefort's thought as a whole according to those very moments.²⁸ The result is a picture of Lefort that is, although not unfamiliar or obscure, one in which the possibilities and powers of his thought are taken to their highest point. For Abensour, the outcome is savage democracy.

Although the phrase rarely appears in his major works, a series of references to savage democracy will be found scattered across a number of Lefort's later essays and interviews, suggesting a conception of democracy that, given its qualification, must be somewhat distinguished from his more characteristic phenomenological rendering of democracy as a symbolic order or form of society. But why *savage*? What is at the source of this curious qualification? We can only speculate. Abensour certainly warns against the initial temptation to associate the term with either Clastres' ethnological studies of the "savage" society or with Hobbes' chaotic state of nature that remains perpetually in a state of *war of all*

27 Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 504. Also see Dick Howard, "Claude Lefort's Passage from Revolutionary Theory to Political Theory," *The Spectre of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 76.

28 For an analysis of Abensour's "radical democratic" interpretation of Lefort see James D. Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy," *Thesis Eleven* vol. 87, iss. 1 (2006).

against all.²⁹ Rather, given the manner in which Lefort appears to want to incite democracy's more unrestricted and uninhibited powers, it is possible that the adjective is borrowed from (or simply inspired by) an equally difficult term encountered in the late writings of his teacher and mentor Merleau-Ponty. In his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*, a text that Lefort would himself edit and prepare for publication, Merleau-Ponty appears to reevaluate the entire basis in which phenomenology approaches the question of ontology. Through his exploratory research, in a rather unorthodox move for an author who long endeavoured to break down the sharp distinctions between subject and object, appearance and essence, Merleau-Ponty nevertheless appears to want to distinguish between a being that is organised according to the conditions of subjective experience and a being that, it can only be postulated, resists or remains external to those processes of subjective mediation. In an attempt to articulate this unintegrated dimension of being in a manner that does not reinstate a notion of an absolute Being or an essential *thing-in-itself*, Merleau-Ponty will invoke a "brute" or "wild" being (*l'être sauvage*).³⁰ Although the precise status of this wild being is difficult to determine given that the concept specifically intends to indicate that excess or residue which transcends all categories and predication, much like Adorno's negative dialectics, this rather unusual qualification does allow Merleau-Ponty to

29 Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy,'" 105.

30 References to "wild being" will be found throughout the text. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Also see Angela Ales Bello, "'Brute Being' and Hyletic Phenomenology: The Philosophical Legacy of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*," *Analecta Husserliana* vol. 104 (2009) and Gilles Labelle, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty et la genèse de la philosophie politique de Claude Lefort," *Politique et Sociétés*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2003).

express something that was not possible before, even if only as a series of negations: wild being is that being which exceeds organisation and resists ontological closure, it is that being which escapes the rules of an established order and refuses to be arranged into an overarching scheme, it is that being which cannot be incorporated into a system and falls outside the realm of facts, figures and predicable patterns. Instead, wild being recalls the “wildness” of wildflowers that remains irreducible to the cultivated garden.³¹ It is that excess of being always in the process of inundating its boundaries and speaks to an ontology without closure, without principle and without essence. Is this not precisely the manner in which Abensour will convey Lefort’s savage democracy, a democracy that: “like an impetuous river that incessantly overflows its bed, cannot ‘go back home’ and submit to the established order”?³²

It is in this respect that Lefort’s savage democracy could arguably be taken to bear a trace or vestige, however subtle, of Merleau-Ponty’s wild being. And yet, perhaps this only raises more questions. In his own analysis, Abensour argues that insofar as it resists domestication and is incapable of being domesticated, democracy may be understood to remain faithful to its “savage essence.”³³ But as Abensour clearly recognises, if the *savage* qualifier intends to release the concept of

31 Eleanor M. Godway, “Wild Being, the Prepredicative and Expression: How Merleau-Ponty Uses Phenomenology to Develop an Ontology.” *Man and World* vol. 26, no. 4 (1993): 389. It is precisely in this sense of “wildflowers” that Lévi-Strauss will employ the term “savage” in order to distinguish an “untamed” human thought from a more methodical or scientific mode of reasoning in *La pensée sauvage*: “In this book it is neither the mind of savages nor that of primitive or archaic humanity, but rather mind in its untamed state as distinct from mind cultivated or domesticated for the purpose of yielding a return.” See *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 219.

32 Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” 107.

33 Ibid.

democracy from the narrow confines of a fixed or preconceived framework, prompting us to think democracy beyond all reference to foundation, principle or *archê*, can we then even speak of a “savage essence?” Particularly in light of Merleau-Ponty’s wild being, does not the savage attempt to undermine the very notion of an *essence* of democracy? And if so, how do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? This is a problem, however semantic, that appears to be resolved by Lefort scholar Bernard Flynn. According to Flynn, Lefort once explained that if he at times relies on a language of essences, he is not thinking of essence in the sense of Plato, but in the sense of “gasoline, fuel, which one puts in a car.”³⁴ Therefore, if we can extrapolate from this rather intriguing remark, when Lefort refers to savage democracy as the *essence* of democracy, he does not intend to lay down a new formula or foundation to which democracy must adhere conceptually. Instead, what he is attempting to express, supporting Abensour’s fundamental claim, is the *power* of democracy itself, the living source of its transformative agency. When Lefort asks us to think democracy according to its savage essence, he is asking us to draw our basic conception of democracy not via a compromised or domesticated representation of democracy, but according to its most revolutionary potentials and capacities.³⁵ Lefort is interested in what democracy can do and what it can achieve. He is interested in what propels democracy forward, how it transforms our

34 Flynn, “Lefort as Phenomenologist of the Political,” 31-2.

35 Sheldon Wolin, whose own concept of “fugitive democracy” repeats many of the distinctive features of Lefort’s savage democracy, will likewise maintain that democracy must be conceived according to its most revolutionary tendencies. See “Fugitive Democracy,” *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), as well as “Postmodern Democracy: Virtual or Fugitive?,” *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

institutions and relations as well as the manner in which those institutions and relations are represented and experienced symbolically. Hence, contrary to those rather monotonous declarations lamenting democracy's "fragility," what Lefort's savage democracy ultimately invites us to consider is its enduring strength and vitality in the modern world. This is something that much of Lefort's work will attempt to demonstrate.

Although never properly defined by the author himself, even the most cursory survey of Lefort's employment of the term will discern that savage democracy is often associated with spontaneous revolutionary currents that have tended to unfold throughout some of the most monumental events to punctuate modern European history: from the earliest days of the French Revolution to February 1917 to May '68. Even if all of these events could be declared to have ultimately failed to fully realise their democratic potential, it nevertheless appears that Lefort is able to identify something inside each of them that captures his imagination: a power, an impulse, a radical democratic upsurge that, however ephemeral its manifestation, refuses to be tempered or restrained: "This ferment may only be an element of revolutions, but it is extraordinary enough to warrant our interest. For a period of time that can be longer or shorter, it gives form to savage democracy, the trace of which can be lost, or is always lost, yet it reveals certain specific aspirations of the modern world."³⁶ Through all the chaos and confusion and contradictions inherent to each of these examples of popular social upheaval,

³⁶ Claude Lefort, "Relecture sur Mai 68," *Le temps présent: Écrits 1945-2005*, 592 (translation by Martin Breagh).

Lefort believes he can discern something distinctive, something which he considers to be essential to the meaning of democracy itself. And yet, at the same time, these observations do not imply that for Lefort, *savage democracy* and *revolution* may in any way be considered synonymous. At least since his early disillusionment with Trotskyism,³⁷ Lefort cannot be said to be guilty of falling prey to what he calls the “myth of revolution,” the naive promotion of a certain revolutionary voluntarism most often associated with Lenin and firmly ingrained in the popular imagination of the French Revolution itself.³⁸ Rather, following the example of Tocqueville, Lefort is intent on distinguishing between the model of the French Revolution on the one hand and the forces of *democratic revolution* on the other.³⁹ It is against this backdrop of Tocqueville’s democratic revolution that Lefort’s savage democracy must be situated and explored. Contrary to that familiar representation of the momentary insurrection that overturns the very conditions of society, Lefort understands democratic revolution as a more protracted democratising process, one in which, however uneven and sporadic, democracy is perpetually in the state of confronting its limits and striving to overcome those limits: “Beyond a historically determined system of political institutions, I wish to call attention to a long-term process, what de Tocqueville called the democratic revolution, which he saw coming to birth in France under the *ancien régime* and which, since his time, has

37 As documented by his essay “The Contradiction of Trotsky,” *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

38 See for example Claude Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 50. Also see Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, 241-2.

39 Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, 50.

continued to develop.”⁴⁰ Therefore, while respecting Tocqueville’s carefully drawn distinction between the two, perhaps Lefort could be said to identify democratic revolution as something which *passes through* the French Revolution: a tendency or capacity that may survive and reappear once again long after the historical culmination of the revolution had itself receded and diminished.⁴¹

Perhaps it is for this reason that Lefort will declare the foremost objective of political philosophy today to be a comprehensive grasp of what Tocqueville describes as democratic revolution.⁴² Even if the aristocratic surveyor of American democracy regularly expresses certain reservations about democracy’s unruly disposition, Lefort praises Tocqueville for grasping its profound capacity for innovation and reinvention, for grounding his essential notion of democracy not with respect to a particular form of government or collection of institutions, but according to its unparalleled powers to create and transform. In a passage which Lefort particularly admires, Tocqueville writes: “Democracy does not give the people the most skilful government, but it produces what the ablest governments are frequently unable to create: namely, an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it and which may,

40 Claude Lefort, “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism,” *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, 302. To develop this concept Lefort will draw from both Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*.

41 Before Tocqueville and Lefort, Immanuel Kant will articulate this very point, distinguishing between the actual historical events of the French Revolution on the one hand and a revolutionary spirit or “enthusiasm” which runs through it and extends beyond it on the other. See “The Contest of Faculties,” *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 182. Citing Kant, Deleuze and Guattari will likewise appeal to this distinction in order to distance the more generic understanding of revolution from their own more idiosyncratic concept of becoming-revolutionary (*devenir-révolutionnaire*). See *What is Philosophy?*, 100, 112-13.

42 Samuel Goldman, “Beyond the Markers of Certainty: Thoughts on Claude Lefort and Leo Strauss,” *Perspectives on Political Science* vol. 40, iss. 1 (2011): 31.

however unfavourable circumstances may be, produce wonders.”⁴³ Therefore, against those innumerable interpretations of Tocqueville which conclude with the maxim that we should love democracy, but love it moderately,⁴⁴ what Lefort extracts from Tocqueville is a vision of democracy as an “uncontrollable adventure,” an intractable impulse that unleashes an extraordinary battle for equality and destroys the very positions occupied by those who traditionally dominate society by virtue of their wealth, status and privilege.⁴⁵ What democracy makes possible is a society where hierarchies can no longer rely upon nature, right can no longer rely upon the divine and social rank will no longer go unchallenged.⁴⁶ These are the forces that Lefort understands to have ultimately undermined the foundations of monarchy during the French Revolution. These are the forces that savage democracy invites us to consider.

It is here where we may establish the link between the *savage* and the *against*. Following Tocqueville’s general account which locates democracy’s revolutionary origins in the waning conditions of premodern Europe, Lefort’s writings on democracy can be appreciated to elaborate a detailed theoretical perspective that meticulously positions democracy against the ontology of the

43 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 252. Also see Claude Lefort, “Irreversibility,” *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 169, as well as Steven Bilakovics, “The Regime of Revolution: Claude Lefort on History, Nature, and Convention after the Democratic Revolution,” *Democracy Without Politics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 150.

44 Perhaps most recently with Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 132.

45 Claude Lefort, “From Equality to Freedom: Fragments of an Interpretation of ‘Democracy in America’,” *Democracy and Political Theory*, 196.

46 Wim Weymans, “Defending Democracy’s Symbolic Dimension: A Lefortian Critique of Arendt’s Marxist Assumptions,” *Constellations* vol. 19, iss. 1 (March 2012): 74.

ancien régime.⁴⁷ Drawing heavily from the research of Ernst Kantorowicz, Lefort understands modern democracy as an unprecedented challenge to the entire order of the monarchical system, not only by displacing the body of the king, but more importantly, by violently breaking down the very basis of monarchy's symbolic representation of right, power and legitimacy.⁴⁸ What exactly is it that democracy is against for Lefort?

At the source of democracy can be found the rejection of a number of things: power detached from the social ensemble, law that governs an immutable order, and a spiritual authority possessing knowledge of the ultimate ends of human conduct and of the community. However, it is not enough to say *at the source of democracy*: this rejection has been democracy's permanent driving energy.⁴⁹

Consequently, what democracy rejects is precisely that which makes monarchy tenable, a rejection which, as Lefort maintains, does not dissipate or attenuate over time, but remains democracy's *permanent driving energy*. Like gasoline in a car, it is this profound rejection, this *against*, that fuels democracy and charges its revolutionary momentum. For Lefort, much like Tocqueville before him, democracy cannot be reduced to a regime of law, to the limits traditionally ascribed to the *état de droit*.⁵⁰ What appears against monarchy is indicative of a savage democracy. Setting up a field in which a unique political conflict may unfold, democracy

47 Bernard Flynn, "Democracy and Ontology," *Research in Phenomenology* vol. 38, iss. 2 (2008): 224.

48 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Also see Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, "Claude Lefort and the Illegitimacy of Modernity," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10, no. 1 (Winter 2009). For Lefort, democracy institutes a "society without a body" or one that "undermines the representation of an organic totality." See Fred Dallmayr, "Postmetaphysics and Democracy," *Political Theory* vol. 21, no. 1 (February 1993): 114-15.

49 Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, 124.

50 Claude Lefort, "Politics and Human Rights," *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, 258.

inaugurates an experience in which the very questions of authority, legitimacy and right are subjected to an incessant controversy and dispute: “In other words, modern democracy invites us to replace the notion of a regime governed by laws, of a legitimate power, by a notion of a regime founded upon *the legitimacy of a debate of what is legitimate and illegitimate*—a debate which is necessarily without guarantor and without any end.”⁵¹ Democracy exposes the order of society to a new ontology, to a radical indeterminacy, so that, in Lefort’s view, institutions can never become fixed, knowledge can never become absolute and the quest for unity can never eclipse an underlying conflict and division.⁵² Contrary to totalitarianism in the 20th century, democracy is therefore the regime, following Abensour, that never shuts, never shies away from this inescapable experience of conflict and division: “Inversely, democracy is seen as constituting itself through the acceptance, or better, the elaboration of the originary division of the social; democracy is the form of society that, unsatisfied with merely recognising the legitimacy of internal conflict, comprehends conflict instead as the originary source of an ever renewed invention of liberty.”⁵³ Dissolving the representation of a unified body-politic, opening up a conflictual space in which social division may be politically expressed, violently displacing the powers embodied in the absolute authority of the crown, what Lefort’s writings effectively reveal is that located at the origins of

51 Claude Lefort, “Human Rights and the Welfare State,” *Democracy and Political Theory*, 39. Also see Ingram, “The Politics of Claude Lefort’s Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy,” 42-3 and Steven Hendley, “Reconsidering the Limits of Democracy with Castoriadis and Lefort,” *Reinterpreting the Political: Continental Philosophy and Political Theory*, eds. Lenore Langsdorf, Stephen H. Watson and Karen A. Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 174-5.

52 Lefort, “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism,” 305.

53 Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” 105.

modern democracy is a revolutionary *being-against* monarchy, an against that would not disperse with the demise of the king, but would endure, transform and go on to confront and contest new forms of inequality and new modes of domination that emerge with a new society. Hence, expounding his larger theory of modern democracy with respect to this inherent rejection of the *ancien régime*, it is in this context that Lefort will detail what is often considered his most memorable description of the form of society that unfolds according to this very rejection that propels democratic revolution, like a motive force, ever further: the disincorporation of power, the spatialisation of power, law and knowledge, the dissolution of the markers of certainty, the indeterminacy of the constitution of the people.⁵⁴

It is therefore according to what Tocqueville chronicles as democratic revolution that savage democracy appears to orient our concept. And yet, even these terms should not be identified too hastily. For whereas democratic revolution, consistent with Tocqueville's general description, considers democracy's more protracted democratising trajectory, seemingly touching every facet of social and cultural life, what Lefort's illustrations of savage democracy appear to isolate, within this very democratising process, are those more transient, punctuated and intensive moments of heightened social turmoil and explosive confrontation. When Lefort speaks of savage democracy, he longs to incite democracy's transformative capacities at their most pronounced, decisive and unwavering and those spectacular

⁵⁴ See particularly Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," and "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," *Democracy and Political Theory*.

moments in history, however brief, when democracy demonstrates its utter refusal to be mastered, domesticated or restrained. It is in this respect, for example, that Lefort will repeatedly employ the phrase to describe the waves of civil unrest he witnessed sweep through France during the summer of 1968, an event that would have a profound affect on Lefort, as it would many other French political thinkers of his generation.⁵⁵

To suddenly see such a liberation of words, powerful words, that was in itself an extraordinary event. It was a new mode of socialisation, a wild socialisation, which could not last. I never had the hope of a revolution in 68; only some idiots ascribed that idea to me. On the other hand, [...] [i]n the midst of that savage democracy there was a sort of freedom which, I confess, was extremely precious to me.⁵⁶

Perhaps what Lefort finds so inspiring about the events of May '68 is not only its unpredictable and spontaneous character that effectively deposed of every model of what proper (Marxist) revolutionary action should look like, but also its proliferation of an entirely new language against authority, hierarchy and bureaucracy and its expression of a genuine desire for liberty and equality that unleashed something powerful, something that, according to Lefort, is almost always restricted, if not repressed outright.⁵⁷ Without a leader, without a unified programme or overarching design, May '68 discharged an uncompromising upsurge of creative, improvised political action that was able to at once break down

55 For a discussion of the wider impact of May '68 on contemporary French political thought see Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

56 Claude Lefort and Pierre Rosanvallon, "The Test of the Political: A Conversation with Claude Lefort," *Constellations* vol. 19, iss. 1 (March 2012): 14. Lefort, in collaboration with Edgar Morin and Jean-Marc Coudray (Cornelius Castoriadis), would write the first full-length volume to consider the events of May '68. See *Mai 1968: la Brèche* (Paris: Fayard, 1968).

57 Lefort, "The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism," 309.

partitions that normally isolate diverse groups, occupy spaces that are ordinarily forbidden, challenge existing hierarchies in ways never before seen and articulate social demands in a manner that could no longer go unheard.⁵⁸ Perhaps it is for this reason that Lefort will identify something within May '68 that is for him consistent with everything that is savage about democracy.

And yet, Lefort is certainly not the first to observe democracy's more savage character. The history of political thought reveals a long line of critics, adversaries and detractors of democracy who are able perceive these tendencies with great clarity, often with far greater clarity, in fact, than those insipid proponents of democracy who claim to advocate it. We have already seen, for example, how Plato portrays democracy as the anarchic disruption of the wild mob, allegorically equating democracy to the aimless ship whose unruly sailors have undermined the authority of the captain and recklessly usurped the doomed vessel.⁵⁹ Likewise, Polybius, the ancient Greek historian, unapologetically catalogues democracy's principal vice as its "savage rule of violence," which perpetually endangers democracy and remains inseparable from it.⁶⁰ When considering democracy's appeal for popular self-government, Jean Bodin questions disparagingly: "How can a multitude, that is to say, a Beast with many heads, without judgement, or reason,

58 Claude Lefort and *Anti-mythes*, "An interview with Claude Lefort," *Telos* no. 30 (1976): 187.

59 Plato, *Republic*, III, 488a-489d. This notion of democracy as the rule of the "wild mob" is also prevalent in Pseudo-Xenophon's "The Constitution of the Athenians." See J. M. Moore, *Aristotle and Xenophon on Democracy and Oligarchy: Translations with Introductions and Commentary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975).

60 Polybius, *The Histories: Books 5-8* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 291. Also see Sheldon Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy," *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 31.

give good council? To ask council of a multitude is to ask for wisdom in a mad house.”⁶¹ On the opposite side of the English channel, penning his *Leviathan* at the height of the civil war, Hobbes observes that many find no reason whatsoever to distinguish between democracy on the one hand and anarchy on the other, signifying not a kind of government, but its lack.⁶² Moreover, when Adam Ferguson, of the Scottish enlightenment, compares democracy and despotism as archetypal examples of corrupted, lawless societies, he concludes that: “Democracy seems to revive in a scene of wild disorder and tumult: but both the extremes are but the transient fits of paroxysm or languor in a distempered state.”⁶³ In a similar vein, warning his new found nation of the unbridled evils of democracy, James Madison famously writes: “Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths.”⁶⁴ In *The Philosophy of Right*, his major contribution to political thought, Hegel recoils at democracy’s very proposition of “popular sovereignty,” insisting that not only does such a confused notion distort the very meaning of sovereignty itself (properly expressed in the embodiment of a monarch),

61 Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, original English translation as quoted in Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8, footnote 5. Also see John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 82.

62 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Parts One and Two* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), 153. Also see Alan Apperley, “Hobbes on Democracy,” *Politics* vol. 19, iss. 3 (September 1999): 166-7.

63 Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73.

64 James Madison, “Federalist 10,” Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 44. Also see Dupuis-Deri, “The Political Power of Words: The Birth of Pro-Democratic Discourse in the Nineteenth Century in the United States and France,” 20-1.

but is likewise entirely predicated upon a “*wild* idea of the people.”⁶⁵ Finally, in a remarkable passage in the preface which opens his prodigious *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville himself proclaims that democracy, painfully lacking in education, religion and morality: “has consequently been abandoned to its wild instincts, and it has grown up like those children who have no parental guidance, who receive their education in the public streets, and who are acquainted only with the vices and wretchedness of society.”⁶⁶ Violent, unstable, tumultuous by nature and impelled by the likes of drunken sailors, wild mobs and orphaned children, very consistent throughout the history of political thought the scandal that is known as “democracy” is hardly considered by its many critics to offer a viable foundation for government and indeed testifies to an experience that could only be expressed as *savage*.

Let us return to Abensour. Whether Lefort references the events of May ’68 or the French Revolution itself, perhaps what immediately strikes Abensour about savage democracy is the manner in which it tends to emerge self-positing and self-actualised, seemingly bound to no particular rules and subject to no particular conditions. Savage democracy appears to attest to democracy’s capacity to spring up at will, at the most unexpected times, assuming the most unpredictable forms. And while there is no reason to presume its outward hostility to institutional

65 G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 182-3. The young Marx will offer his own analysis of this very passage in his “Critique of Hegel’s ‘*Philosophy of Right*’.” See Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 86. This is the passage that would ultimately lead Marx to conclude that with “true democracy” the State itself disappears. This position will be discussed in chapter 5.

66 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, 7-8. Also see Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 1.

mechanisms or modes of organisation, what particularly seems to intrigue Abensour about savage democracy is its propensity to manifest in such a way that it nevertheless reveals no identifiable formula, no underlying schema and thus evades all ideological categories and classifications:

“Savage democracy” evokes, rather, the idea of the wildcat strike (*grève sauvage*), that is, a strike that arises spontaneously, that begins with itself and unfolds in an “anarchic” fashion, independent of any principle (*archê*), of any authority—as well as of any established rules and institutions—and that strikes in such a way that it cannot be mastered. It is as if “savage” connotes the inexhaustible reserve of turmoil that soars above democracy. In a word: to forge a “libertarian idea” of democracy is to think it as savage.⁶⁷

Perhaps this is as close to a definition as we are likely to come. Spontaneous, governed by no overarching order, guided by no regulating principle or *archê*, Abensour not only draws Lefort’s savage democracy into a broader discussion concerning democracy’s anarchic condition—a topic we have already covered at length with Rancière—he will also situate the term according to Lefort’s more underlying position against mastery. This is a recurring theme in Lefort’s work that I have tried to underscore here. As we have seen, Lefort qualifies a *savage* democracy to inspire a notion of democracy that resists subordination and pacification, a democracy which cannot be easily possessed, neutralised or restrained. Savage democracy not only manifests in opposition to various logics of mastery and domination, it manifests in such a way that it refuses to be mastered and dominated itself. In part, this is what makes democracy *anarchic*. It is precisely

67 Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy,’” 106. Also see Breaugh, “Critique de la domination, pensée de l’émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour,” 65-66.

the meaning of anarchy to open to indeterminacy and defy masterability. And yet, perhaps what Abensour finds most compelling about savage democracy's anarchic character in this regard, is its unique capacity to liberate the way in which we think about political activity itself. When Abensour considers what exactly Lefort intends to elicit with the term "savage" democracy, when he considers what this string of references that populate Lefort's writings all share in common, what he ultimately appears to decipher is something perhaps just as imperative to his own critical political philosophy as it is to our own theory of democracy's being-against advanced here: the *emancipatory act of politics*. According to Abensour, to think democracy savage is to uncover the "libertarian idea" of democracy. As specified in Lefort's *Un homme en trop*, Abensour illustrates this libertarian idea accordingly: "Libertarian is he who dares to talk when everyone is silent, she who does not shy from contradicting the public, unafraid to break the wall of silence so as to make the unexpected voice of liberty be heard."⁶⁸ It is in the spirit of this direct and uninhibited libertarian expression that savage democracy may be taken to represent the liberation of political action itself. If we extrapolate from Abensour's compelling exegetical study, savage democracy may be interpreted both in terms of action and form: as a distinct political *action* in which a desire for liberation is expressed and as a distinct political *form* in which that action is liberated in its own right. Perhaps it is for this reason that Abensour finds it beneficial to develop the

68 Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy,'" 106. Christina Hurtado-Beca will likewise situate her discussion of savage democracy according to a desire for liberation. See "Démocratie sauvage ou démocratie intermittente," *Critique de la politique. Autour de Miguel Abensour*, 105.

notion of savage democracy alongside the “principle of anarchy,” a term extracted from Reiner Schürmann’s efforts to cultivate a politics of *praxis* or theory of liberated action from Heidegger’s various ontological studies.⁶⁹ And while Abensour admits that his recourse to Schürmann may be found rather peculiar, he maintains that the intersection of savage democracy and the principle of anarchy will nevertheless serve to illuminate this indispensable libertarian dimension of Lefort’s term.

Briefly, Schürmann’s basic thesis contends that 20th century philosophy’s prolonged critique of metaphysical closure (perhaps culminating with deconstruction) in many respects begins with Heidegger, who may initiate his phenomenology with the classical ontological question “what is being?” but who will ultimately dislodge this question from the inherited philosophical tradition by way of what Schürmann calls the anarchy principle. Consequently, isomorphic to democracy’s “savage essence,” Abensour will introduce Schürmann’s “principle of anarchy” via the initial problem of its apparent contradiction: for have we not already discerned anarchy to be that which lacks all reference to principle and indeed, embodies an uncompromising position against it? And yet, as Abensour explains, far from a concept which restores a foundation to anarchy, what Schürmann’s principle of anarchy intends to uncover is precisely the point where a Heideggerian theory of *praxis* supposedly arrives: at a principle of action, true, but a principle that functions to negate its very principle, a principle that commands itself

69 Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

not to have one; at the very moment a *principle* of anarchy is posited, it is immediately undermined by its own anarchic content exposing an inescapable paradox that, according to Schürmann, serves to open to a representation of political action liberated from origin, reference and commandment.⁷⁰ This is what particularly interests Abensour about Schürmann and explains his insistence that savage democracy and the principle of anarchy share a common ontological organisation: “In its very movement, in its dynamic, does not savage democracy have something in common with anarchy, understood in the sense of a liberation of action from the hold of foundations—from an *archê*—in the sense of a manifestation of an ‘action without why’?”⁷¹ If we follow Abensour’s reading, what Schürmann’s principle of anarchy makes possible is a theory of praxis released from a metaphysics of closure in which the meaning of political activity remains forever subordinated to a first principle. No longer bound to its beginnings, to its commencement, an anarchic or libertarian theory of praxis affirms that political action cannot simply be appropriated and understood according to its origins, to the conditions it can be referred back to. At the same time, nor must political action be subjected to a *telos*, to an ultimate goal, end or final cause (a category really more appropriate for production).⁷² Rather, what Schürmann attributes to Heidegger is the first substantial philosophical demonstration that praxis need not be bound to a legitimating principle and likewise, that a practical philosophy need not be derived

70 Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” 112-13.

71 Ibid., 113. Also see John W. M. Krummel, “Reiner Schürmann and Cornelius Castoriadis Between Ontology and Praxis,” *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* no. 2 (2013): 48-9.

72 Miguel Abensour, “An-archy Between Metapolitics and Politics,” *Parallax* vol. 8, iss. 3 (2002): 8-9.

from a first philosophy.⁷³ In this regard, Schürmann envisions Heidegger's work as an important reminder that at times even the very concept of *praxis* may itself require emancipation.

Therefore, with the principle of anarchy, we may think the political act liberated from its principle: action becomes an *event*, self-legitimizing, an end in itself.⁷⁴ For Abensour, this is essential to savage democracy. Refusing the limitations of the principle-derivation model, marking a decisive break from a strict rationalism of causality and finality, Abensour understands savage democracy to realise a form of political action free to unfold in multiple and even contradictory ways, remaining open to the accident, to fortune, to error, to the unforeseen and to the unforeseeable. *Is this not a fitting description of the logic of spontaneity itself?* Hence, placing aside the intricacies of those longstanding questions regarding the precise relationship between theory and praxis, thinking and acting, Schürmann's principle of anarchy, although not a reference for savage democracy, very much provides an ontological model appropriate to the form of political action that Abensour ascribes to it. It is in this sense that savage democracy may be understood to forge a libertarian idea of democracy. In the most concrete terms, savage democracy traces a particular political action or form of political action that allows democracy's persistent democratising struggles against various modes of domination and strategies of inequality to unfold in a uniquely spontaneous and anarchic fashion. It may be understood both in terms of the political action that expresses a desire for

⁷³ Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy,'" 112.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

liberation as well as the opening up of a space in which that political action may transform and evolve in any number of ways. In this respect, when conceived as a political act, what savage democracy first seeks to liberate is the political act itself. This is something that Abensour's analysis of savage democracy will not allow us to forget. Perhaps this represents his most important contribution to Lefort's concept.

Accordingly, in both content and in form, what Abensour appears to draw from savage democracy is the emancipatory act of politics. It designates that unprecedented political challenge which, given its spontaneous, anarchic character, breaks with a theory of praxis that finds the only legitimate political activity to be the one that remains sanctioned, preordained, *instituted*. Democracy refuses to be restricted to a particular sphere of society, frame of time, subject or object. Lefort certainly allows for a broader conception of democracy than this. As illustrated by Abensour, the quintessential libertarian act is he who dares to speak when everyone else is silent. It is precisely the political act that must at times break through the established order of accepted norms, institutions and conventions. As Lefort appears to affirm in a particularly intriguing remark: "In democracy itself, the institution of individual and political freedoms couldn't make one forget that freedom is not given; speech always requires an *interruption* of the ordered relations among men, a right that exceeds all definition, a sort of violence."⁷⁵ With this passage—which

⁷⁵ Claude Lefort, "Humanism and Anti-Humanism: Homage to Salman Rushdie," *Writing: The Political Test*, 31. Also see Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy," 43.

may uncover a potentially fruitful point of intersection with the work of Rancière—Lefort wishes to remind us that freedom is never something to be given; it must be *taken*. It must be seized, created, affirmed. This can be a violent act. Even in the context of the broader topic of rights, on which he certainly writes a great deal, Lefort rejects the notion that rights and freedoms are simply harboured by institutions, handed down from above, distributed by the State.⁷⁶ Rather, what Lefort's writings clearly demonstrate is that freedom, however defined, is something intrinsically bound to a long process of political action, persistent questioning and permanent contestation. To express this process, Lefort will at times reference Tocqueville's notion of democratic revolution, at others he will put forward his own more idiosyncratic savage democracy.

Lefort's contribution to a theory of rights (rights of man/human rights) may offer additional insights into his intentions with savage democracy. As early as *Éléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie* (1971), Lefort will describe the protracted struggle for rights in terms of an undomesticated, *savage* democracy: "Let it once again be said, it is not only the protection of individual liberties that is at issue, but also the nature of our social ties; where there is spreading feeling for rights, democracy is necessarily savage and not domesticated."⁷⁷ In addition to providing a compelling point of departure for an intriguing analysis of Lefort's highly original theory of rights that will contradict everything that we will

76 See for example Lefort, "Politics and Human Rights," 264, as well as "Human Rights and the Welfare," 43.

77 Lefort, *Éléments d'une critique de la bureaucratie*, 23 as quoted in Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy,'" 107. This is one of the earliest examples of Lefort's use of the term.

encounter on the subject from Marx to Arendt, these remarks may also be advanced to chart out the relative distinction between what he elicits as *savage* democracy on the one hand and what he will delineate more generally as the democratic *form of society* on the other. This is an important nuance in Lefort's work that warrants far more attention than it receives. Although the language of rights remains a defining feature of what is broadly framed as modern democracy in his later work, if Lefort rejects both Marx and Arendt's familiar assertion that any substantive evaluation of rights must necessarily situate them within the bounds of an established institutional framework, it is because Lefort himself will locate the source of those rights, as is well known, in a symbolic domain which extends beyond the realm of any such concrete institution.⁷⁸ Therefore, insofar as Lefort binds the very discourse of rights so prevalent in the modern age to a symbolic field, his larger concept of democracy will correspond not to a set of institutions, but to a particular form of society distinguished by a particular symbolic mutation, one that distributes an abstract or indeterminate figure of rights across a horizontal social imaginary that organises both meaning (*mise en sens*) and representation (*mise en scène*) in society.⁷⁹ As Lefort readily observes, the demand for rights can never be dissociated from a wider social awareness of rights themselves.⁸⁰ And yet, although Lefort clearly understands the larger discourse of rights particular to the modern era in reference

78 See Weymans, "Defending Democracy's Symbolic Dimension: A Lefortian Critique of Arendt's Marxist Assumptions," 75.

79 For a broader discussion of this point see Raf Geenens, "Democracy, Human Rights and History: Reading Lefort," *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 7, no. 3 (July 2008).

80 Lefort, "Politics and Human Rights," 260, 264. Also see Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, 227-8.

to this symbolic dimension constitutive of the democratic society, this does not intend to conceal the fact that the *struggle* for rights—the emancipatory act itself—can never be located there. Rather, when Lefort considers that “spreading feeling for rights,” that incessant demand for rights, the actual battle for rights on the ground, he can no longer be said to be alluding to the symbolic dimension which so defines the democratic form of society, but more specifically to that direct form of political activity that Abensour associates with savage democracy, a struggle played out, if we follow Lefort, against the backdrop of this symbolic horizon which infuses this struggle with its salience and social significance. It is in this respect that Lefort’s reflections on rights may serve to exemplify the two intrinsically interwoven dimensions of his larger concept of democracy ceaselessly being worked out throughout his later writings. In the context of a society which not only establishes a representation of rights in its social imaginary, but one in which the precise content of those rights is destined to remain indeterminate, what savage democracy seeks to distinguish is the *demand* for rights itself, the endeavour to institute new rights, the continuous effort to extend those rights to more and more disenfranchised people which has so indisputably transformed the fabric of our social ties since the modern revolutions. So it is not really a matter of isolating a “liberal” Lefort and a “radical” Lefort, but a matter of identifying the particular context in which Lefort deploys his concept of democracy: either as a *form of society* or as a *savage* democracy. The savage evokes democracy’s creative and transformative dimensions and capacities, its inventions as well as its interventions.

What savage democracy invites us to consider is that human beings are never simply the subject of rights, but at the same time their authors.⁸¹ Much like equality for Rancière, rights are something to be created, contested, confirmed.⁸² They remain inextricably intertwined with their enunciation.⁸³ As Lefort avows: “rights are not simply the object of a declaration, it is their essence to be declared.”⁸⁴ Therefore, cutting across the many illusions and misattributions which so often obscure the topic of rights, perhaps Lefort may be read to offer an assessment of democracy which succeeds far better than most in identifying the substantive political function of the discourse of rights in the modern age: they provide a language, a logic, an instrument according to which the ongoing democratisation of society may be advanced. For as Abensour testifies, the demand for new rights is ultimately a demand for new social relations, a new form of society, *a new way for society to be*.⁸⁵

Understood in this context, drawing on Lefort’s admiration for the work of historian E. P. Thompson, whose research traces the struggles of an emerging proletarian class under the conditions of early capitalism, what Abensour will particularly wish to extract from this persistent declaration of rights that so epitomises savage democracy for Lefort is its more formal character of *permanent*

81 Stefan Rummens, “Deliberation Interrupted: Confronting Jürgen Habermas with Claude Lefort,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 34, no. 4 (2008): 394.

82 For a detailed discussion of Rancière’s position on human rights see Andrew Schaap, “Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière’s Critique of Hannah Arendt,” *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 10, no. 1 (January 2011).

83 Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, 273.

84 Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights,” 257. Also see Bilakovics, “The Regime of Revolution: Claude Lefort on History, Nature, and Convention after the Democratic Revolution,” 153.

85 Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy,’” 107.

contestation.⁸⁶ It is permanent contestation that Abensour will locate at the very heart of democratic revolution. It is likewise the Lefortian concept that perhaps best gives shape to those political forces that we have hitherto expressed in terms of democracy's *being-against*. Insofar as rights can never be fixed, fastened or established absolutely, once and for all, even more than the institution of rights themselves, Lefort will tend to define democracy in terms of a *theatre of contestation*.⁸⁷ Essential to Lefort's understanding of democracy is the installation of a field in which rights and other grievances may be declared, contested and disputed. From the beginning, this is very much how we qualified the experience of politics itself. As we have seen, following Lefort, rights are neither found in nature nor granted by God. They must be articulated, realised, most often by those who find themselves excluded from the benefits and protections that rights can provide. But just as their realisation cannot be divorced from their articulation, their articulation cannot be divorced from their contestation. The very demand for rights itself implies a certain provocation or defiance, a certain "*interruption* of the ordered relations among men." Accordingly, as the perpetual initiation of a unique political controversy and dispute, the activity that Lefort chronicles as permanent contestation may first be recognised to contain a distinct phenomenal dimension. Democracy is always something demonstrative, something visible, the making

86 Abensour will largely attribute Lefort's well known concept of *permanent contestation* to E. P. Thompson, perhaps drawing in particular from Thompson's widely influential essay "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* vol. 50, iss. 1 (Feb. 1971). See Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy,'" 107.

87 See for example Lefort, "Politics and Human Rights," 258. Also see Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, 168.

visible what was not visible before. Perhaps this is one reason why its characteristic act of contestation may be considered *theatrical*, an account that will feature just as prominently in the writings of Rancière. To the extent that his own theory of democracy is formulated according to an inherent *disagreement* regarding the very distribution of the social, Rancière will often present democracy as a “staging” of equality: democracy opens up a space of litigation by that part of the community that has no part (*les sans-part*), a demonstration of equality that, for Rancière, must effectively reconstitute the very sensible of the community itself: those who could not be seen now appear, those who could not be heard now speak.⁸⁸ Similarly, what Lefort calls permanent contestation may likewise be appreciated to open up a space in which a unique political conflict may unfold: “Democracy must be seen as this *milieu* for conflicts, as a *milieu* in which we have to know how to engage in contestation.”⁸⁹ Lefort’s understanding of contestation should not be confined, as we occasionally find in more narrow readings of his work, to the institution of legitimate conflict so that competitions, rivalries and antagonisms may be played out according to procedural rules (thereby excluding all those conflicts already deemed “illegitimate”).⁹⁰ Rather, the act of contestation that remains consistent with

88 Peter Hallward will consider this *staging of equality* in two closely related essays. See “Staging Equality,” *New Left Review* vol. 37 (January-February 2006) and “Staging Equality: Rancière’s Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality,” *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, eds. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2009). In many respects, the significance of this phenomenal dimension of democracy may be traced back to Arendt, who, drawing from the experience of the Athenian assembly, will often characterise politics in terms of the institution of *seeing* and *being seen*, *hearing* and *being heard*. See particularly *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

89 Lefort and Rosanvallon. “The Test of the Political: A Conversation with Claude Lefort,” 13.

90 As we find, for example, in James Bohman’s introductory “Continental Political Philosophy,” *The Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy*, eds. Gerald Gaus and Fred D’Agostino (New York: Routledge, 2013), 164.

a savage conception of democracy is precisely the conflict that functions to raise the very question of what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate conflict and refuses the closure of this question in any absolute sense. This is precisely what it means to render conflict irreducibly *political*. Thus, akin to disagreement in the work of Rancière, contestation is Lefort's preferred term for the act that we found to be essential to the meaning of politics itself: the making controversial what was not controversial before. Contestation does not simply imply adopting a resolute position on a particular social problem, or set of problems; it is the act which itself makes the social problematic. It is what divides the social or recasts an antecedent social division in a renewed political form. Perhaps this is how we should interpret Abensour when he states above that democracy is not only the acceptance, but *elaboration* of that originary division of the social.⁹¹ For what contestation could be said to introduce to the generality of social conflict is the particularity of democracy's *being-against*, an against that is not so much a type of conflict among others, but as the specific challenge of the demos, the minority, the excluded, what reconstitutes or reconfigures the arena of social conflict according to the *power of the people*, according to the power that not only appears in the form of an against from its inception, but operates specifically to render what it is against an irreducible problem of politics. Hence, if Lefort's contestation carries with it an implicit against, it is not simply because contestation necessarily expresses an opposition to that which it confronts and disputes in society, but because what it

91 We will return to the *originary division of the social* in chapter 5.

confronts and disputes is persistently subjected to the condition of politics, a condition that exposes what it is against to a radical indeterminacy undermining its absolutism, certainty and fixity.

Democracy's distinguishing practice of contestation and the permanent nature of this contestation is itself indicative of a democracy in perpetual motion, a democracy unsettled and profoundly discontent. Lefort will resist the notion that modern democracy, even long after the revolutionary age from which it springs, may be presumed a settled form, a stabilising agent, a completed project. As we have seen, democracy does not represent the resolution to the problem of the political society. It is rather what complicates society in the first place, what renders it politically problematic, not in a single gesture, however monumental, but repeatedly, over and over again. As a succession of political contests engendered by an increasingly diverse body of actors located at the most divergent corners of society, since the dawn of its modern manifestation against the order of the *ancien régime*, democracy has offered an enduring political challenge to the prevailing relations of society.⁹² However sporadic and discontinuous, it is the very permanence of this challenge, perpetually reborn, regenerated and resumed, that must orient Lefort's concept of democracy according to a protracted process of democratisation, according to what Tocqueville, in his own analysis, describes as

92 In a similar fashion, what Laclau and Mouffe develop as a "plural" or "radical" democracy describes the process of deepening and extending the democratic revolution by intersecting diverse democratic struggles and subject positions as a means to proliferate sites of conflict and forge new strategies to confront and challenge oppressive power relations in society. On a number of occasions Laclau and Mouffe will draw directly from Lefort's work. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001), chapter 4, as well as Chantal Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?," *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2005).

democratic revolution. For democracy is not merely the name of the emancipatory act itself. It is also the name of the society that this act invariably seeks to create: a more democratic society permeated by more inclusive, participatory and egalitarian institutions and relations. This cannot be achieved in a single moment. It is a project that necessitates a prolonged, sustained effort. Accordingly, contrary to the regimes of monarchy and totalitarianism to which Lefort clearly posits its concept against, democracy may be understood to open a representation of time in which its movements and transformations, successes and failures, must be charted and evaluated according to an extended trajectory, a *becoming*.⁹³ Democracy strives for a future more democratic than the past. To again appeal to that powerful concept in Nietzsche, democracy's relation to the present could be thought *untimely*: it resists the conditions of the present in the hopes of a better future to come. In addition to its constitutive openness to the indeterminate and to the indefinite, perhaps this is why Lefort will declare democracy the *historical society par excellence*.⁹⁴

More than a description or explanation, perhaps what Lefort's savage democracy offers his readers is a new way to think about democracy. Rather than proposing a proper concept of democracy, the savage is what opens up its concept, challenging us to consider its powers and potentials anew. Savage democracy not only demands we reflect upon what is savage about democracy, it demands we think

93 Here Lefort could be seen to approximate what Deleuze calls "becoming-democratic" (*devenir-démocratique*). See Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 112-13.

94 Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," 16.

democracy in a savage way. Thinking democracy savage entails distancing its concept from those mitigated, domesticated representations of democracy, allowing us to rediscover its most creative and transformative dimensions and capacities. It therefore functions to animate and reanimate those interminable philosophical questions that constantly return us to the very construction of the concept itself: *how should democracy be thought? How do we go about organising its concept? On what basis? And to what end?* Despite Rancière's many objections, perhaps this is what will restore democracy as a legitimate topic of philosophy. In his final volume *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze reflects that central to the practice of philosophy is the creative exercise of concept construction. With reference to particular problems posed to philosophy from without, these concepts help us think in new ways that were not possible before. Deleuze insists that philosophy is a practical discipline, even suggesting the value of what it creates can only be evaluated according to its practical, often *nonphilosophical* uses. What is the use of philosophy? Deleuze will not waver in his response: the critique of the present, "the criticism of its own time," so that we may counter *what is*, think against it and create new possibilities to act. In this regard, perhaps what it is that ultimately makes philosophy *political* is not so much the topics it examines or themes it considers, but the manner in which the concepts it generates can be thrown back into society and used in a political way.⁹⁵ As we have seen, it is certainly true for Abensour, who studied under Deleuze, that philosophy does indeed contain a

95 For an evaluation of Deleuze's notion of concept construction in a political context see Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1-12.

political and critical potential. And when Abensour ventures to construct his own concept of democracy, he will not fail, unlike so many, to recognise and incorporate its more “savage” dimensions. A political philosophy necessitates a concept of democracy organised to critique the *here and now*. Savage democracy may prove invaluable in this task. Accordingly, following the example of Abensour, if we have pursued Lefort’s savage democracy to organise our basic conception of democracy here, it is because beyond releasing the concept from a more compromised, domesticated representation of democracy, inviting us to reconsider everything about what the *power of the people* can mean, it is precisely what Lefort understands as savage about democracy that orients the construction of its concept according to something that cannot be reduced to a form of government or set of institutions, that cannot be confined to rule of law or the *état de droit*, but represents a distinct political challenge to an order of society dominated by hierarchies, inequalities and modes of exclusion. This is what is essential for a theory of democracy’s being-against. To generate a concept of democracy according to what it is against is an attempt to think democracy an enduring transformative agent in society. This is precisely what Lefort’s savage democracy compels us to consider.

Understood as the emancipatory act of politics, integral to Lefort’s savage democracy, as Abensour demonstrates, is the permanent contestation of that which it rejects and disputes in society. In Lefort’s terms, if democracy invariably appears in the form of an against, it is because this rejection that fuels democracy and propels it forward, is not only located at the revolutionary “source” of democracy,

but as Lefort maintains, constitutes its “permanent driving energy.” It is precisely the permanence of this rejection, this *against*, that should not escape our attention. For neither arbitrary nor an end in itself, democracy’s being-against will attest to a very particular political project: the perpetual democratisation of society, of its institutions and relations. Situated in the context of Tocqueville’s democratic revolution, once again, this is precisely what Lefort’s savage democracy compels us to consider.

Hence, although often eclipsed by more prominent facets of his work and rarely explored, what may be extracted from Lefort’s theoretical studies of democracy are the three indispensable components that must be represented in any philosophical construction of its concept: the *savage*, the *against* and *democratisation*. More than any particular conclusion about democracy, this forms the basis of the concept that we have pursued throughout this study.

Part Three | Rationalities of democracy's *being-against*

4

Model I: democracy against the police (Rancière)

So what the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors understand by 'the police' is very different from what we put under the term. [...] What they understand by 'police' is not an institution or mechanism functioning within the State, but a governmental technology peculiar to the State—domains, techniques, targets where the State intervenes.

-Michel Foucault

Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualise in the broadest concept of the police. It is the name of what comes and interrupts the smooth working of this order through a singular mechanism of subjectivation.

-Jacques Rancière

If we have appealed to Lefort's admittedly obscure reference to savage democracy to organise a basic concept of democracy for the purposes of this study, it is because rather than supply a definitive model or prescriptive formula for democracy, we found the *savage* to open up its concept, exposing it to new possibilities and experimentation. Savage democracy is not simply an interpretation of democracy among others (such as "liberal" democracy or "social" democracy). It

is a vehicle through which we may revolutionise the way we think about democracy altogether. It compels us to revisit even our most underlying assumptions about democracy, to constantly test the accepted boundaries and limitation of its concept. In this respect, perhaps we could ascribe a certain savage democracy to Rancière, Abensour and no doubt to others as well. Whenever a theory of politics challenges the prevailing representation of democracy, daring us to reimagine its concept anew and continually explore the potential of what the *power of the people* can mean, such a theory can very well be said to incite a savage conception of democracy. This is why Lefort's savage democracy implies an exercise of thought as much as it identifies something essential about democracy itself. This is also why savage democracy provides a fitting conceptual basis through which we may pursue what I have called democracy's *being-against*. For just as its revolutionary proclivity against will tend to evoke everything that Lefort finds to be savage about democracy, as a mode of thought, as a way of liberating the way we think about democracy, the savage may also facilitate the rediscovery of this often dismissed, forgotten or overlooked being-against. It is for this reason that Lefort is essential to our study.

In part, the link between the *savage* and the *against* could be established with Lefort because his own recurring allusions to savage democracy, however ambiguous, must always be situated in the context of his broader philosophical project which ultimately incorporates a distinct model of democracy's being-against into its core theoretical framework: a democracy conceived at once against the

monarchic and totalitarian forms of society. As we encountered, these are the two objects that Lefort will tend to posit his concept of democracy against. And yet, however central to his own characteristic rendering of democracy and the symbolic order of society he associates with it, this formal opposition to monarchy on the one hand and totalitarianism on the other is in no way exhaustive of what democracy is against in the modern age. The topic of democracy's against may be considered through any number of avenues and channels. This is because its being-against may theoretically assume as many forms as the objects it manifests to confront and dispute in society, at different times, under different conditions. For this reason, what democracy is against in the modern world will often be found to be quite distinct from what it was originally against in antiquity, the form of its being-against always determined by the particular context in which democracy appears an emancipatory act of politics. In recent decades, in the guise of a diverse body of research, an increasing number of authors appear to have uncovered various incarnations of this against, integrating this striking facet of democracy into their larger theoretical projects. It thus becomes possible to identify, for example, the groundwork for a more anthropological analysis of a democracy against heteronomy (Castoriadis),¹ or drawing from the roots of historical materialism, a democracy against capitalism (Ellen Wood),² or rediscovering the origins of its "fugitive" capacities in ancient Greece, even a democracy against the constraints of

1 This theme extends across Castoriadis' later work. See for example the essays contained in the English compilations *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

2 See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

its own constitutionalisation (Wolin).³ Conversely, if we chose to initiate the topic via a detailed analysis of democracy's being-against the archê, this is not only because this particular against offers a unique opportunity to consider democracy's underlying anarchic condition which we found to be indispensable to the meaning of politics itself, but also because as the uncompromising rejection of the very division between governor and governed, ruler and ruled, it would appear that it is this against that must be deemed universal to democracy, wherever and whenever it appears.

Therefore, as a means to investigate this often neglected dimension of democracy in greater detail, for the remainder of this study let us select two exemplary theoretical models in contemporary political thought in which the against appears particularly pronounced and carefully evaluate how its logic plays out in each case. Keeping with the principal authors whose work has guided our inquiry throughout, we shall advance Rancière's model of a democracy against the police and Abensour's model of a democracy against the State. Although their writings on democracy remain quite distinct in many respects, by charting out the objects and relations of its being-against, what both Rancière and Abensour are able to identify in democracy is precisely that which we have attempted to isolate in our own analysis of democracy here: a unique political challenge, objection or confrontation in which the foundations of a given social order or particular

3 See Sheldon Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy," *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and "Fugitive Democracy," *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

institutional arrangement is called into question by that generic body or political subject traditionally known as the demos. If we have argued that democracy remains irreducible to a type of government, form of society or set of institutions, however assembled and arranged, it is because it is the forces that initiate this challenge and set it in motion that must ultimately form the basis of its concept. Both Rancière and Abensour help us to understand this.

Let us begin with Rancière. In *Disagreement*, the work that will dominate our attention here, Rancière will formulate a rather particular notion of democracy not in isolation, but located at the juncture or intersection of two very opposing logics: the logic of *equality* and the logic of the *police*. What Rancière understands as politics will be described in terms of this encounter, nexus or “meeting of the heterogeneous.”⁴ Two related implications may be immediately drawn from this. Firstly, nothing can be regarded political in and of itself. Politics occurs only when there is a meeting of these two distinct logics. Anything may have the potential to become political, but only on the occasion of this encounter or confrontation of democracy with the police.⁵ Secondly, any notion of a “pure politics” must consequentially be denounced a fiction. It is the nature of politics to always remain mixed, impure. Politics is a composition, an alloy; not a simple substance.⁶

Perhaps more importantly, Rancière understands the manner in which these

4 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 32.

5 Ibid., 32-3.

6 See Samuel A. Chambers, “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 10, no. 3 (July 2011).

two logics collide in a very particular way. For there is no neutral context or territory in which democracy's logic of equality may encounter that of the police. And we are told from the outset to be wary of any concepts that function to conceal or cover over their inherent antagonism, implying the smooth connection between the two (Rancière identifies *power* or *power relations* as an example of such a concept).⁷ Instead, the police will be introduced in terms of a certain state of generality in which politics—as the meeting of logics, the orchestration of antagonism—appears as something of an exception to the *givenness* of this social order.⁸ Although its arrangement and design will vary dramatically, it is this order of the police that for Rancière, classifies the general state of society. *Politics is that which acts on the police*.⁹ It is this notion of politics as an active agent, as something which *acts* or *acts upon*, that should not escape our attention. For it is indicative of Rancière's larger strategy in the text which first seeks to establish the police, however defined, as a kind of primary category so that a more precise interpretation of politics may be at once disentangled from it and reoriented in terms of something specific that happens to it: a disruption, suspension, modification.¹⁰

Accordingly, insofar as politics represents the setting up of this encounter, this

7 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 32.

8 It is for this reason that Badiou will identify Rancière's "police" as an overtly political expression of his own more ontologically generic concept of the "state of the situation," a general, overarching state of being that governs over the particularities of a given situation. Accordingly, he will likewise correspond Rancière's "politics" with his own concept of "the event" which breaks open the limits of the state of the situation allowing for new possibilities. See Alain Badiou, "Rancière and Apolitics," *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005), 116. Also see Jeff Love and Todd May, "From Universality to Inequality: Badiou's Critique of Rancière," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* vol. 2, iss. 2 (Fall 2008): 53-4.

9 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 33. Also see Jodi Dean, "Politics without Politics," *Parallax* vol. 15, no. 3 (2009): 27-8.

10 See Jacques Rancière, "The Use of Distinctions," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 206-7. Also see Paulina Tambakaki, "When Does Politics Happen?," *Parallax* vol. 15, no. 3 (2009): 104.

confrontation or antagonistic relation between democracy and the police, whatever it is that ultimately falls under the general category of “the police” may therefore be postulated and put forward as the principal object in which democracy can be said to manifest against. In Rancière’s model, the police is posited as the condition for democracy, as both its point of departure and its object of dispute. Democracy appears as a dynamic polemical agent that interjects moments of dissensus into the police order, calling into question the intuition of its given arrangements, classifications and regulations, opening up a space for new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking about the community, its composition and configuration. This is why as long as Rancière outlines his concept of politics with specific reference to democracy’s inextricable relation to the police, his first task remains to isolate these two terms accordingly: “Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organisation of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimising this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimisation another name. I propose to call it *the police*.”¹¹

Therefore, in rather broad strokes, the police will be introduced as a vast set of institutions and procedures that govern over both the organisation and representation of a community: the exercise of authority, the distribution of roles, spaces and functioning parts as well as the manner in which these systems of authority and distribution are legitimised and maintained.¹² And yet, in the very next

11 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 28.

12 Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 76.

sentence, Rancière admits that this rather anachronistic use of the term “police” is not without problems. For what it intends to encapsulate obviously remains quite distinct from the usual associations we are typically accustomed to today. Here, the police will no longer merely signify law enforcement, the disciplinary instrument of the State, the forces of law and order, men in little blue suits (*la basse police*). Alternatively, Rancière employs the term in its broadest connotations, much closer to the manner in which it would have been understood across Europe in the 17th and 18th century.¹³ It is precisely this more historical sense of the police that informs Rancière’s terminology and thus, must likewise orient our own analysis of the concept accordingly. Rancière certainly points us in this direction in his initial proposal of the term. Nevertheless, given its significance in his larger theoretical project, a number of commentators have observed that the concept of the police remains rather undertheorised across Rancière’s writings.¹⁴ This criticism is entirely justified. For even in *Disagreement*, the work that arguably more than any other situates the police—and democracy’s opposition to it—at its theoretical centre, the concept still only receives but a few pages of the most abbreviated description. This lack of analysis could very well be seen as one of the text’s greatest deficits.¹⁵

13 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 28.

14 See for example Samuel A. Chambers, “The Politics of the Police: From Neoliberalism to Anarchism, and Back to Democracy,” *Reading Rancière*, eds. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 19 and Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 96.

15 Todd May will defend Rancière against this criticism, arguing that Rancière does not organise his political theory in a typically descriptive or analytical manner, but that his writings are in fact “addressed to” those disadvantaged, marginalised and overlooked groups in a given distribution of the social. May therefore suggests that Rancière presents the police precisely from the perspective of those most impaired by its arrangements, systems and strategies. If May is correct, it would imply that what Rancière seeks to elaborate in *Disagreement* is not so much a descriptive analysis of the police itself, but its *effects* on those it dominates, excludes or neglects. See *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 118.

In this respect, in order to sufficiently appreciate the object that Rancière appears to organise his concept of democracy against, it becomes necessary, for the moment, to suspend our discussion of his own work and concentrate our analysis on another source. In his brief exposition of this more comprehensive interpretation of the police in *Disagreement*, Rancière will on more than one occasion appeal to Foucault, whose later work considers this early modern incarnation of the police—its mechanisms, jurisdiction and destinations—in the context of his own research on *governmentality*. Although he would never venture to incorporate this research into a proper volume, Foucault does address the topic in considerable detail in a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France at the end of the 1970s.¹⁶ Therefore, in attempt to establish a more substantive framework for Rancière’s somewhat obscure reference to the police, let us follow his lead and turn to the research of Foucault.

Foucault interprets the police, in the sense that Rancière will advance the term, as a particular historical manifestation of a larger rationality he will eventually designate and frame conceptually as “governmentality.” In attempt to displace the centrality of sovereignty in political analysis, Foucault employs the term “government” with increasing abstraction to cover a sweeping range of techniques, strategies, objects and domains which not only traverse the bounds of State and subject, but a number of disciplines and institutional practices ranging from economics to medicine to pedagogy to religion. Therefore, beyond its more familiar

16 After Foucault’s death, the topic of *governmentality* would largely be taken up and developed by Anglo-American scholarship in the social sciences, particularly Peter Miller, Graham Burchell, Nikolas Rose and Mitchell Dean.

references to State administration, Foucault demonstrates that well into the 18th century, what may fall under the general category of government is actually quite vast, including, at different times, topics as diverse as the ethics of the self, the management of the family and household, the moral guidance of the soul and the overseeing of public health, social welfare and economic development.¹⁷ For this reason, Foucault will often dissociate government from the comparatively narrow confines of the State, the State remaining but a single component in a more complex network of actors, institutions and mechanisms involved in the governing of the conduct of individuals, groups or populations.¹⁸ Even with the advent of a refurbished “absolutist” State in the 16th century, for Foucault, this merely attests to a particular historical modification in the practices of government itself. He regards the appearance of the modern nation State only as a type or “episode” of this larger governmental rationality which must at all times be granted a certain theoretical priority accordingly: the State remains an instrument or agent of government, not the reverse.¹⁹ In this respect, very much keeping with Foucault’s analysis, perhaps this may offer fresh insight into why, unlike Abensour, Rancière’s model of democracy will not isolate the State as the principal object of its being-against, but rather something which appears to remain much more expansive and all-encompassing: “I do not, however, identify the police with what is termed the ‘State

17 Thomas Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” *Rethinking Marxism* vol 14, iss. 3 (2002): 50.

18 Jonathan Xavier Inda, “Analytics of the Modern: An Introduction,” *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*, ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1-2.

19 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Picador/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 248. Also see Colin Gordon, “Governmental Rationality: An Introduction,” *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds., Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

apparatus.’ The notion of the State apparatus is in fact bound up with the presupposition of an opposition between State and society in which the State is portrayed as a machine, a ‘cold monster’ imposing its rigid order on the life of society.”²⁰ Indeed, given the scope of government, traditionally understood, Foucault regards the very notion of a “civil” society, as a separate or autonomous sphere of society, as little more than a fairy tale.²¹ According to Foucault, it is not so much a new form of State that engenders civil society as a result, product or negation of itself, but a new form of *governmentalised* society that organises new relations of the State.²²

Therefore, refusing to restrict its location and jurisdiction to the conventional limits of the State, government will instead tend to be defined simply in terms of “conduct” or “the conduct of conduct” and conceived accordingly, provides Foucault with a consistent theoretical schema able to trace and decipher, under a single term, a number of practices, strategies and mechanisms applicable to a range of projects extending from the governing of self to the governing of others.²³ By organising a working framework to consider the underlying problems of government—how to govern, how to be governed, by whom, how strictly, by what methods and to what ends—what Foucault investigates under the general formula of governmentality should therefore be understood not as a competing paradigm limited to a single historical epoch, but as a larger rationality coextensive

20 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29.

21 Gordon, “Governmental Rationality: An Introduction,” 7.

22 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, 248.

23 Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” 50-1. In this regard, Foucault will make no distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” government, “consensual” and “coercive” government.

with various modalities of governance potentially stretching across vast historical boundaries.²⁴ Consequently, it becomes possible for Foucault, with a certain degree of consistency, to compare and evaluate, for example, a project of government specific to Greeks (*self-legislation/self-regulation*), to the Christians (*the directing of the soul*) and to early modernity (*the management of a population*). Government, in this respect, has less to do with the imposing of laws over a sovereign territory than it does with the active organisation and arrangement of particular objects in order to effectuate particular ends deemed appropriate to those objects governed.²⁵ What government ultimately concerns, Foucault infers, is “the right disposition of things.”²⁶ Whether it be the self, the family, workers in a factory, inmates in a prison, patients in a hospital, inhabitants of a territory or members of a population, its principal problem is one of the *comportment* of human beings.²⁷ Its principal task is one of *guidance*, the structuring, ordering and shaping of the field of possible activity.²⁸ Such a rationality could very well be epitomised by the Hobbesian conception of man outlined in the opening pages of his political treatise *On the Citizen*. Since the Greeks, Hobbes declares, the history of political thought has simply assumed man naturally fit for society, but he is not: “Therefore, man is made fit for society not by nature, but by training (*disciplina*).”²⁹ It is the business of government to guide and shape, organise and arrange, manage and regulate.

24 Foucault’s earlier concept of *power* is likewise structured with a similar transhistorical applicability.

25 Inda, “Analytics of the Modern: An Introduction,” 4.

26 Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 208.

27 Inda, “Analytics of the Modern: An Introduction,” 1.

28 Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” 52.

29 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21-22, 24-5. *Disciplina* may equally be translated as “education” or “discipline.”

Government concerns not only the organised practices of governing in the strictest sense, but also the active rendering of the objects of government *governable* in the first place. It is precisely this active or positive quality of governing that Rancière will associate with the police.

In a key lecture on governmentality,³⁰ tracing significant historical developments from the 16th to the 18th century, Foucault explains that with the collapse of feudalism, the rise of the Reformation and Counter-reformation and the emergence of a new competitive sovereign State system in early modern Europe, the discourse on government would explode with new force.³¹ This extensive body of literature that appears during this period would considerably augment the knowledges, techniques and objectives of government. Not only would it address more traditional topics of morality, family and the affairs of the State, but for the first time, also tackle large scale problems such as national economy, public health and social conditions. As a result, the very notion of government itself would ultimately become synonymous with these more *generalised* forms of administration and management.³² We find, for example, detailed theoretical discussions considering the management of wealth and resources, production and circulation, rates of fertility and mortality, modes of living and habitation, hygiene and sanitation, accidents and epidemics, security and unrest.³³ This is very much the context in which the police, as a new form of governmental technology, will appear.

30 Delivered February 1, 1978 at the Collège de France as part of a course on “Security, Territory, Population.” The topic of the police will largely be discussed on March 29 and April 5 in this lecture series.

31 Foucault, “Governmentality,” 201-2.

32 Ibid., 209.

33 Inda, “Analytics of the Modern: An Introduction,” 4-5.

Indeed, Foucault will locate this whole literature alongside a profound *governmentalisation* of society, amalgamating a comparatively fragmented feudal system into a centralised, bureaucratic State administration (the absolutist State), governing over a newly integrated set of economic practices and policies (mercantilism), analysed, calculated and evaluated according to a new set of rational tools, methods and strategies (particularly statistics, literally “the science of the State”). This represents the birth of a new era of knowledges and technologies, record keeping and data collection, measuring and planning, formalisation and regulation, standardisation and normalisation. Perhaps it is for this reason that when Hegel considers the police in the *Philosophy of Right*, it is conceived as a “higher guiding authority” that serves to actualise and preserve the universal across the particularities constitutive of civil society.³⁴

To facilitate the immense undertaking of such large scale national campaigns from economy to security to public health, informed by this new *reason of State* (*raison d'État*), an increasingly expansive body of government would likewise require a new object: whereas it would customarily target the family, individual or subject, by the 18th century, government would now identify *population* as its principal aim.³⁵ The discovery of population would considerably liberate this early modern project of government in many respects. It would play a significant role in the transformation of the predominant model of rule from a more conventional

34 G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 152, translation slightly modified.

35 Foucault, “Governmentality,” 216-17.

sovereign authority over a territory to a more elaborate governmentalised administration of a society.³⁶ At once more specific and more totalising, it would allow for a far more precise object of knowledge and a far more systematic means to manage that object as a numerical and calculable system of *aggregate effects*.³⁷ In this regard, the notion of population represents a major leap in the ability to implicate the everyday conduct of a mass body in the exercise of a sovereign power.³⁸ Consequently, by the end of the 18th century, it is the population that would come to occupy the police at the height of its powers.³⁹ For Foucault, such a development is indicative of the inception of *biopower*: the management of a population is akin to the management of life itself.⁴⁰

In his lecture, Foucault illustrates this historic transformation of government through a detailed analysis of a long trend of anti-Machiavellian literature that would appear during this period. Although revered by his immediate contemporaries, not long after Machiavelli's death, his political writings, particularly *The Prince*, would quickly fall out of favour and it would not be until the early 19th century that his reputation as a profound political thinker would largely be reestablished. As Foucault demonstrates, throughout this diverse political

36 Bruce Curtis, "Foucault on Governmentality and Population: The Impossible Discovery," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* vol. 27, no. 4 (Autumn, 2002): 506.

37 Foucault, "Governmentality," 216.

38 Curtis, "Foucault on Governmentality and Population: The Impossible Discovery," 520.

39 Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*, 416.

40 Foucault will often use "biopower" and "biopolitics" interchangeably. Although sympathetic to the general concept, Rancière will take issue with this conflation of "power" and "politics" insisting on a formal distinction between the terms. See "Biopolitics or Politics?," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. For further analysis of Rancière's argument see John McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," *Sofia Philosophical Review* vol. 3, no. 1 (2009): 123-9.

literature critical of Machiavelli, a far more varied and extensive theory of government would be worked out, the rule of the prince remaining but a single form.⁴¹ Whereas Machiavelli's "advice to the prince" would largely be interpreted to concern a rather narrow concept of government limited to a logic of territory, subjects and the problem of a how transcendent prince may protect and retain his sovereign principality, his many critics would be far more interested in pursuing a theory of government able to consider the dynamics of managing a multiplicity of complex relations immanent to society itself.⁴² Echoing Plato's notorious allegory of the State as a ship which we examined in depth at the outset of this study, now with reference to those very critics of Machiavelli, Foucault will invoke the metaphor once again in order to exemplify the increasing complexity of this new "art of government:"

What does it mean to govern a ship? It means clearly to take charge of the sailors, but also of the boat and its cargo; to take care of ship means also to reckon with the winds, rocks, and storms; and it consists in that activity of establishing a relation between the sailors, who are to be taken care of, and the ship, which is to be taken care of, and the cargo, which is to be brought safely to port, and all those eventualities like winds, rocks, storms, and so on. This is what characterises the government of a ship.⁴³

Although Plato largely employs the allegory to symbolise the ostracism of the philosopher by a savage demos whose anarchic rule over a sea vessel effectively undermines the authority of the ship's proper captain, epitomised by this dyadic

41 Foucault, "Governmentality," 205.

42 Ibid., 205-6.

43 Ibid., 209.

relation of the captain and his crew, we implicitly accepted its basic premise of government as the relatively straightforward problem of one ruling another, the few ruling the many. Throughout, we made no distinction in this regard, between *governing* and simply *ruling*. Certainly, when considering democracy's underlying challenge to the *archê*—the founding principle of rule—this rather univocal account of government remains quite appropriate. However, insofar as Rancière posits democracy against the order of the police, a concept principally drawn from the research of Foucault who centres his analysis around this dramatic expansion of the field of government in the early modern period, it now becomes necessary to modify and broaden our general conception of government significantly so that it may include these more comprehensive institutional practices of governing a society as a multiplicity of complex relations. This is imperative if we wish grasp the basis of Rancière's model.

How then are we to isolate the police in such a vast governmental project particular to this given historical milieu? As Foucault recounts, one such anti-Machiavellian treatise to consider these complex relations of government (La Mothe Le Vayer) will outline a familiar topology identifying three tiers or strata of government accordingly: individual, family and State. It is precisely the purpose of government, the treatise submits, to establish and maintain a material continuity between the three (in both upward and downward directions). The upward continuity, in which a necessary criterion to govern the family and the State is the capacity to govern oneself, is hardly novel, perhaps extending back to the Greeks

themselves. However, the downward continuity, in which the effective government of the family and the individual is facilitated by the effective government of the State, thereby ascribing to the management of the family and to the conduct of the individual a model of government isomorphic to that of State administration, is precisely what by the 17th century, Foucault contends, is beginning to be called “the police.”⁴⁴ The police, in its basic conception, has little to do with the application of law. Rather, it is indicative of an entirely new model of government in which the management of society is not only identified as its primary objective, but is systematically implemented with the same precision and detail as the administration of the State itself. Beginning in the 17th century, the police is simply the name of the principal mode in which this management of society is carried out. The police may therefore be juxtaposed with the law in the following way: whereas the law concerns universals, the police concerns particulars. Much like the judiciary, army and treasury, the police is conceived as a distinct administrative body of the State; but unlike the judiciary, army or treasury, one whose functions remain indefinite and whose jurisdiction remains unlimited.⁴⁵ As Foucault often likes to repeat: the true object of the police is man himself.⁴⁶

“So what the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors understand by ‘the police’ is very different from what we put under the term. [...] What they understand by ‘police’ is not an institution or mechanism functioning within the State, but a

44 Ibid., 206-7.

45 Michel Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*, 318-19.

46 Here Foucault quotes Turquet de Mayerne. See *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, 322.

governmental technology peculiar to the State—domains, techniques, targets where the State intervenes.”⁴⁷ The police operates in society primarily as an agent of *intervention*. It is for this reason that the police should not be confused with the State itself. It is rather the means in which the State acts directly on society in a non-juridical fashion. It represents the combined instruments, techniques, practices and strategies in which the State identifies, targets and intervenes in a wide spectrum of activities, conditions and relations of human life from commerce to infrastructure to health to population management. The police may therefore be understood as the *actualisation* of this predominant theory of government particular to the early modern period. It embodies the indispensable technologies and knowledges essential to a new governmentalised society. It is what renders the project of the management of society not only feasible, but effective. Whereas the sovereign or prince would traditionally be occupied with his subjects’ status, virtue and obedience, what is of interest to the police is simply what men *do*: their activity, occupation, production and reproduction.⁴⁸ With an historically unprecedented degree of breadth and precision, the police functions to organise and integrate a wide diversity of human activity into the jurisdiction, authority and influence of the State:

What, then, are the concrete tasks of police? As its instrument, it will have to provide itself with whatever is necessary and sufficient for effectively integrating men’s activity into the State, into its forces, and into the development of these forces, and it will have to ensure that the State, in turn, can stimulate,

47 Foucault, “‘Omnes et Singulatim’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” 317.

48 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, 322.

determine, and orientate this activity in such a way that it is in fact useful to the State.⁴⁹

The goal of the police is not social repression. It is to order and shape the social in such a manner that its activity is deemed useful to the State and increases its forces. Rather than a punishing mechanism assembled to contend with the delinquency of a deviant minority, the primary concern of the police is to enhance the general health, order and productivity of society as a whole. Through a tripartite strategy of intervention, regulation and discipline—which in practice quickly loose all distinction—the police facilitates the rational, deliberate and calculated organisation and management of the social. It classifies and allocates, arranges and coordinates, administers and distributes, advocates and oversees. It is what creates and ensures a well ordered, productive and smoothly functioning society. It is precisely against this background that Rancière's reference to the police must be understood.

While Rancière will not correspond his own, somewhat nuanced concept of the police exactly with the more descriptive historical account found in Foucault, it is this general sense of an active agent that systematically organises, configures and arranges the social—its parts, places, roles and functions—that gives Rancière cause to appeal to the term. Although abstracted from its proper historical milieu, Rancière clearly identifies something in our own society today—and indeed perhaps something inherent to all societies in general—which merits the revival and sweeping application of the term as it was broadly understood in 17th and 18th century Europe. What remains consistent across Foucault and Rancière's treatment

49 Ibid., 322-3.

of the police is the prominence granted to its underlying practice of social ordering, to the aspiration of implementing the proper order of society.⁵⁰ Rancière takes the police as a symbol for the harmonious, productive society that functions without interruption and without dispute. It is indicative of the well managed, well regulated community that organises its parts and roles according to a larger administrative framework effectively foreclosed to the complications of politics. This is why he finds the police intrinsically hostile to the agents of democracy. So whereas Foucault contrasts the police and sovereignty, Rancière contrasts the police and politics. For Rancière, the police is synonymous with the authority to distribute order over a population, an authority that often remains indistinguishable from the very order it installs. It is in this respect that he sees the police and the general motivating principle behind it, as in no way particular to an early modern strategy of government. Its basic formula may be found everywhere. It may be found in ancient oligarchies and in republics; it may be found in totalitarianism and in neoliberalism as well. It is what determines in advance modes of inclusion and exclusion, divisions of labour, the separation between public and private. Indeed, it appears as if Rancière has difficulty envisioning a form of social existence that endures with any perpetuity outside the dictates of a given police order.⁵¹ Even political philosophy, as Rancière is eager to demonstrate, is inundated with examples, justifications and elaborate defences of various police orders both

⁵⁰ May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, 42.

⁵¹ Samuel A. Chambers, "Police and Oligarchy," *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2010), 62.

concrete and ideal.⁵² As we have already encountered, it is the *Republic* that very much embodies the archetype of a political philosophy whose first objective is to substitute the order of politics with the order of the police. Plato calls the proper order of society “justice.” It has many other names. Regardless, according to Rancière, this substitution amounts to the effective elimination of politics from philosophical inquiry.⁵³ As we have seen, this remains the basis of his principal criticism of political philosophy.

Therefore, however indebted to the research of Foucault, rather than a governmental technology particular to the State, Rancière appears to utilise the concept to encapsulate the totality of rationalities, mentalities, operations and processes that function to systematically organise, regulate and preserve a given order of society (covering everything from law to coercion to education to science). For Rancière, the police signifies the power to impose order on a social body: it is the power to identify groups, designate parts, assign roles, allocate functions and partition spaces. Its basic presumption is that the appropriate behaviour, activity and thinking will follow from one’s particular allotted part, role, function and place.⁵⁴ It assumes that one’s natural set of abilities and capacities both determines and is determined by one’s proper place in the larger social order. This is precisely its

52 Rancière writes: “The basis of the politics of the philosophers is the identity of the principle of politics as an activity with that of the police as a way of determining the partition of the perceptible (*le partage du sensible*) that defines the lot of individuals and parties.” See *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 63. Also see Jeremy Valentine, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Problems,” *Paragraph* vol. 28, iss. 1 (March 2005): 46.

53 For additional insights on Rancière’s position see May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, 42-3 and Chambers, “The Politics of the Police: From Neoliberalism to Anarchism, and Back to Democracy,” 28-9.

54 Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 78.

appeal to the archê which remains at the root of every police distribution. Consequently, although he maintains that he employs the term in its most “neutral” and “nonpejorative” sense, Rancière will identify the police in every hierarchical structure and in every social arrangement that functions to assign, affix, restrict and exclude. Whereas Foucault’s analysis of the police tends to concentrate on technique and strategy, what appears to interest Rancière is primarily its *effects* on a social body.⁵⁵ It is very much from this perspective that a concept of democracy, as the appearance of a political subject that interrupts and frustrates the logic of the police, will be developed.

Rancière will associate the police with the count of the community. In both *Disagreement* and the closely related “Ten Theses on Politics” which largely serves to distil and enumerate its most essential findings, the police will be distinguished as a particular way of identifying and dividing up the parts and shares of what is common. As opposed to a straightforward numerical (arithmetical) count, the police engineers various intricate measuring strategies to evaluate the title, worth and share of each member of the community.⁵⁶ It calculates, appraises and assigns according to a selected criterion, standard or judgement. Once again, this its appeal to the archê. In a single movement, the police establishes both a common ground of the community (that which constitutes the community as a whole) and the manner in which the common of the community is divided (the dividing up of parts and

⁵⁵ See footnote 15.

⁵⁶ Gilles Labelle, “Two Refoundation Projects of Democracy in Contemporary French Philosophy: Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Rancière,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 27, no. 4 (2001): 88. Labelle appropriately titles section II of his article: “Jacques Rancière: the demos against the police.”

shares).⁵⁷ Concerned both with what can be divided and how that division is to be carried out, the police may therefore be understood to constitute, in Rancière's lexicon, a partition (*le partage*) of the social, determining one's part, role and extent to which one partakes (*avoir-part*) in the institutions of society (economic, governmental, familial, etc.). Accordingly, as a division or partition of the social, as a distribution of parts and shares, the police offers a definitive solution to the longstanding problem of separation and exclusion, of who participates, to what extent, under what conditions and to what ends.

One the more predominant features to characterise the police count, if we follow Rancière, is the manner in which it aspires to represent the community as a body that lacks void and supplement.⁵⁸ The police offers a regulatory framework that claims to encompass the whole of the community so that all its parts are known, named and counted.⁵⁹ On at least one occasion Rancière will describe this process in terms of *saturation*: "The essence of the police is the principle of saturation; it is a mode of the partition of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*) that recognises neither lack nor supplement."⁶⁰ The principle of saturation signifies the *fullness* or *completeness* of society, the count that intends to exclude the very possibility of supplementation. The police order is emblematic of a distribution without remainder, without excess and without omission. It claims that there is

57 See Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivation: Foucault with Rancière," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* vol. 42, no. 5/6 (2010): 592.

58 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 36.

59 Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, 78.

60 Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritics* vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 124.

nothing unaccounted for, that there is nothing left over or external to its method of accounting.⁶¹ In this regard, not only does the police embody the power to limit, marginalise and exclude, it also embodies the power to render those excluded effectively *invisible*.

Therefore, beyond the count of the empirical parts of the community—the actual groups, functions, roles and shares—what Rancière is intent on establishing is that the police must simultaneously be understood in terms of a *regime of representation*, as an agent that functions to organise and formulate the underlying constitution of society in a symbolic manner.⁶² This is a key component of Rancière's concept:

The police is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it. But to define this, you first must define the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed. The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. [...] Policing is not so much the "disciplining" of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed.⁶³

According to Rancière, the police cannot be reduced to a materialism of distributed parts and shares. It is equally essential that it determine the *ineligibility* of those parts and shares distributed: how they are represented, how they are perceived and

61 Chambers, "Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics," 306-7.

62 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 36.

63 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 29.

how they are experienced.⁶⁴ Insofar as the police stipulates the very terms of *partaking*, of inclusion and exclusion, participation and marginalisation, it must first specify the modes of perception in which those terms are inscribed. Not only does the police organise the material divisions of a shared common (*un commun partagé*), it likewise functions to organise the representational space in which those divisions are articulated and deciphered. The police constitutes both a particular representation of how the parts of the community are ordered and a particular ordering of how the parts of the community are represented. Its mandate is to establish the very parameters between the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable, the audible and the inaudible.⁶⁵ It is the power to name, to frame, to determine what can be seen and what cannot, what can be heard (*logos*) and what remains indistinguishable from the incoherent fog of noise (*phônê*). Its primary concern is one of the *symbolisation* of society, the manner in which the sensible is mediated according to a given framework or design: “The police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible.”⁶⁶ Essential to the police order, it could therefore be said, is the *governance of the sensible*. For Rancière, the police intervention, regulation and management of the social extends all the way to sensory experience itself. What it governs, what it guides and shapes, is the way in which we see and

64 Chambers, “Police and Oligarchy,” 63.

65 Linsey McGoey, “Police Reinforcement: The Anti-Politics of Organizational Life,” *Reading Rancière*, 150.

66 Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” 36.

hear, what we see and hear and likewise, what will not be seen and not be heard at all. Although Foucault's general definition of government still very much applies, it is here where Rancière will most decisively diverge from his research and venture to cultivate a conception of the police particular to a theoretical framework all of his own: "In 'Omnes et Singulatim,' Foucault conceives of the police as an institutional apparatus that participates in power's control over life and bodies; while, for me, the police designates not an institution of power but a distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*) within which it becomes possible to define strategies and techniques of power."⁶⁷ It is Rancière's general position that any relation or mechanism of power already presupposes a particular distribution of the sensible according to which that relation or mechanism of power is symbolically arranged. Moreover, this position remains consistent with one of his most elementary theses: that at the heart of every community, at the heart of every institution of the social, lies an *aesthetics*, that is, a particular configuration and coordination of the field of the sensible, of the modes of perception and forms of representation that dictate the relations and boundaries between *ways of seeing*, *ways of doing*, *ways of saying* and *ways of being*.⁶⁸ Accordingly, what it is that ultimately constitutes the common of a community is not so much a shared identity, territory or ideology, but a shared distribution of the sensible, a shared sense or modality of sense.⁶⁹ This is why

⁶⁷ Rancière, "Biopolitics or Politics?," 95.

⁶⁸ Rancière employs the term "aesthetics" in a manner generally consistent with the Kantian notion of "*a priori* forms of sensibility." See his essay "From Politics to Aesthetics?" *Paragraph* vol 28 (March 2005): 13. Also see the interviews collected in the volume *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁶⁹ See Katharine Wolfe, "From Aesthetics to Politics: Rancière, Kant and Deleuze," *Contemporary Aesthetics* vol. 4 (2006).

Rancière can speak of a “politics of aesthetics.” For what is at stake in politics is not only the transformation of the institutions and relations of society, but the very manner in which those institutions and relations are perceived and rendered intelligible. A politics of aesthetics sets out both to challenge the limits of the perceptible and to offer new possibilities of perception, new ways of seeing and new ways of being seen.⁷⁰ In this regard, Rancière’s politics of aesthetics goes well beyond what Gramsci describes in his *Prison Notebooks* as the “war of position.” Politics is nothing less than the war of perception itself.

And while the precise conceptual relationship between these key terms that populate Rancière’s later work (*aesthetics*, the *distribution of the sensible*, the *police*) may at times appear frustratingly undefined, what nevertheless remains strikingly apparent is that unless these terms remain entirely synonymous, what his appeal to the police ultimately compels us to consider is not only that every society is constituted in a symbolic manner, but that the symbolic is itself something with the capacity to be *governed*. Perhaps this is what will most sharply distinguish the concept of the symbolic as it appears in Rancière and Lefort. Whereas Lefort binds a particular symbolic order to the monarchic, democratic and totalitarian regimes, Rancière appears to ascribe a general symbolic order to the police itself (politics always external to this symbolic order). Whereas Rancière associates this symbolic with *saturation*, this is a term that Lefort would likely reserve only for totalitarianism. And yet, even here, there is no suggestion from Lefort that the

70 Jean-Philippe Deranty, “Jacques Rancière’s Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition,” *Political Theory* vol. 31, no. 1 (February 2003): 137.

symbolic is ever itself an object of government. “The police” is Rancière’s universal term for precisely this: the totality of systems and processes that function to govern the symbolic constitution of society, to manage and regulate the modes of perception operative in a social field. It is for this reason that politics cannot simply be equated with the affairs of the public. For what is public, what is private, their divisions and boundaries, is already symbolised in a particular way from the start. (This is something that the Greeks appear never to have fully grasped.) Rather, for Rancière, integral to the meaning of politics is the conflict over its very symbolisation.⁷¹ It is the initiation of a controversy, a polemic, in which the representation of the public, the private, the organisation of the community itself, is put into question and rendered an irreducible political problem. This is the act of democracy. Therefore, if democracy can indeed be understood to oppose the general order of the police as Rancière reimagines the term, perhaps what it ultimately appears against is the systematic governance of the symbolic itself. For beyond its various modes and strategies of ordering the social, assigning to each their proper role, place and function, the police tends to reside over an underlying ontology of closure, a closure that functions to restrict what is visible, what is thinkable and what is possible.⁷² Although working through an entirely different framework, Castoriadis will regularly identify such ontological closure as the very basis of the *heteronomous* society. For both Rancière and Castoriadis alike, democracy is the

71 Jacques Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* vol. 9, no. 3 (December 2004): 6.

72 Bram Ieven, “Heteroreductives - Rancière’s Disagreement with Ontology,” *Parallax* vol. 15, no. 3 (2009): 50.

rupture of closure. It counters this representation of society by inventing new ways of interpreting and new ways of imagining the community, its composition and configuration. According to Rancière, this is the revelation of the political subject.

In the opening lines of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, the demos is defined rather succinctly as those who have: "virtually no share in any aspect of government."⁷³ On at least one occasion, Rancière proposes that his volume *Disagreement* may be read as one long commentary on these opening lines of Aristotle's text: "In a sense, one can say that politics begins when those who have no share begin to have one."⁷⁴ According to Rancière, at the heart of this political struggle for a *share*, for an opportunity to *take part* in the affairs of government, is a dispute over language itself: not only who have the right to speak, but who in fact can be heard at all, who have the capacity for speech and whose speech is recognised as such. This strange intersection between language and politics is one that may be traced across political theory from Aristotle to Arendt to Habermas. When Aristotle defines man a political animal it is not simply because he is social, but because he is in possession of *logos*. Whereas other animals possess only the capacity to express pleasure and pain, to growl and groan, man is unique in that he is endowed with the capacity to speak, to discuss, to debate: what is just and what is unjust, how the community should be organised, what the laws that govern that community should be.⁷⁵ And yet, immediately following this logical or

⁷³ Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 211.

⁷⁴ Jacques Rancière, "Democracy Means Equality," *Radical Philosophy* vol. 82 (March 1997): 31.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, 13.

anthropological definition, Aristotle moves to qualify its implied universality distinguishing those who genuinely possess *logos* from those, we can only assume, who merely possess the semblance of it, whose access to *logos* is mediated by *memesis* (slaves and by extension, we could add, women, workers, colonised peoples, etc.). How can this distinction be justified? The coherence of Aristotle's remarks depends entirely on the meaning of *logos*. As Rancière explains, as soon as Aristotle isolates the basis for political participation in a *logos* possessed only by a select few, it will no longer designate a generic linguistic capacity, or even reasoned discourse, but a symbolic division.⁷⁶ The question at hand is not one of biology, physiology or cognition, but representation, a symbolic determination, a distribution of the sensible that organises the basic relations and proximities between speech and bodies, *logos* and subjects, a division indicative of the order of the police. Therefore, if *Disagreement* may be interpreted as something of an extended meditation on Aristotle's most elementary political problem—who is in possession of *logos*, who is entitled to a share—an interpretation that Rancière himself will very much endorse, it is not because he accepts language as a foundation for politics, but because it is language that he sees to ultimately form the implicit object of a very particular dispute: who can be heard and who cannot, who has a share and who does not. It is precisely the inauguration of this dispute, this disagreement, that Rancière identifies with politics. Beyond questions of justice and injustice, the organisation of the community, its laws and institutions, if politics renders *logos*

⁷⁶ Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," 5.

itself an object of controversy, it is because *logos* is never simply a matter of speech, but a particular *account* that is made of speech, of its intelligibility and audibility.⁷⁷ This is why Rancière often associates democracy with acts of revolt, but revolt of a particular kind, a “logical revolt,” borrowing a term from Rimbaud, that is just as much a conflict over those who speak and the account that is made of this speech as anything else.⁷⁸ Therefore, contrary to Aristotle, if language can offer no ground for politics, it is because politics represents a dispute over the interpretation of what constitutes language itself, over the very distinction between *logos* and *phônê*. Whereas Aristotle appeals to language as a condition or necessary requisite for belonging to a political community, Rancière sees language as the basis of a disagreement regarding who belongs to such a community and who does not. Whereas Aristotle’s political subject is the one whose words demonstrate an innate possession of *logos*, Rancière’s political subject is the one whose words and indeed, *excess* of words, throw the entire symbolic division of *logos* into question. It is this political subject that concerns us here, the subject who represents an excess of words, a *literary* animal rather than an inherently political one,⁷⁹ whose speech embodies the capacity to disrupt and modify the sensible, that which we see and that which we hear, rendering the symbolic order of the police inherently problematic.

77 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 22-3.

78 Arthur Rimbaud, “Démocratie,” *Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 350. *Les Révoltes logiques* was also the name of an ambitious journal of history and politics founded by Rancière and others in 1975 to which he contributed a number of articles on various topics. It published regularly until 1985.

79 Chambers, “Jacques Rancière and the Problem of Pure Politics,” 309.

From his very first work, perhaps the central question that propels Rancière's larger theoretical project since his infamous break with Althusser is precisely that which his former teacher systematically failed to consider: the significance of the role of the subject in the history of social emancipation.⁸⁰ For this reason, some elect to read many of Rancière's major works, contra Althusser, according to the heritage of a humanist Marxism in which the subject remains an integral component of any effective theory of emancipation.⁸¹ And yet, Rancière himself is unequivocal that the political subject, as he understands the term, is not a sociological entity.⁸² Much like Foucault, Rancière will never presuppose a subject.⁸³ The political subject does not precede itself, does not exist before it acts, before it creates itself a manifest form. The proletariat, for example, does not exist as a class before it imposes itself on the workings, divisions and suppositions of industrial capitalism, before it makes itself a problem *precisely where there was none before*. Nor is the manifestation of the political subject, consistent with Abensour's appeal to the principle of anarchy, contingent upon any particular set of socio-historical determinations. Both the origin and destination of the political subject can never be known in advance. Spontaneous, unpredictable, incalculable, Rancière largely considers the sporadic appearance of the political subject as

80 See Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* (London: Continuum, 2011). Also see Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Rethinking Emancipation* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 84, 86.

81 For example Deranty, "Jacques Rancière's Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition," 138-9.

82 Jacques Rancière, "Work, Identity, Subject," *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*, eds. Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (London: Continuum International Publishers, 2012), 213-14.

83 Todd May, "Jacques Rancière and the Ethics of Equality," *SubStance* vol. 36, no. 2, iss. 113 (2007): 30.

something of an “accident” across a long history of various modes of domination.⁸⁴ Therefore, if class struggle does not represent the underlying social motor of politics, as Marx considers it to be, it is because politics is the name of that which sets up this conflict between classes, as parts of society, in the first place.⁸⁵ Politics, in this view, is not the clash of interests, opinions or perspectives, but describes the process in which two opposing logics that count the parts of the community, that of equality and that of the police, are made to encounter one another in the form of a disagreement. The vehicle through which these two logics meet and intersect is the political subject. The political subject is something that happens, that comes into being and then falls away, provisional, local, episodic, transforming both the identity of the subject itself as well as its relations, limits and parameters as prescribed by the symbolic order of the police. This is why Rancière often prefers to speak of political “subjectivation” (*la subjectivation politique*), a term more inclined to draw its concept towards the very process in which one or many become a political subject.⁸⁶ It is precisely through this process of subjectivation that the principal agent of democracy’s being-against the police will manifest in political form.

In *Hatred of Democracy*, as we have seen, Rancière offers a more general account of democracy as “political” or “anarchic” government, government based

⁸⁴ Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” 35.

⁸⁵ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 18.

⁸⁶ The term *la subjectivation* will also be translated as “subjectification” and “subjectivization.” For purposes of consistency, I will be using political “subjectivation” throughout, modifying translations when necessary. This term should also not be confused with Foucault’s own concept of subjectivation which seeks to describe the subject that comes into being through its *subjection* to institutional or disciplinary practices or power relations.

on the absence of title or qualification. But in *Disagreement*, written a decade earlier, we encounter a somewhat different perspective. Here, democracy is formulated almost exclusively in terms of its relation to the police, or more specifically, in terms of the principal mechanism in which a given order of the police is effectively obstructed or suspended: “Democracy is more precisely the name of a singular disruption of this order of distribution of bodies as a community that we proposed to conceptualise in the broadest concept of the police. It is the name of what comes and interrupts the smooth working of this order through a singular mechanism of subjectivation.”⁸⁷ In this context, democracy is conceived, in somewhat narrow terms, as politics’ mode of subjectivation, the process in which an excluded or marginalised people, those previously unseen and unheard, abandon their allotted part or position, challenging the identities, categories and classifications of a particular police distribution, frustrating its basic symbolic representation of society. Democracy occurs when the sensory self-evidence of what is perceptible, intuitive, given in society is contested and called into question, when the basis of the natural correspondence between bodies, places, roles and functions is thrown back on its own inherent contingency. It reconfigures or redefines the dominant mode of perception operative in a social field. It draws the voices of those of no account, who have no right to speak, into a space of perceptibility. *A democratisation of perception*. This is not an inevitable process, whatever the conditions. Rancière maintains that the emergence of an emancipatory

87 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 99.

politics is neither necessary nor automatic; it requires a subject and it is only through the agency of this subject—its acts of dissensus—that politics comes into being in the form of democracy. Perhaps this represents one of *Disagreement's* most important theses. Democracy is the act of a subject. What makes an action political is not its object or location, but its form: the setting up of a dispute through a defiant demonstration of equality.⁸⁸ It is to initiate a controversy, a polemic, that contradicts the underlying assumptions of the police and renders new voices, new relations and new destinations possible. To become a political subject is to make oneself appear, to make oneself of some account, to impose oneself on those very spaces and times where one does not belong. Democracy begins with a new people occupying a new sphere of appearance. It is precisely the manifestation of this sphere and this people that undermines the dictates of a given distribution of the sensible.

But who is this political subject whose intermittent appearance, at different times, under different conditions, orients democracy against the police? Rancière's fifth thesis (*Ten Theses on Politics*) resolves that the subject of democracy is neither the collected members of the community, nor necessarily a specific social demographic unified by a shared experience or shared interest (for example, the working class). Rather, the political subject will be identified only as the supplementary part in relation to every count of the parts of the population.⁸⁹ Insofar as the police embodies the principle of *saturation*, a distribution of the sensible that

⁸⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁹ Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," 33.

structurally precludes lack and supplement, excess and remainder, the political subject represents the surplus subject in this saturated field of experience.⁹⁰ It is the manifestation of the uncoun ted, the invisible remainder become flesh, the part without part whose very appearance makes contentious the status of what is objectively given. Therefore, if democracy's political subject may be generally expressed as "the people," it is the people as supplement, as surplus or residue. Democracy occurs when this supplement is added to the symbolic constitution of the social rendering the established government of the sensible inherently problematic. Whereas the police concerns the configuration of perception, democracy concerns its reconfiguration: it adds something that was not there before.⁹¹ It produces a multiple that contradicts the very logic of the count of the police. This is precisely how Rancière understands acts of *dissensus*. Dissensus reveals a gap in the sensible, a miscount, an impropriety; it demonstrates that the total is not total, the whole is not whole. It introduces a wrong (*le tort*), a torsion or twisting of logics that would otherwise never meet: the logic of equality and the logic of the police.⁹² Consequently, expressed in terms of a surplus subject, an agent of dissensus, a manifestation of a wrong, the political subject will have no natural identity and no constant body. As soon as workers, women, people of colour deviate from their allotted place or position and emerge a political subject, everything that

90 Rancière and Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," 124.

91 Simons and Masschelein, "Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivation: Foucault with Rancière," 594.

92 Jacques Rancière and Kate Nash, "Post-democracy, Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Jacques Rancière," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* vol. 1, iss. 3 (1996): 175-6. Also see *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, chapter 2.

is thought to be intuitive about their identities is effectively denatured, forced out of its obviousness.⁹³ Emancipation means precisely this: *the escape from minority*.⁹⁴ Eluding the fixity of all identifiable classifications and determinations from class to gender to ethnicity, the political subject must therefore be conceptualised formally. The political subject is a floating subject, a fluctuating performer that no longer coincides with the original coordinates of its assigned place, role and function as distributed by the order of the police.⁹⁵ Instead, it paradoxically inhabits two worlds at once: the world of equality and the world of the police, the world where it is visible and the world where it is not, the world where it belongs to the community and the world where it remains a stranger. For Rancière, politics involves the intersection of these worlds, the demonstration of the existence of a common world with a shared language and a shared *aisthesis*.⁹⁶ Such a world may only come into being through conflict, through a certain violence to the symbolic, but it is precisely the invention of a common world, the sharing of a common stage, that allows arguments to be heard, polemical scenes to unfold and disputes to be carried out in a political fashion.

As I have argued throughout, politics is never simply conflict in itself. It is what modifies or reconfigures the relations of conflict; it is the conflict that makes conflict political. Workers, women, people of colour, politics requires a subject and it is only through the emergence of a subject that politics is initiated and set in

93 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 36.

94 Jacques Rancière, "The Uses of Democracy," *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 48.

95 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 89.

96 *Ibid.*, 27, 51-2. Also see his eighth thesis in "Ten Theses on Politics," and "The Uses of Democracy," 49-50.

motion. For Rancière, the name of this process of subjectivation, of becoming a subject, is *democracy*. But whereas politics will have but a single democratic form, democracy itself will witness many different actors, under various names, come to pass as its political agent. In part, it is for this reason that the identity of the political subject is destined to remain indeterminable. This is especially true in the modern era. Indeed, it is largely with respect to the increasing heterogeneity of the political subject that Rancière will draw the principal distinction between ancient and modern democracy. While ancient democracy witnessed the demos, the poor, those, as Aristotle explains, who have no share in government, open an arena of dispute largely played out in and for the public sphere, modern democracy, Rancière contends, experiences a proliferation of subjects whose acts of dissensus render litigious a vast range of objects at the most divergent regions of society.⁹⁷ Modern democracy will therefore be defined almost exclusively in terms of the multiplication of forms of subjectivation which itself multiplies the sites of disagreement. By contrast, Lefort will draw his own conceptual distinction between ancient and modern democracy with respect to the manner in which power is represented symbolically. While ancient democracy perceived power as belonging to no one, identified in the middle, between citizens and principally localised in a well defined public sphere, modern democracy, Lefort contends, experiences power as an *empty space*, occupied by a people that remain indeterminate and situated in a field with no such boundaries or limits.⁹⁸ Despite these theoretical variants, what

97 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 58-9.

98 Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" *Democracy and Political Theory*

both accounts appear to emphasise is the extent to which modern democracy effectively dislocates and extends the principal subject, object and location of politics. If we elaborate their very brief comments on this matter, both Rancière and Lefort appear to understand modern democracy to augment exponentially who the subject of democracy may be, the objects that democracy concerns and the spaces where democracy occurs. What is public and what is private, what constitutes a citizen, what determines who participates, to whom equality applies: in its modern incarnation, the solutions to these problems appear to shift and fluctuate at a far greater rate. What modern democracy challenges, what it contests and disputes, appears increasingly decentred and diversified, drawing politics into a vast spectrum of spheres of life that no doubt would have been quite foreign to the ancient Greek experience: economic production, the family, the role of women. But whereas Lefort's analysis will often consider this phenomenon against the backdrop of a symbolic horizon that renders the representation of "the people" radically indeterminate at an ontological level, Rancière's analysis will always return those unanticipated moments of subjectivation, the emergence of a subject whose emancipatory activity, however regional or occasional, itself opens up the representation of "the people" and perpetually modifies its meaning. If this process appears more fragmented or discontinuous in Rancière, it is because, unlike Lefort, he will associate no general symbolic order with democracy itself (as an asymbolic political form). Rather, the political subject always manifests against a symbolic

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 225-6. Also see Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 158.

order systematically organised and governed by the police.

So while democracy has always meant the *power of the people*, perhaps the lesson that modern democracy serves to underscore again and again is that the identity of “the people” is a question destined to remain unresolved in any absolute sense. Perhaps we should understand this irresolution as essential to the meaning of democracy itself. This will only further explain why Rancière must expound the political subject in formal terms. For although the subject of democracy is indeed “the people,” it is a people who will invariably adopt many different names. Ancient democracy may have transformed the class known only as “the demos” into the name of a political subject, a term of controversy and dispute, but according to Rancière, the demos merely represents the originary and most generic name for such a subject. Scattered across his writings, we encounter numerous examples of other such names drawn from history which have served a similar political function, even if those names are not typically associated with democracy in either its ancient or modern form. Nevertheless, it is through these names that the mechanism of subjectivation as a demonstration or verification of equality will be developed in greater detail.

- “Pleb.” Rancière will frequently recount an episode in Roman history reported by Livy often known as the secession of the plebeians. In 494 B.C.E., the plebs abandoned their place in the city and gathered *en masse* on the Aventine Hill demanding a treaty that would guarantee their formal

recognition in the republic. The patricians promptly replied that all negotiations were out of the question given that such an accord required something impossible for a class of men whose cries and screams were indicative only of the sufferings of exhausted or mistreated animals. They simply perceived no shared space, no shared language in which the plebs could be engaged on common grounds. Accordingly, rather than respond with violence and aggression, the plebs discovered their power to confront and dispute this claim with words alone. By resorting to dialogue, by demonstrating a certain equality, the plebs were able to distort the manner in which they, as a class, were perceived. Consequently, compelled to recognise the plebs as speaking beings rather than simply the “working parts” of the organic body of Rome, the patricians ultimately conceded and accepted their demands for the establishment of the plebeian tribunes. But more than the extension of citizenship, which by no means eradicated all existing inequalities, for Rancière, the real achievement of the plebeian secession was the recognition of the plebs themselves. Indeed, what Livy documents is the moment “pleb” emerges the name of a political subject.⁹⁹

- “Woman.” Rancière will also cite the example of French playwright and outspoken advocate of the rights of women Olympe de Gouges. Although De Gouges remained a staunch proponent of the revolution, her writings and

⁹⁹ Rancière largely reads the Plebeian secession through the work of Pierre-Simon Ballanche. See *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 23-6. Also see Martin Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 93-4.

relentless criticisms of the methods of the Jacobins would ultimately lead to her arrest and execution at the height of the reign of terror. Following her sentencing at her trial, De Gouges famously protested that if women are entitled to go to the guillotine, they are also entitled to go to the assembly. Her point is unequivocal: if women, excluded entirely from the business of government, properly belong to the private, domestic sphere of life, unqualified or unfit for participating in public affairs, how is it that they may simultaneously represent a threat to the cause of the revolution? Rancière will elaborate this blatant contradiction that De Gouges so elegantly evokes in terms of a disagreement, one in which the category of woman, affixed to an assigned role, function and place, is compromised by a profound demonstration of equality, a case of verification, a sharing of a common stage. By enacting her paradoxical status to the court—equal to men on the scaffold, not equal to men in the assembly—De Gouges was able to extract “woman” from the confines of its allotted position as a gender or identity and recast it the name of a subject with new visibility and new relations.¹⁰⁰

- “Proletarian.” We discover a similar case with the term “proletarian.” In Latin, *proletarii* simply means “prolific people,” those who merely produce (and reproduce) without name and without status. It thus provided a fitting name for the industrial labourers of the 19th century. As Rancière recalls, one

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 68. Also see Simons and Masschelein, “Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivation: Foucault with Rancière,” 594-6.

of its earliest and most notable uses in this sense was during the trial of revolutionary socialist Auguste Blanqui, charged with rebellion in 1832. When asked his profession by the magistrate, Blanqui simply replied “proletarian.” When met with objection, Blanqui responded brazenly that it is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labour deprived of political rights. So once again, we encounter something of a contradiction: for proletarian is indeed no profession in the sense of a proper occupation or trade and Blanqui himself, educated both in medicine and law, was certainly no typical worker. And yet, as Rancière demonstrates, what Blanqui’s statement forced the court to acknowledge is proletarian as a *class*. Since his archival work in the 1970s, Rancière has long rejected the proletariat as a distinct sociological entity, as a coherent social group, culture or *ethos*. Rather, as Blanqui testifies, it is the name those who do not count, those without rights, those without representation. It is not simply the general name of manual labourers or of workers collectively, but the name of a political subject, one that disturbs the meaning of “worker” and “labourer,” drawing them out of their obviousness, their natural place in society. Proletariat is the *politicisation* of a class, the name that distinguishes the working class as a political problem.¹⁰¹

■ “Jew.” Finally, there are also occasions when the name of a political subject

101 Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization.” *October* vol. 61: (Summer 1992): 60-1 and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 37-8. Also see Labelle, “Two Refoundation Projects of Democracy in Contemporary French Philosophy: Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Rancière,” 91-2.

remains entirely distinct from the identity of the group that adopts it and puts it forward as a political name. This was certainly the case when, during May '68, tens of thousands of French demonstrators marched through Paris chanting the slogan: "We are all German Jews" (*nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands*). Originally something of an anti-Semitic slight levelled against Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a prominent student organiser with German-Jewish heritage, "German Jew" was quickly reappropriated and universalised by the movement itself, clearly drawing on the still recent memory of the profound injustices associated with this precarious status in Nazi Germany. It was not a matter of identification, declaring all those in the streets victims or potential victims of the State. Nor was it a matter of exploiting the moral atrocities of the Holocaust by associating the conditions in France with that of the concentration camps. Far from a rhetorical strategy, for Rancière, what it signals is a process of subjectivation, one that allowed for a defiant political entity to espouse the cause of the Other: the Algerian, the worker, the poor. It was a way to discover a collective "we" that was not there before. "German Jew" was simply the name to assemble this "we" and to express this cause. Rather than a descriptive term intended to identify all those demonstrating in the streets, for Rancière, what it designates is an "impossible identification," functioning to declassify "Jew" a persecuted people or ethnic group and refashion it a name for an emergent political subject composed of a diverse body of workers, students and other

actors. In this sense, much like “pleb,” “woman” and “proletarian,” it is the name not of a people, class or demographic, but the name of a wrong, a gap, a miscount that identifies a surplus or residue in the count of the police.¹⁰²

Accordingly, political subjectivation should not be confused as the formula for an identity politics. For its struggle is not primarily one of identity, but of *recognition*.¹⁰³ Rancière maintains that politics is never simply an assertion of identity, but at the same time its disavowal: a refusal or denial of the function, role or place that one has been assigned. Marx clearly understands the proletariat, for example, as the name of the class that represents the dissolution of itself as a class.¹⁰⁴ The names of politics are the names of a wrong, a miscount, a misnomer. For this reason, there are no proper names for the political subject; they must be invented, borrowed, modified. If anything, this is a process of *declassification* or *disidentification*. When names become *political*, that is to say, when particular distributed identities stray from their allotted place, their inherent or natural station and emerge the names of the uncounted, the excluded, contradicting the count of the police, they shift to a space of subjectivation losing all reference to a sociological specificity and subsequently open to anyone.¹⁰⁵ If politics is not centred around an

102 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 59. Also see Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 57-8.

103 Deranty, “Jacques Rancière’s Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition,” 146-7.

104 Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 256.

105 See Jacques Rancière, Max Blechman, Anita Chari and Rafeeq Hasan, “Democracy, Dissensus and the Aesthetics of Class Struggle: An Exchange with Jacques Rancière,” *Historical Materialism* vol. 13, iss. 4 (2005): 290. This process is not dissimilar from what Deleuze will conceive as becoming-minoritarian (*devenir-minoritaire*). See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

identitarian self, it is because it always passes through the location of the Other (*heteron*) or the self as Other: the logic of subjectivation is always *heterological*.¹⁰⁶ The political subject is simply the form that binds the name of the Other to an axiomatic claim of equality (politics' only universal). This is true even for the subject of human rights, in which "human" corresponds not to the species as a whole or to a form of bare life, but appears a litigious name of the disenfranchised, the subaltern, those without part, which may be invoked by anyone to assert a fundamental equality.¹⁰⁷ Once again, this testifies to the underlying indeterminacy of human rights on which Lefort writes extensively.

Therefore, beyond his indispensable analysis of the archê, what Rancière contributes to a theory of democracy's against is the groundwork for a concept of the principal agent through which this against will be typically expressed: the political subject. Democracy cannot be thought in terms of institutions alone. It requires a subject and it is only through the agency of this subject that democracy's opposition to what it is against will be initiated and set in motion. This is what is essential to our study here. In his own analysis, Rancière explores this theme primarily in the context of the police. Drawing from Foucault, whose research serves to broaden our general formulation of government substantially, the police is indicative of a project of intervention, of social ordering, of implementing the

106 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 59-60.

107 Andrew Schaap, "Enacting the Right to Have Rights: Jacques Rancière's Critique of Hannah Arendt," *European Journal of Political Theory* vol. 10, no. 1 (January 2011): 23.

proper order of society. For Rancière, this operation has a symbolic dimension. The police is a regime of representation, a government of the sensible, an administration and management of what is visible, what is thinkable and what is possible. It not only concerns the partition of the social, the dividing up of parts and shares, but the very modes of perception in which those divisions and allocations are rendered intelligible. Extrapolated from a ubiquitous governmental technology particular to early modern Europe and identified as a formula generally applicable to various societies past and present, what Rancière understands as the police will inevitably take on many different forms. Nevertheless, although he certainly maintains that some orders of the police remain infinitely preferable to others, Rancière will offer no systematic historical or typological evaluation of these significant formal variations, but instead concentrates his analysis exclusively on the politics in which the police comes to be disrupted, suspended, modified. While the manifestation of such counter-powers do not go unnoticed in his own work, this is something Foucault himself will never adequately develop.¹⁰⁸

Hence, rather than a descriptive, historical or sociological analysis, Rancière offers a consistent theoretical perspective *against* the police. And yet, despite its more nuanced characterisation as a distribution of the sensible, Rancière is certainly not the first to outline a detailed theoretical opposition to the police in this manner. At the dawn of a new era that would witness the dominion of the absolutist State

108 See Simons and Masschelein, "Governmental, Political and Pedagogic Subjectivation: Foucault with Rancière," 603 and McSweeney, "Giving Politics an Edge: Rancière and the Anarchic Principle of Democracy," 124.

begin to fall into decline, this is a theme that extends across many of the major texts of classical liberalism where the limits of the State are routinely called into question and a new language of naturalism and non-interventionism is advanced.¹⁰⁹ But what is more unprecedented is a theory of an emancipatory politics that grounds a radical conception of democracy according to a definitive challenge to the police as a general state of society. Rancière's model of democracy is one of a democracy against the police, a democracy that calls into question the basis of a given social order and tests the limits of what is perceptible in society. This is what is entirely new. For Rancière, the conditions for democracy are nothing beyond the general order of the police itself. The police is at once its point of departure and its object of dispute. As we have seen, democracy undermines the police distribution by introducing new subjects, new names and new voices that were not there before. It initiates a disagreement over what it means to speak, what it means to be seen and what it means to have a part. By dislodging subjects from their "proper place," by demonstrating a certain equality, democracy may therefore be understood as the reinvention of a relation, the rearrangement of a territory and the reconfiguration of a sensible field. Democracy not only has the capacity to transform social relations, but the very manner in which we come to perceive one another, our basic interactions and the spaces that we inhabit in common. It is in this respect that Rancière's democracy against the police may be appreciated as a politics of aesthetics.

¹⁰⁹ See for example Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993) and John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

And while some readers of *Disagreement* find this account of democracy rather limited, ultimately content with a subversive politics that appears to only momentarily disturb the smooth working order of a given police order, what this familiar criticism often fails to consider is the larger perspective that orients the general framework of Rancière's critical project. From peasants to artisans to industrial labourers to the poor, the predominate figures and themes that populate Rancière's political works will testify to a broader critique of domination that from beginning to end is dedicated to a detailed examination of how the limits of what is political are perpetually challenged by those who are most excluded. And as an historical archivist as well as a theorist of politics, one thing that Rancière's extensive body of research will demonstrate as a whole is that emancipation is anything but a series of fleeting rebellious acts leading nowhere. In response to those critics of *Disagreement* Rancière thus refutes:

I don't have a vision of history as punctuated equilibrium, where things erupt at intervals and then lapse back into platitude. [...] I didn't mean to suggest that equality exists only on the barricades, and that once the barricades come down it's over, and we go back to listlessness. I am not a thinker of the event, of the upsurge, but rather of emancipation as something with its own tradition, with a history that isn't just made up of great striking deeds, but also of the ongoing effort to create forms of the common different from the ones on offer from the State [...].¹¹⁰

However fragmentary or intermittent, for Rancière, emancipation represents a protracted, enduring process worthy of the terms "history" and "tradition." Accordingly, his understanding of emancipation cannot be reduced to a science of

¹¹⁰ Jacques Rancière and Eric Hazan, "Democracies Against Democracy," Giorgio Agamben, et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 79-80.

isolated moments. Just as we will see with Abensour, the meaning of emancipation is bound to a perpetual struggle against strategies of inequality and modes of domination, some specific to modernity, some seemingly age-old. It is precisely in this context of a broader history or tradition of emancipation that Rancière's model of a democracy against the police must be situated. It is precisely in this context that we may consider Rancière's concept of democracy according to a broader theory of democratisation.

5

Model II: democracy against the State (Abensour)

In democracy the State as particular is only particular, and as universal it is the real universal; i.e. it is not something determinate set off against other contents. In the modern times the French have understood this to mean that in true democracy the political State disappears.

-Karl Marx

Democracy is the determinate institution of a conflictual space, a space against, an agonistic stage on which two antagonistic logics confront one another: the autonomisation of the State as form, and the life of the people as action, political action.

-Miguel Abensour

Rancière's democracy against the police theorises a democracy that opposes a general order of society in which the coordination and classification of the social is determined in advance. It disputes that women have a proper place, the working class an inherent function. In this view, what democracy rejects is the very aspiration of implementing the proper order of society, a productive, harmonious society that functions without interruption and without dispute. This is precisely the society that politics renders inconceivable. For Rancière, politics exists insofar as

singular forms of subjectivation open and reveal a gap in the symbolic order of the community. Accordingly, in this model, democracy's being-against will be expressed primarily through the manifestation of a political subject that challenges the prevailing government of the sensible via a defiant demonstration of equality. What may be extracted from Rancière's model, therefore, is the general postulate that the agents of democracy's against, its powers or forces, are in no way abstract or indeterminable, but embodied in the political acts of a subject. Even if Rancière's general account of the police is ultimately found to remain ambiguous or incomplete, this is what is indispensable to our concept of democracy here. Democracy is the story of how those who lack political agency come to have it. Before the name of a regime, before a set of institutions, democracy is the act of a subject. Traditionally this subject is known as the *demos*. Particularly apparent when his project is taken as a whole, far from a fleeting disturbance of the police order, Rancière will want to situate such political acts, as we concluded above, according to a broader history or tradition of emancipation.

And yet, of the two, perhaps it is Abensour who will establish this connection between democracy, emancipation and being-against in a more definitive manner. We have already explored Abensour's vivid interpretation of savage democracy as the emancipatory act of politics, but until now, we have largely only encountered Abensour as just that: an interpreter, an advocate, a reader of Lefort and Arendt. We now have the opportunity to examine Abensour's thought on democracy in its own right. While in many respects, Abensour's general

approach to the question of democracy may be seen to be initiated through an expressly Lefortian paradigm, at the same time, his concept of democracy reveals a decisive shift in emphasis from a form of political regime to a form of political action.¹ Abensour takes Lefort's familiar characterisation of democracy as an open, interminable political experience, for example, as a testament to its perpetual reinvention of forms of political action against various modes of domination in society. This is emblematic, no doubt, of Abensour's longstanding appeal to that *savage* dimension of Lefort's thought, a dimension that in no way restricts the construction of his own conception of democracy, but quite the opposite, helps propel that concept across new limits and boundaries. In this respect, with Abensour, we can witness Lefort's savage democracy, as an experimental strategy to liberate democracy in thought, very much put to use in a creative and productive way. In Abensour's work, democracy appears not as a legitimate means to govern another, but as an agency of transformation and democratisation in society. It is for this reason that his theses are often taken to parallel those of Rancière. For Abensour, democracy is, in essence, something other than regime. It is the distinct activity of the demos that opens up that unique political field in which conflict is able to unfold, new social bonds are able to be forged and the desire for freedom and autonomy is able to be expressed. As the form of collective action that seeks to institute inclusive, participatory and non-hierarchical models of social interaction, it binds a notion of social emancipation to that enduring political project to establish a

¹ James D. Ingram, *Radical Cosmopolitics: The Ethics and Politics of Democratic Universalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 199.

state of non-domination. To this vision of democracy, Abensour will at times give the name “insurgent” democracy, a deliberately polemical term that not only intends to mark out and distinguish his own concept of democracy from that of Lefort, but at the same time, to identify the “natural” target of what he understands as one of democracy’s most vital conflicts: the State itself.² Consequently, his reference to an insurgent democracy will at once seek to affirm two axioms:

First, that democracy is not a political regime but primarily an action, a modality of political agency, characterized by the irruption of the demos, or the people, onto the political stage in their struggle against those whom Machiavelli calls the *grandees* and for the establishment in the city of a state of non-domination. Second, that this political action is not confined to a particular moment but continues through time, always ready to spring up due to the obstacles encountered. It involves the birth of a complex process, where the social is instituted and the institution directed at non-domination, one permanently inventing itself to better perpetuate its existence and to defeat the counter-movements that threaten to annihilate it and to effect a return to a state of domination.³

This is the democracy that Abensour posits against the concentration of power, against the rigid hierarchies that permeate so much of our society, against the underlying logic of the *archê* and likewise, against the State. If Abensour sees democracy and the State as fundamentally antithetical, antagonistic and ultimately irreconcilable, it is because beyond its given apparatus or particular historical incarnation, he identifies the State-form as the constitution of the social abstracted from the political dimension of its very institution. For Abensour, the State

² See Miguel Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

³ Miguel Abensour, “Insurgent Democracy and Institution,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, xxiii-xxiv.

represents the alienation of the self-institution of the demos, the formal separation of the constitution of the social from the originary subject that institutes it. Democracy, conversely, is understood as the activity that opposes the autonomy of the State, that obstructs this abstraction and monopolisation of the political moment. Democracy is the struggle for the self-determination of the demos. It generates modes of association other than those mediated by the State, inventing new and inclusive ways of engaging collectively in a distinctively public space. It transforms, as it were, the “power over men” into a “power with and among men,” or invoking Spinoza, into the “power to act.”⁴ In this view, democracy’s *power of the people* appears as the power to resist the State, its form, its logic, summoning forth new and alternative possibilities of social organisation and social bonds. If Abensour appeals to the term *insurgent* to incite such a democracy, in part, it is because he regards the very idea of democracy to challenge what is most essential to the State itself.

Abensour’s model of democracy is thus explicitly expressed as a democracy *against*, a democracy that both discovers its origins and determines its orientation according to its immanent relation to a particular object which it must refute, oppose and ultimately seek to undermine. And yet, this is precisely the account of democracy that would give Marcel Gauchet cause, in a collection of interviews, to completely dismiss and discredit Abensour’s work as mere “revoltism,” as “irresponsible radicalism,” an “aesthetics of intransigence” leading to the

4 Miguel Abensour and Michel Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des “tous uns” : désir de liberté, désir d’utopie* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2014), 94.

“corruption of democracy.”⁵ In response to these charges by his former colleague and one time collaborator, Abensour would, in turn, pen an open letter that would only reaffirm his commitment to a notion of modern democracy that is not only born of a revolutionary moment, but whose very constitution remains indicative of an ongoing revolutionary impulse to confront and contest those very institutions and technologies that serve to obstruct its democratising initiatives, domesticate its savage forces and reconcile its broader objectives with those of the State:

democracy is not a crystallised form [...] that establishes an organisation of powers and rules of the game; it is rather a continuous movement, a political action that in its very manifestation works to undo the State-form [...] in order to replace it with its own, that of the sovereign people, by struggling against its mystificatory reconciliations and fallacious integrations. Democracy is the determinate institution of a conflictual space, a space against, an agonistic stage upon which two antagonistic logics confront one another: the autonomisation of the State as form, and the life of the people as action, political action.⁶

For Abensour, democracy is the name of that which sets up this essential opposition between the political activity of the demos and the principles of the State. It is precisely this “institution of a conflictual space, a space against” that concerns us here. It is precisely this *democracy against the State* that Abensour develops in what is often regarded as his most experimental text. Here, working primarily through the

5 Marcel Gauchet, *La condition historique* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 160. Also see James D. Ingram, “The Politics of Claude Lefort’s Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy,” *Thesis Eleven* vol. 87, iss. 1 (2006): 41.

6 Miguel Abensour, “Lettre d’un ‘révoltiste’ à Marcel Gauchet converti à la ‘politique normale’,” *Réfractations* no. 12, 2004: 164 as quoted in Ingram, “The Politics of Claude Lefort’s Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy,” 44. For a detailed comparison of the projects of Abensour and Gauchet as “students” of Lefort see Ingram’s article. For additional insights into Abensour’s polemical response to Gauchet see Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 180-1.

writings of the young Marx, Abensour offers a detailed, rather idiosyncratic analysis of what Marx postulates, in direct contradistinction to Hegel, as “true democracy,” the democracy in which the State itself, as an abstract or alien form, is said to disappear. Ultimately interpreted as the struggle for self-institution and self-determination in a defiantly public space, what is at stake for such a democracy, according to Abensour, is nothing less than the *autonomy of the political* itself. It is for this reason that Abensour, borrowing a phrase from J. G. A. Pocock, identifies Marx’s early work as a “Machiavellian moment.”⁷ Accordingly, it is Abensour’s democracy against the State that will serve as our second theoretical model to investigate democracy’s being-against.

Insofar as Abensour situates this democracy against the State according to the broader struggle against social domination, his writings will tend to frame the concept of democracy in terms of a continuous, multifaceted and ever-evolving emancipatory politics. Indeed, perhaps Abensour understands the meaning of emancipation as just that: not so much as the *state* of being liberated from domination, but much like Rancière, as the ongoing *process* or struggle against it. Consequently, emancipation can never be dissociated in Abensour’s work from an enduring project of democratisation, a project predominantly propelled by the persistent political activity of the demos against those forms of domination it encounters, confronts and contests in society. And yet, alongside and inextricably

⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

interwoven with such direct political activity, perhaps equally essential to Abensour's understanding of emancipation is the permanent *critique* of domination itself, the meticulous theoretical evaluation of both those archaic modes of domination that seem so universal throughout history as well as new strategies of domination that continually seem to appear with new institutions and new technologies.⁸ It is here where Abensour locates the political and emancipatory potential of philosophy. Despite having long acknowledged the considerable deficits of what Arendt understands as the "tradition of political philosophy" and hence, of the so-called "return to political philosophy" which he takes to merely announce the fashionable resurgence of its established practices and attitudes in his own day, Abensour will nevertheless affirm the importance of a rigorous philosophical analysis of those very problems which he deciphers as central to the matters of politics itself, namely, the essential relation between domination and emancipation in society. For Abensour, the value of philosophy is its unrivalled capacity to grapple with a series of fundamental political questions: *what is the nature of freedom? How do we distinguish between power, authority and domination? How do we distinguish between politics and the State? What does it mean to think politics in the context of a society against the State?*⁹ Drawing heavily from Lefort's lengthy interpretive study of Machiavelli, Abensour maintains that if political philosophy cannot be reduced to the management of the established order, it is

8 See Martin Breugh, "Critique de la domination, pensée de l'émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour," *Politique et Sociétés* vol. 22, no. 3 (2003) and Gilles Labelle, "La philosophie politique et le 'choix du petit' dans le travail de Miguel Abensour," *Monde Commun* vol. 1, no. 1 (automne 2007).

9 Miguel Abensour, "De quel retour s'agit-il?" *Les Cahiers de Philosophie* no. 18 (1994): 8.

because it remains indispensable to the critical reformulation of the meaning of emancipation in the “*here and now*” (*hic et nunc*).¹⁰ It is here where Abensour will dramatically distinguish his own approach from that of Rancière. While he commends Rancière’s contribution to the critique of domination in the form of the police, Abensour questions why Rancière must so vehemently distance such a critique from political philosophy itself, effectively relinquishing its critical and emancipatory potential on account of its traditional indictment of democracy and customary defence of various autocratic regimes.¹¹ Alternatively, more in the tenor of Arendt and Lefort, Abensour will opt to pit political philosophy against its very tradition in the attempt to exploit philosophy’s unequalled powers of critique, theoretical construction and interminable interrogation for renewed political purposes. Therefore, contrary to both the restoration of the practice of political philosophy in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle and the academic revival of a discipline that seemingly privileges the canonical history of political thought over the issues of the present day, Abensour calls for an engaged philosophical critique of social domination organised specifically to contribute to the emancipatory struggles of today.¹² Akin to Marx’s celebrated eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Abensour is compelled by a notion of philosophy that not only interprets the world, but longs to participate in changing it. This is not a philosophy that simply reflects upon the abstract topics of politics; this is a philosophy that must itself become

10 Miguel Abensour, “Philosophie politique critique et émancipation?,” *Politique et Sociétés* vol. 22, no. 3, (2003): 120.

11 Miguel Abensour, “Pour une philosophie politique critique?,” *Pour une philosophie politique critique* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2009), 286.

12 Patrice Vermeren, “Equality and Democracy,” *Diogenes* vol. 55, no. 4 (2008): 59.

political. While philosophy can never replace the necessity of direct political activity, what it can provide is a critical conceptual framework through which a spectrum of contemporary social and political problems may be navigated and evaluated in the larger emancipatory project towards a state of non-domination. To this end, as we have already encountered, Abensour will advance a *critico-utopian* or *critical political* philosophy.

It is possible to isolate and identify three facets of Abensour's proposed model of political thought: a critical political philosophy is one that maintains a tenacious orientation towards social emancipation, offers a detailed critical analysis of the relations, institutions and technologies of domination and never obscures the vital distinction between domination and politics itself.¹³ As demonstrated in a series of closely related essays, Abensour formulates the basis of his critical political philosophy through a unique intersection of the most constructive elements of critical theory and political philosophy while avoiding what he understands as the many pitfalls that plague both theoretical types. On the one hand, while Abensour discerns critical theory (Frankfurt School) to contain a rich, comprehensive socio-critical evaluation of modern systems of authority that is in no way limited to a Marxist theory of economic exploitation, at the same time, it appears to suffer from a curious silence on the nature of political liberty itself, as if it can envisage emancipation only in terms of a freedom from politics altogether. On the other hand, while Abensour regards more traditional examples of political

¹³ Abensour, "Pour une philosophie politique critique?," 267.

philosophy (presumably Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Rousseau, etc.) as more inclined to consider experimental scenarios of alternative political constitutions, even if only ideal or imagined constructions, at the same time, it often appears incapable of conceiving political liberty outside the context of a completely unified sovereign space that not only mysteriously lacks any acknowledgement of social domination, but the inevitable conflict and division that may threaten to disturb its serene tranquillity. Accordingly, the passage through the crossroads between critical theory and political philosophy must carefully navigate two paradigms simultaneously: a “catastrophic” vision of domination indicative of a total domination lacking any conceivable opening for political transformation or means of escape and an “irenic” vision of politics indicative of a politics that not only neglects or conceals the theme of domination entirely, but the very conflict and division that remains so essential to the meaning of politics itself.¹⁴ Therefore, through a series of delicate manoeuvres, Abensour will distinguish a critical political philosophy as the philosophy that locates the very condition of emancipation precisely in the political conflict against social domination itself. Although he applauds the political works of Arendt and Lefort as prime examples of philosophies that successfully avoid the hazards of both paradigmatic tendencies, Abensour discovers something of a rare forerunner of the critical political thinker with none other than Machiavelli himself. It is with Machiavelli, Abensour contends, that we encounter the first traces of a political theory able to identify the “cradle of political liberty” in the very context of the

14 Ibid., 294. Also see Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des “tous uns”*: *désir de liberté, désir d’utopie*, chapter 6.

struggle of the people against the dominance of the ruling classes.¹⁵ Contrary to the still prevailing views of Machiavelli as the prototypical “realist” (Croce) or quite simply “teacher of evil” (Strauss), Abensour regards Machiavelli as something of a political educator who has the unique ability to help us rethink the nature of politics anew.¹⁶ A great admirer of the tremendous achievement of Lefort’s *Le travail de l’oeuvre*, beyond the opposing architectonics of the republic and the principality, Abensour reads Machiavelli to uncover something of the basic ontological status of politics itself: rather than identify the roots of political liberty in the unity and harmony of the well ordered city, drawing from the experience of Rome, Machiavelli demonstrates that it is in fact social division, conflict, discord—particularly the clash of opposing classes or social groups—that constitutes the essence of an intrinsically contingent and unstable political field.¹⁷ This is the basis of Abensour’s allusion to the “originary division of the social” that we encountered in chapter 3. Much like Aristotle, Machiavelli tends to approach the general question of the social through the seemingly universal division between rich and poor, the few and the many, the rulers and the ruled. And yet, beyond the clash of these two competing socio-economic groups, in both *The Discourses* and *The Prince*, Machiavelli will relate this division to a more underlying conflict between

15 Abensour, “Philosophie politique critique et émancipation?,” 137 and “Pour une philosophie politique critique?,” 311-13.

16 Martin Breugh, “From a Critique of Totalitarian Domination to the Utopia of Insurgent Democracy: On the ‘Political Philosophy’ of Miguel Abensour,” *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Postwar France*, Martin Breugh, Christopher Holman et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 240.

17 See Abensour’s comments in “Sur le chemin de Machiavel,” *Pour une philosophie politique critique*. Also see Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), Part 3, chapter 3.

two distinct psychological types (*umori*): the grandees' desire to command and dominate and the people's desire not to be dominated.¹⁸ Note that the implicit orientation of these opposing humours or ambitions are in no way equivalent. While one class is defined by its inclined disposition towards social dominance and ascendancy, the other simply expresses a negation. Perhaps a uniquely Machiavellian conception of democracy could be said to begin here: with the problem of how to formally institute the desire *not to be dominated*. Regardless, it is precisely this irreducible conflict of the people against the indissoluble threat of oppression—a conflict which extends well beyond Marx's materialist conception of a historically resolvable class struggle—that Machiavelli identifies as the source and origin of the liberty and “good laws” of the Roman republic. It is for this reason that the Florentine secretary ultimately identifies the people, rather than the wealthy few, as the rightful guardians of liberty.¹⁹ Consequently, it is against the backdrop of Machiavelli, or at least a Lefortian interpretation of Machiavelli, that Abensour will frame his construction of a critical political philosophy specifically designed to conceptualise the emancipatory dimension of social conflict integral to democratic politics. For as we saw in his essay on savage democracy, for Abensour, democracy implies just that: not only the recognition, but the *elaboration* of the originary division of the social, the affirmation, investment and political expression of social conflict as the “originary source of an ever renewed invention of liberty.”²⁰

18 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 116 and *The Prince* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 39.

19 Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, 116.

20 Miguel Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 105.

From Machiavelli to Arendt and Lefort to the Frankfurt School to more traditional examples of political philosophy, Abensour assembles his proposed model of political thought from a broad range of sources. And yet, in addition to this rather unique amalgamation of theoretical tools at his disposal, perhaps Abensour would qualify that a critical political philosophy only achieves the height of its emancipatory potential when it renders its critique *utopian* in form. Although the concept of utopia understandably acquires a rather contentious status in 20th century social and political theory, it nevertheless remains a prominent motif across much of Abensour's work from the very beginning.²¹ If we cut across his many writings that touch upon this theme, Abensour argues that utopian literatures (political, literary or otherwise) cannot ultimately be appropriated as blueprints or programmes for the ideal society; they present no specific goals to be achieved, places to be discovered or fantasies to be realised.²² Rather than the promise of paradise, rather than a vision of some sheltered, static, harmonious existence, what interests Abensour about utopia, more structurally, is precisely what it can do to political thought: how it can shift our perspective, how it can redirect our orientation, how it can inform our desire. Particularly in his earlier work, much of Abensour's study of utopia is centred around the thesis that utopia has the capacity to both inspire and educate an emancipatory desire.²³ By opening up the possibility

21 Utopia, for example, is the principal topic of Abensour's doctoral thesis "Les Formes de L'Utopie Socialiste-Communiste" completed under the supervision of Gilles Deleuze in 1973.

22 Breaugh, "From a Critique of Totalitarian Domination to the Utopia of Insurgent Democracy: On the 'Political Philosophy' of Miguel Abensour," 245.

23 See Christine Nadir's helpful essay "Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. Le Guin," *Utopian Studies* vol. 21, no. 1 (2010). Also see Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 113-16.

of a world other than what is, by constructing a new relation between the *actual* and the *possible*, utopias can disrupt the closure of the present and provoke a restless, revolutionary appetite for change. For Abensour, utopias remind us that the world is not fixed, not determinate, not absolute. Accordingly, they can function to emancipate the imagination, motivate political action and foster a “stubborn impulse toward liberty and justice.”²⁴ Far from a sublimated expression of wish-fulfilment, the concept of utopia can therefore be taken as a symbol of hope in politics, as the desire for a better world than the one we have today. In this respect, as the perspective that adopts a critical relation to the present in the hopes of a better future to come, what Abensour calls the *utopian* will be found to resemble what Nietzsche calls the *untimely*.

Of particular interest to Abensour is a distinct tendency in modern utopian thought that he often designates the *new utopian spirit* (associated primarily with William Morris, Pierre Leroux, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas).²⁵ After the catastrophic failure of the 1848 revolutions, Abensour detects a decisive shift in the tone of utopian literature that would extend well into the 20th century experience of totalitarianism itself. Introspective, sceptical, self-critical, this new mode of utopian thought would not only recognise, but incorporate the criticisms and suspicions that came to surround the utopian movement into its very concept of utopia itself, shattering its mythology and

24 Miguel Abensour, “Persistent Utopia,” *Constellations* vol. 15, iss. 3 (2008): 407.

25 See Miguel Abensour, “L’histoire de l’utopie et le destin de sa critique,” *Textures* no. 6/7 (1973) and no. 8/9 (1974).

refining its uses.²⁶ Perhaps most important for a critical political philosophy, characteristic of this new utopian spirit is the persistent critique of how the desire for emancipation so often turns into its opposite, how the utopian dream, as it were, so often collapses into an authoritarian nightmare. For Abensour, this phenomenon remains one of the prevailing political problems of our times. It is precisely for this reason that he turns to utopian thought. For it is the first task of the new utopian spirit, according to Abensour, to break the circle of this “dialectic of emancipation,” to place utopia against itself, to at once extract its political and emancipatory potential, to draw out its revolutionary desire, while at the same time instructing this desire in the risks of the utopia promise, thereby fashioning utopia into a critical tool and preventing its concept from settling into a model for society to simply implement, realise or reproduce. What remains is the idea of utopia in pure form (as a *no-place* (*ou-topos*), perhaps this is already inscribed in Thomas More’s original concept from the start). By voiding itself of content—specific goals, designs, destinations—utopia thus returns a strategy of critique, offering a critical evaluation of both the conditions of our own society, as well as the desire for those conditions to be otherwise. This is precisely what interests Abensour. Utopias offer no solutions, no explanations, but represent a critical *displacement of what is* in thought, inviting us to imagine the possibility of a radical alterity of the *here and now*.²⁷ As Deleuze will put it, the concept of utopia binds the critique of the present

26 Abensour, “Persistent Utopia,” 415. Also see Breugh, “From a Critique of Totalitarian Domination to the Utopia of Insurgent Democracy: On the ‘Political Philosophy’ of Miguel Abensour,” 247.

27 Abensour, “Persistent Utopia,” 407, 418.

milieu to an absolute deterritorialisation of thought. Consequently, for Deleuze: “it is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point.”²⁸

Therefore, as the critique of our own time, as the push towards the different, the possible, the otherwise, we may very well detect a certain *against* within the structure of utopia itself. If we follow Abensour’s analysis, perhaps the utopian experience could ultimately be described as one of estrangement; it generates a certain distance, assumes a critical perspective, calls into question the status of the existing state of affairs.²⁹ Accordingly, utopia could be seen to initiate a mode of political thought oriented against what is often taken as simply given in society. For essential to the utopian imagination is the capacity think otherwise, to resist the present, to adopt a critical relation to what is. *Utopia is the political expression of thinking against*. Although seldom a topic of utopian studies and rarely explored, this remains an indispensable dimension of utopian thought. As soon as utopia breaks with a representation of a distant mythical paradise completely divorced from our present experience and collides with the reality of our social conditions as an instrument of critique, utopia will find expression in the distinctive form of an against. Perhaps it is here where Abensour discovers its true political potential. Perhaps it is here where we will discover its connection with democracy. One of the predominant themes across Abensour’s work is the precise relationship between

28 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 99. Also see Eugene W. Holland, “The Utopian Dimension of Thought in Deleuze and Guattari,” *Arena Journal* no. 25/26 (2006).

29 Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, 119.

utopia and democracy, a problem that is ceaselessly being worked out over the course of a series of writings.³⁰ While Abensour clearly identifies both utopia and democracy as examples of emancipatory projects, one at the level of thought, the other at the level of a social collective, perhaps their most pronounced point of intersection must ultimately be located here: with the against itself. Just as utopia represents a distinct mode of thought oriented against the conditions of the present and desires their transgression, democracy represents a distinct political activity oriented against the relations of domination and strives for their transformation. Hence, perhaps democracy could be said to be utopian insofar as it demonstrates the capacity to think against the conditions of the present and utopia could be said to be democratic insofar as it demonstrates a desire for a more participatory, more egalitarian society. Although Abensour does not seek to synthesise or assimilate utopia and democracy, but to hold their intersection perpetually in tension, one drawing from the other,³¹ this at least provides one response to that enduring question he regards as so essential to modern political thought: *how to at once democratise utopia and utopianise (utopianiser) democracy?*³²

Therefore, just as we were able to locate a *savage* dimension of Abensour's concept of democracy, opening up that concept and pushing its interpretation towards its most radical point, perhaps we will likewise detect a distinct *utopian*

30 Consider for example Abensour's more recent "Utopie et démocratie," *Pour une philosophie politique critique*. Also see Paul Mazzocchi's insightful essay "Excavating Abensour: The Dialectics of Democracy and Utopia at a Standstill," *Constellations* vol. 22, iss. 2 (June 2015).

31 Martin Breugh, "Le lien social entre utopie et démocratie," *Critique de la politique. Autour de Miguel Abensour*, eds. Anne Kupiec and Étienne Tassin (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2006), 91.

32 See Abensour, "Utopie et démocratie," 350 as well as Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des "tous uns": désir de liberté, désir d'utopie*, 381. Also see Nadir, "Utopian Studies, Environmental Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. Le Guin," 28.

dimension of that concept as well. For although utopia can provide no coherent picture of the form of society that democracy inevitably seeks to create, if we follow Abensour, it does very much embody the anatomy of the against that we have found to be so imperative to democracy itself. Emancipatory, savage, utopian, this is the concept of democracy that Abensour's critical political philosophy ventures to formulate. This is the democracy that he ultimately posits against the State. And yet, in addition to savage democracy and utopian thought, the background to Abensour's theory of democracy includes another important facet yet to be considered, namely, the source of its more comprehensive position against the State itself. A decade before his meditation on Marx's "true democracy," this is something that will first be encountered in a highly original critique of the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

The State, its origin, form and function, as well its position in the history of political thought, is a problem that Abensour will initially approach via the anthropology of Pierre Clastres. In an important essay recently translated as "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres,"³³ Abensour will appeal to Clastres as a means to resist the widespread custom of political philosophy to represent the nature of society as an experience of endless strife and instability which itself necessitates the supremacy of the State as a separate, overarching power, a custom that Abensour finds particularly emblematic of Hobbes' *Leviathan*.³⁴ As Abensour demonstrates,

33 Originally included in the commemorative volume edited by Abensour, *L'esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

34 Miguel Abensour, "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres," *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Postwar France*, 94. For further elaboration see Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des "tous uns": désir de liberté, désir d'utopie*, chapter 3.

this counter-Hobbesian tendency that extends across Clastres' work (perhaps most explicit in *Archaeology of Violence*), can be taken to refute and even reverse many of the English philosopher's most underlying assumptions about societies, the State and societies without States. From Hobbes to Engels to many of his own contemporaries in the field of political anthropology, Clastres' work highlights modern political thought's profound inability to approach those societies past and present that lack a State from any perspective other than that of State societies themselves.³⁵ Perhaps this is most apparent with Hobbes himself. As is well known, Hobbes' contractualism moves to establish the necessity of the State by virtue of its juxtaposition with its supposed opposite: the state of nature. Infamously defined as the time of perpetual war of "every man against every man," the state of nature (which Hobbes would occasionally associate with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas) is described as a condition marked precisely by the *absence* of social institutions, law and justice, peace and security, a condition in which human life, plagued by constant danger and fear, is destined to remain "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."³⁶ Therefore, beyond the general distinction between instituted society and this rather mythical state of nature, for Abensour, Hobbes can be read to set up an even more dramatic opposition: that of the absolute sovereignty of the State and the permanent state of war.³⁷ Unifying the body politic in the singular will of the sovereign, Hobbes expounds the State as the formal transcendence of the

35 Abensour, "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres," 90-1.

36 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Parts One and Two* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), 106-7.

37 Abensour, "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres," 100.

primal conditions of war; it is what abolishes, suppresses and overcomes the natural causes of division, conflict and discord consequential of human nature. This is precisely the narrative of the State that Abensour seeks to overturn. This is precisely his interest in Clastres. As Abensour illustrates, Clastres' extensive research on primitive societies in South America may be encapsulated by three theses, all of which Abensour will frame as contrary to Hobbes in nature: 1) primitive societies, that is, societies without States, are indeed societies nonetheless; 2) the political institution of such societies is established not through the unifying principles of the State, but through war; 3) war is not the inevitable condition of *every man against every man* indicative of a brutish state of nature, but a specific political campaign of Stateless societies aimed against the emergence of the State itself.³⁸ Hence, Clastres' "Copernican revolution" or radical reversal of the Hobbesian paradigm may be expressed accordingly: if Hobbes posits the State against war, Clastres posits war against the State.³⁹ Indeed, over the course of his fieldwork, Clastres comes to understand war in this context neither as the condition of savage people in their natural state (Hobbes), nor as the breakdown of exchange relations among tribes (Levi-Strauss), but as the primary strategy of primitive societies to at once generate social bonds, collectively retain the social formation of their homogeneous, indivisible communities (without hierarchy, coercion or formal division between rich and poor, ruler and ruled) and to ward off the perpetual threat of the appearance

38 Ibid., 101-2.

39 Ibid., 111. Also see Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des "tous uns": désir de liberté, désir d'utopie*, 71.

of a unitary, autonomous authority that remains external to the community itself.⁴⁰ For Clastres, primitive societies are thus societies organised against the State. This is the basis of their politics. As a strategy to illustrate the logic of democracy's own *being-against*, I have already implicitly made an argument for the analogous structure of the against found both in primitive societies and democracy alike,⁴¹ but in his own work, Abensour appeals to Clastres for a different reason. With implications extending well beyond the immediate framework of the Hobbes-Clastres debate, by turning to Clastres to ground a substantive position against Hobbes, Abensour discovers a way to effectively disturb what he identifies more generally as the paradigm of "State thought" (*pensée de l'État*) so pervasive across the tradition of political philosophy itself.⁴² Indeed, working through those very counter-Hobbesian themes in Clastres themselves, Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, will reflect upon philosophy's strange fixation with the State over the course of its long history. Not only does political philosophy tend to centre its analysis around the relations of the State (king and subject, sovereign and people, governor and governed), it also appears to organise its very models of thought around the terms of the State itself: *its* principles, *its* mechanisms, *its* goals. Thus, in both thought and analysis, political philosophy, they argue, is inclined to adopt the perspective of the State. It props itself up with the State, draws from its authority, even fashions itself after the State's own image (Plato's philosopher-

40 Abensour, "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres," 104-5.

41 In chapter 3 above.

42 Breaugh, "Critique de la domination, pensée de l'émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour," 56.

rulers). In exchange, philosophy supplies the State its rationality, its universality, its *raison d'être*. The State is presented as the most rational and harmonious organisation of a community, the greatest freedom, a moral force. Consequently, anticipating Abensour, Deleuze and Guattari understand the history of political philosophy predominately as a history of State thought, this bizarre symbiosis between philosophy and the State perhaps reaching its apex with Hegel (in which the State is expressed as a historical manifestation of *absolute spirit*).⁴³ Hence Abensour's turn to Clastres. Beyond the anthropological argument, Abensour invokes Clastres in the attempt to liberate political thought from the centrality of the State, to call into question this entire history of State thought from Plato to Hobbes to Hegel, a philosophy in service of the State, its underlying supposition that the State is not only inherently legitimate, but the necessary, inevitable and most desirable form of human coexistence. In so doing, Abensour ventures to rethink the status of the State itself, to disentangle politics from the State and following Clastres, to put forward a model of politics in opposition to the State. For regardless of its historical incarnation, as the formal separation of the organs of power from the whole community, the State remains for Abensour an instrument of domination, a mode of coercion and exclusion in society. It is here, interestingly, where he will encounter resistance from Lefort.

In his own assessment, Lefort finds Clastres' general theory of the State

43 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 374-6. Following Clastres, Deleuze and Guattari will organise their own political philosophy in terms of the "war machine" against the State apparatus.

rather one dimensional and limited in scope. Although he accepts many of Clastres' basic postulates of primitive societies, Lefort rejects that the State may be theorised as transcendent or "detached" from an otherwise integrated and undivided social body. What Clastres ultimately fails to provide, he contends, is a sufficient account of both what determines legitimate and illegitimate authority within society as well as its symbolic dimension outside of it. For this reason, Lefort finds no reason to accept Clastres' basic conception of the State as it supposedly manifests in tribal communities as its universal form. While Clastres never claims that all State societies suffer from one and the same oppression, the eternal risk of the mutual exclusivity of primitive and State societies, according to Lefort, is that it inadvertently functions to render all forms of the State equivalent. The State, Lefort claims, possesses no such uniformity. The State, as it appears in the totalitarian society and the democratic society, for example, is not the same State. Consequently, contrary to Abensour, Lefort will reject that the State may be epitomised by coercion and repression absolutely. For Lefort, this only obscures its many nuances.⁴⁴ As a result, perhaps this explains why Abensour's theory of a democracy against the State will move to distance itself from Lefort somewhat, concluding that Lefort's concept of democracy ultimately remains too bound up with law and the State, its continuing struggle for new rights and more inclusion merely serving to legitimate and expand the State's very authority.⁴⁵ And yet, at the

44 See Claude Lefort, "Dialogue with Pierre Clastres," *Writing: The Political Test* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). This essay also originally appeared in Abensour's edited volume *L'esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique*. Also see Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 94-98.

45 Abensour, "Of Insurgent Democracy," xxxii. Also see Mazzocchi, "Excavating Abensour: The Dialectics of

same time, perhaps Abensour's criticism itself risks obscuring Lefort's own many nuances. In one of his last published essays "Nation et souveraineté," Lefort may be interpreted as offering a final meditation on how we may ultimately unravel an analysis of politics from that of the State.⁴⁶ Indeed, although it is true that much of Lefort's more descriptive political analysis of the democratic society does indeed retain a place for the State, at the same time, does it not also provide us a way to think democracy outside and beyond the State itself?⁴⁷ Could even the most uncompromising demands of a *savage* democracy really be reconciled with a State system as Abensour eventually suggests? Almost appearing to anticipate such objections, Lefort writes: "It is often said that the power of the State is increasing as a result of these new demands, but the extent to which it is being challenged tends to be forgotten."⁴⁸ Moreover: "Such demands are rooted in the awareness of right. However substantial they may be, and whatever changes they might introduce into the system of managing enterprises and into every sphere of administration, they do not seek to be resolved by the action of State power. They stem from a domain that the State cannot occupy."⁴⁹ Is Abensour guilty here of forgetting those moments in Lefort that serve to challenge the sovereignty of the State, that locate the essence of democracy in a domain well beyond its grasp? Regardless, what remains clear

Democracy and Utopia at a Standstill," 293.

46 See Claude Lefort, "Nation et souveraineté," *Le temps présent: Écrits 1945-2005* (Paris: Belin, 2007).

47 Marc G. Doucet, "Thinking Democracy Beyond Regimes: Untangling Political Analysis from the Nation-State," *Claude Lefort: Thinker of the Political*, ed. Martin Plot (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2013), 170.

48 Claude Lefort, "Human Rights and the Welfare State," *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 43.

49 Claude Lefort, "Politics and Human Rights," *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 264.

enough is that it is not Lefort who is the source of Abensour's concept on the State, but Clastres. If Abensour finds Lefort's treatment of the State dangerously ambiguous, Clastres' political anthropology provides a more uncompromising picture of what is most essential to the State-form itself. Both in philosophy and in politics, Clastres helps Abensour to think *against* the State. This will prove essential to his concept of democracy.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, State thought reaches its highest point with Hegel, then perhaps it is quite fitting that Abensour cultivates his mature philosophy of democracy not with Lefort primarily, but with a young Marx defiantly opposed to Hegel's speculative theory of the State. In 1843, after the suppression of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, the liberal journal for whom he had been writing since the completion of his doctoral thesis, Marx took the opportunity to revisit and reevaluate Hegel's political thought. The result was a lengthy manuscript in which he prepared a paragraph by paragraph critique of the final section of the *Philosophy of Right* devoted to the question of the State. Although abandoned unpublished, only appearing in 1927, this critique would showcase both Marx's emerging humanism as well as his increasing distance from the Hegelian roots which he would so often be associated. At the heart of the manuscript, Marx challenges the cogency of Hegel's abstract State and by reversing his very logic, arrives at the position that with "true democracy" (*wahre demokratie*) the State itself disappears. This forms the basis of Abensour's exegetical volume *Democracy Against the State*, a detailed study that may function at once as a monograph on the

political thought of the young Marx before his so-called “economic turn” and as a broader philosophical contribution to the theory of democracy itself, one that does not fail to locate the *against* very much at its centre.

While Abensour’s text does not seek to overturn or contradict established Marxist scholarship, the general framework through which he approaches the young Marx will be found to be entirely unique. Drawing from Pocock’s landmark study which itself circumvents a predominant State thought tracing an alternative, republican paradigm of modern political thought from Florentine humanism to the American Revolution by way of Machiavelli and James Harrington, Abensour identifies Marx as a “Machiavellian moment,” situating his early writings according to a vibrant republican tradition of civic humanism and secular political inquiry.⁵⁰ It is this Machiavellian moment that directs Abensour’s study from beginning to end. Contrary to Althusser, it is not Gramsci that provides the essential link between Marx and Machiavelli.⁵¹ Even when Lefort offers his own reflections on the parallels between the two—the decisive break with idealist philosophy, the denunciation of a distinctively apolitical Christian morality—he will likewise rely on Gramsci’s “Notes on Machiavelli” as his initial point of departure.⁵² Rather, Abensour detects something of Machiavelli’s critical political inquiry within Marx’s very writings. Although he does not suggest that Marx draws explicitly from

50 In addition to Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*, Lefort’s *Le travail de l’oeuvre* undoubtedly remains a second major source for Abensour’s uniquely “Machiavellian” reading of Marx. See Farhang Erfani, “Fixing Marx with Machiavelli: Claude Lefort’s Democratic Turn,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* vol. 39, no. 2 (May 2008): 201.

51 See Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 1999).

52 See Claude Lefort, “Reflexions Sociologiques sur Machiavel et Marx: La Politique et le Réel,” *Les formes de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio-Essais, 2000).

Machiavelli himself (throughout this early period Marx references Spinoza far more than Machiavelli), Abensour will maintain nevertheless that Marx's political convictions and philosophical analyses reveal a general perspective consistent with the spirit of a modern republicanism epitomised by the political thought of Machiavelli. What are the markers of such a republicanism worthy of the name "Machiavelli?" Once again, it is not a question of realism. As Abensour outlines in the opening pages of the text, modern republican thought initiates a civic humanism that recentres the human being as a self-determining historical subject and political actor. It rehabilitates the ancient virtue of *vita activa* advocating the active participation of citizens in the public affairs of the city. Refusing to deduce politics either from theology or morality, liberating the *res publica* from the bonds of the theological-political, it identifies the political realm as *something in itself*, as something worldly, historical, contingent, rendering the organisation of society and the institutions of government both susceptible to crisis and available to modification. Against the tradition of Augustine, it therefore reorients the problems of politics away from the promise of the heavenly city of God, fastening them firmly in the present, grounded in the historical conditions of the social however rife with conflict and division. Perhaps most importantly, as best demonstrated by Machiavelli himself, modern republican thought expressly revives a philosophical tradition of radical questioning that reconsiders the very exercise of political thinking itself: *how are we to think political affairs? What are the conditions for a comprehensive and assiduous political inquiry? What is the status of the political*

itself? *What is specific to the politics of modernity?*⁵³ In his introductory essay to the English edition of *Democracy Against the State*, Max Blechman regards Abensour's recourse to the Machiavellian moment to function as something of a test for Marx's thought.⁵⁴ Indeed, not only does Abensour's approach give prominence to a Marx that can in no way be said to be ideologically bound to a metaphysics of history or underlying economic foundation of society, it uncovers a Marx who has the capacity to offer great insight into the object of politics itself: the self-determination of the demos, the institution of political equality and what he calls more generally in *On the Jewish Question* "human emancipation."⁵⁵ In his critique of Hegel, this is precisely what Marx associates with true democracy.⁵⁶ Hence, by reading the young Marx according to a rich tradition of modern republican thought, Abensour is able to bind a sustained meditation on the nature of the political to a rather unconventional concept of democracy as human emancipation, a democracy that Abensour understands not only as a battle against the State, but as a battle for the autonomy of the political itself.

In this respect, *Democracy Against the State* will resist an interpretation that limits its objectives to a mere commentary on Marx, its underlying theses clearly a testament to its author's broader pursuit of a concept of democracy that can in no way be restricted to Marx's youthful criticism of Hegel. The validity of Abensour's

53 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 2-8.

54 Max Blechman, "To Think Emancipation Otherwise," *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, x.

55 Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 234.

56 For a more extensive survey of Marx's concept of democracy beyond the 1843 *Critique* see Vasilis Grollios, "Marx and Engels' Critique of Democracy: The Materialist Character of their Concept of Autonomy," *Critique* vol. 39, no. 1 (2011).

conclusions about democracy, therefore, should not be evaluated solely on the merits of his hermeneutical strategies. While his interviews repeatedly pay tribute to Marx's 1843 *Critique* as a watershed moment in his own theoretical investigation of democracy,⁵⁷ what Abensour discovers in Marx is something he undoubtedly holds to have a far wider significance for an understanding of democracy itself. Certainly, a theory of a democracy against the State does not ultimately rely upon Marx. For Abensour, Marx simply provides a compelling political philosophical passage through which it may be encountered. It is this encounter that Abensour's volume ventures to explore.

By any account, the evolution of Marx's thinking in the 1840s is nothing short of astonishing. In order to isolate and identify this purported Machiavellian moment in Marx—a moment that would prove to be very momentary indeed—Abensour traces the development of his early political thought from the 1842 *Rheinische Zeitung* articles to the pivotal 1843 writings (particularly the momentous critique of Hegel that uncovers the autonomy of the political bound to a figure of true democracy) to the more widely scrutinised *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of the following year (in which, according to Abensour, the analysis of the political would be first eclipsed by the centrality of the economic, a theme which would largely dominate Marx's thought until the events of the Paris Commune nearly thirty years later). If we follow Abensour's reading, inspired by

57 See Abensour's remarks in Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des "tous uns": désir de liberté, désir d'utopie*, chapter 5 and Miguel Abensour, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Rancière, "Instances démocratiques," *Vacarme* vol. 48 (été 2009).

the example of the French revolution, the *Rheinische Zeitung* articles assail the Prussian monarchy as an antiquated relic of the *ancien régime*, ultimately appealing to a notion of the “rational State” emancipated from the vestiges of both religion and absolutism as the guardian of general interest and basis and centre of modern, secular political life. Here, therefore, it is the State, purged of its theological dimension, that is identified and invested as the emancipatory site of politics. By Abensour’s own account, such a position undoubtedly testifies to what Lefort could very well diagnose as a larger fissure in the premodern theological-political symbolic, facilitating not only a new political discourse, but an entirely new representation of politics itself.⁵⁸ But by 1843, Abensour detects a decisive shift in the object of this political critique. Whereas the 1842 writings are intent on dismantling the theological apparatus of the Prussian Christian State, the principal task that comes to occupy Marx a year later is more universal: namely to “unmask” the alienating consequences of the State itself.⁵⁹ It is only through a critical rereading of Hegel that Marx would encounter the problem. Although alienation obviously remains a predominant theme across Feuerbach’s widely influential *Essence of Christianity*, it is Hegel’s utter mystification of the State that would prompt Marx to grant the concept its first distinctively political treatment. In this regard, while Marx’s theory of alienation is customarily associated with the proletarian experience of alienated labour under the conditions of capitalist production as formulated in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Abensour

⁵⁸ Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

identifies a concept of a uniquely *political* alienation, identically structured, at the centre of his critique of Hegel drafted a year earlier.⁶⁰ It is by way of this more theoretical problem of political alienation in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* that Marx would come to a more systematic criticism of the modern State itself. It is here, Abensour contends, that politics is finally disentangled from the State and appears for the first time, as in Clastres, in opposition to it.

If we follow Deleuze, the construction of philosophical concepts always testifies to a particular provocation, to a particular problem or set of problems of a given historical milieu. What, we can therefore inquire, is the principal problem that Hegel's concept of the State intends to evaluate? A work of enormous complexity, perhaps Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* must ultimately be located *between* historicism and idealism. For it is organised neither as a description or defence of the existing institutions of modern day Prussia, nor simply as an elaborate promotion of Hegel's own preferred society. What it seeks to establish are the logical conditions of rational freedom (what Hegel calls "Ethical life"). Its basic supposition is that beyond abstract right and the subjectivity of morality (Hegel finds even Kant's moral universalism too subjective), any manifestation of rational freedom necessarily requires a society of rational institutions, a rational ordering of institutions. Following lengthy discussions of the family and civil society, this is ultimately discovered to be realised in the supremacy of the State. At once resisting

60 Abensour is not the first to observe this theme in the 1843 *Critique*. Perhaps one of the earliest references to "political alienation" in this respect appears in Ralph Miliband, "Marx and the State," *The Socialist Register* vol. 2 (1965): 280. Nicholas Churchich will devote an entire chapter to the concept in *Marxism and Alienation* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), chapter 9.

the tenets of both liberalism and absolutism, Hegel's concept of the State, said only to manifest at a given historical juncture (in a modern age having overcome or superseded (*aufheben*) the conditions of slavery and feudalism), will immediately resemble something of a nuanced constitutional monarchy. And yet, beyond the more narrow confines of the "political State proper," what Hegel understands the actualisation of the *Idea* of the State to express, personified by the singularity of the crown, is the organic unity of the institutions of society, the integration and realisation of the family and civil society within the State as a universal end.⁶¹ It is therefore not difficult to determine that Hegel's concept of the State is designed to serve a very particular purpose within his larger political philosophy. What Hegel's concept of the State evidently seeks to resolve is precisely what he identifies as the emergence of a major schism in modern Prussian society: what the State functions to reconcile is the formal division between what he understands as *political* society on the one hand (institutions of government, the administrative bureaucracy) and what he reformulates as *civil* society on the other (namely, that sphere of society between family and government, private interests and universal ends: the society of rational market economy organised into corporations and overseen by the police).⁶² Hegel conceives the State as a universal form, self-sufficient, an end in itself, that both logically anticipates and teleologically completes its finite moments as

61 Reconciliation is a theme that very much frames Hegel's social and political thought in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 12, 222-3. Also see Michael O. Hardimon, "The Project of Reconciliation: Hegel's Social Philosophy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* vol. 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1992).

62 Hegel is the first to use the term "civil society" in this manner. Before Hegel, "political" and "civil" society were terms largely employed interchangeably and simply intended to oppose what is "natural" to man. Both Tocqueville and Marx would follow Hegel in this basic terminological distinction.

external necessity, higher authority and absolute end, unifying particular and universal, part and whole, in an immanent expression of its actualised Idea. We have thus already arrived at the basis of Marx's criticism.

Although Marx readily acknowledges the materiality of the problem, clearly appreciating the significance of an increasingly divided society, his manuscript is quick and unreserved in its rejection of its formal resolution in the *Philosophy of Right*. According to Marx, Hegel's concept of the State is able to repair such a divide only *in appearance*, only at the level of abstraction. Indeed, much of Marx's criticism of Hegel will be devoted to what he perceives as the mystification of the State as Idea. Rather than *right*, he charges, Hegel makes logic, abstract reality, his principal subject and theorises the State according to the logical categories of this abstract reality subsequently.⁶³ The State thus appears not as a political institution of society, but as in Hobbes, as an autonomous entity eternally set out against it. Defined in its most abstract terms, the State's relation to the social becomes one of externality, of formal opposition, the family and civil society rendered but finite moments of the finality of the State as Idea. Realised only in their transcendence, the family and civil society exist not for themselves, but for the universality of the State, their empirical existence governed not by themselves, but by an abstract logic that remains entirely *alien* to them.⁶⁴ Hegel's speculative philosophy therefore remains for Marx an irreparable categorical inversion: it mistakes the abstract for the concrete, the predicate for the subject. It privileges an abstract reality over the

63 Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'," *Early Writings*, 72-3.

64 *Ibid.*, 62-3.

material conditions of political life. It sacrifices the self-institution of society for the sake of the harmony of a higher form. For it is not the State that conditions the family and civil society, Marx repeatedly interjects, but the family and civil society that condition the State. What Hegel's theory of the State systematically fails to consider, Marx perhaps drawing here from Rousseau, is that it is the people—"the whole *demos*"—that is the material source and active principle of their very constitution. On the contrary, according to Hegel, in the absence of the unifying form of the State, the people are destined to remain but a "formless mass."⁶⁵

This attitude would serve to raise two important questions for Marx that inevitably turn his critique to the problem of the modern State itself: *is sovereignty ultimately enshrined in the monarch or in the people? And is it possible to speak of the sovereignty of the people as opposed to the sovereignty of the monarch?*⁶⁶ In what is undoubtedly for Abensour some of the most revealing passages of the *Critique*, Marx will consider these questions through a formal juxtaposition of monarchy and democracy. Although we have already encountered such a juxtaposition with Lefort, retracing Marx's steps, Abensour will take this theoretical exercise to a very different end. Insofar as Hegel establishes sovereignty proper as internal to the State and expressed in the uniformity of the *monos*, he regards any notion of popular sovereignty, as we encountered in a previous chapter, to be founded upon a confused, "wild idea of the people." For this reason, Hegel locates

65 See Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 183 and Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'," 86-7.

66 Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right,'" 86.

democracy at the limit of the sovereign and identifies its constitution as perpetually in conflict with itself. But Marx sees the categories very much reversed: “Hegel proceeds from the State and conceives of man as the subjectivised State; democracy proceeds from man and conceives of the State as objectified man.”⁶⁷ For if it is not the *monos*, as an abstract part, but *the whole demos* that represents the material source and active agent of the constitution of the social, then it is democracy and not monarchy, that properly expresses the sovereign element both in content and in form: “In democracy the *formal* principle is identical with the *substantive* principle. For this reason it is the first true unity of the particular and the universal.”⁶⁸ Following Marx’s logic, Abensour can therefore establish monarchy the constitution in which a part, abstracted from the whole, determines the character of the whole from a fixed point, so that the demos is subsumed under but one form of its existence: the constitution itself. Democracy, rather, is the constitution in which the constitution itself remains merely a facet of the self-determination of the demos, appearing only as a single determining moment of the people and thus not as the State as an abstract form. Democracy, simply put, is the constitution in which the whole is dominated by no single part. According to Marx, this remains its distinguishing characteristic: “In democracy no moment acquires a meaning other than what is proper to it. Each is really only a moment of the demos as a whole.”⁶⁹ Therefore, if Marx understands democracy as the exception to every other

67 Ibid., 87.

68 Ibid., 88. Also see Patricia Springborg, “Karl Marx on Democracy, Participation, Voting, and Equality,” *Political Theory* vol. 12, no. 4 (November 1984): 540.

69 Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’,” 87.

constitution, distinguished from both monarchy and the republic alike, it is because the democratic constitution does not abstract itself from the form of its self-institution, but remains a substantive dimension of the demos as its originary subject. For this reason, just as Spinoza calls democracy the most “natural” constitution,⁷⁰ Marx likewise considers it the most “generic.” It is precisely this generality that Marx claims will finally resolve the question of the constitution itself: “Democracy is the solution to the *riddle* of every constitution. In it we find the constitution founded on its true ground: *real human beings* [...]. The constitution is thus posited as the people’s *own* creation. The constitution is in appearance what it is in reality: the free creation of man.”⁷¹ Thus conceived, Abensour can distinguish democracy the political expression of the self-determination of the demos; monarchy, its formal abstraction. It is in this sense that Marx declares democracy the *truth* of monarchy and monarchy democracy *falsified*. Whereas democracy explains itself, only through democracy can monarchy be explained. Whereas democracy makes the constitution for man, monarchy makes man for the constitution.⁷² Against Hegel’s own typology, Marx will therefore diagnose monarchy a democracy in degenerated form, a democracy in contradiction with itself. Monarchy is the democratic constitution severed from its instituting subject. It remains the formal *alienation* of the self-determination of the demos. This is precisely how Marx comes to understand the modern State itself:

70 Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 179.

71 Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’,” 87. Also see Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 58.

72 Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’,” 87.

If in a democracy the political State exists separately from its content and is distinguished from it, it nevertheless exists itself only as a *particular* content, as a particular *form of existence* of the people. By contrast, e.g. in the monarchy, this particular moment, the political constitution, assumes the significance of the *universal*, determining and dominating all particulars. In democracy the State as particular is *only* particular, and as universal it is the real universal; i.e. it is not something determinate set off against other contents. In the modern times the French have understood this to mean that in true democracy the *political State disappears*.⁷³

The State is the constitution of the social made abstract. It not only assumes autonomy over the demos as such, but dominates its particular moments as a universal form. This is ultimately what renders the State incompatible with democracy. This is not merely a logical determination. Cutting through the rigidity of his formalism, Abensour demonstrates that beyond the opposition between monarchy and democracy, what Marx's critique boldly uncovers is the underlying antagonism between democracy and the State itself. *Democracy is not a State-form. Democracy is against the State*. It is in this respect, perhaps indebted to Rousseau once again, that Marx can proclaim *true* democracy the State's formal disappearance.⁷⁴ Democracy means the State ceases to be the dominant moment. When the State remains merely a moment, it is no longer the State. Consequently, emblematic of a politics antithetical to the State, the very concept of true democracy demands Marx entirely reconsider the place of politics itself. For as its association with the State becomes no longer viable, as an abstract form, Marx will reestablish

73 Ibid., 88. For additional insights into this important passage see Simon Critchley, "True Democracy: Marx, Political Subjectivity and Anarchic Meta-politics," *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*, eds. Lars Tonder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

74 If we assume, not without justification, that by "the French" Marx is thinking principally of Rousseau. See Robert Fine, *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001), 75.

the political realm precisely according to that from which the State is ultimately abstracted: *the whole demos*. For Abensour, this is Marx's Machiavellian moment.

In this respect, perhaps the structure of Marx's argument is not entirely unique. Perhaps Marx merely repeats what is simply axiomatic to Rousseau: that sovereignty remains in its only legitimate form an expression of the people rather than the State (indeed, Marx appears to share a certain affinity with that spontaneous "democratic moment" of contract theory in which the whole collectively institutes itself a political society). And yet, as I have suggested, while there is little doubt of Rousseau's importance for Marx during this period,⁷⁵ only further supporting the claim of a republican heritage, Abensour himself will not frame Marx's conclusions according to the question of sovereignty primarily. Instead, from Marx's critique of the State, Abensour will draw three important theses: 1) politics pertains not to the workings of the State, but to the emancipation of the demos; 2) democracy is the form in which this emancipation takes place; 3) in democracy, the State, as the domination of the demos, becomes a privileged site of political conflict. This gives us much to consider. Let us begin with the demos itself. As Abensour observes, uncovering the alienating properties of the State, Marx is compelled to ground politics according to the demos as its original source and true subject. And yet, we must proceed with care. For this does not announce the discovery of a new archê. On this Abensour is unequivocal. As we have seen, the archê functions to divide a social body according to an abstract principle of rule.

⁷⁵ Perhaps Lucio Colletti remains the authority on the link between Rousseau and Marx. See *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

And indeed, as essential to the division between governor and governed, ruler and ruled, Abensour does not fail to detect the workings of the *archê* at the foundation of every State. However, binding a concept of politics to the demos *as a whole* rather has the effect of a negation: what it refuses is the monopolisation of the political moment in the guise of an abstract State. The generality of the demos therefore affirms the very opposite of the specificity of the *archê*: *that politics has no proper subject*. The true subject of politics is precisely the subject that is not a proper subject at all. It is for this reason that the demos can never serve as a suitable *archê*. This is something we have encountered before. Rather than a particular class or disenfranchised body, Marx's appeal to "the whole demos" will recall the demos of Rancière's anarchic title, the empty form that signifies that generic equality of "*anyone at all*." For Rancière, this anarchic equality is politics' only foundation. For the very same reasons, the same can be said of the demos as a whole. They remain identical expressions. Consequently, Rancière would likely determine such a concept of the demos not a vague abstraction, but indicative of that essential anarchy beneath every hierarchical structure, that underlying equality implicit in every system of inequality. Indeed, there is no true democracy, Abensour affirms, without reactivating this anarchic impulse that rises against the *archê* of the State.⁷⁶ As he writes elsewhere, drawing not from Marx, but from Levinas, it is precisely the multiplicity of anarchy, the very plurality intrinsic to the social itself, that ultimately frustrates the unity and totality of the State: "It disturbs the State in a

76 Abensour, "Of Insurgent Democracy," xl-xli.

radical way, that is to say by shaking the State in its roots and its foundation.”⁷⁷

Adopting the language of La Boétie, the formula of Abensour’s democracy against the State can therefore be expressed in the following way: the “all ones” (*tous uns*) against the “all One” (*tous Un*).⁷⁸ This expression allows us to further clarify Abensour’s terms. The only difference, he suggests, between Rancière’s democracy against the police and the democracy against the State he attributes to Marx is their respective objects in question: whereas the police refers to government or governmentality, a vast instrumental machinery of social partition and allocation, the State refers to a more unified, totalising structure.⁷⁹ Monolithic, centralised, universal, the State is a system of integration and mediation, a unifying, organising entity that posits itself as a fixed point over and beyond the plurality of the demos. Perhaps this is why Hegel finds the State best expressed by a monarchy and why Popper finds the totalitarian State of the 20th century to represent its logical conclusion.⁸⁰ For Abensour, the State is not only a privileged point among many, it is the point that determines all other points through itself; it is not only the One that isolates itself from the multiple, it is the One that dominates the multiple from above. Whereas Foucault regards the State as but a type or episode of government that traverses the bounds of State and society, Abensour understands the State as the form that breaks with society and remains autonomous from it. As in Clastres, the

77 Miguel Abensour, “An-archy Between Metapolitics and Politics,” *Parallax* vol. 8, iss. 3 (2002): 17.

78 Miguel Abensour, “Is There a Proper Way to use the Voluntary Servitude Hypothesis?,” *Journal of Political Ideology* vol. 16, iss. 3 (2011): 341.

79 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxiv.

80 See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

State is therefore the form that lends itself nicely to the concentration of power, to the isolation of the organs of power from the whole community. Indeed, this is intrinsic to its meaning. In contrast, Abensour associates the demos, contrary to the State, with plurality, free creation and ongoing self-institution. In direct contradistinction to the rigidity and fixity of the State, he characterises the life of the demos, referencing William Godwin, as dynamic, plastic, fluid, a state of perpetual mutation, everlasting innovation.⁸¹ Although at times he finds Marx's presentation of the demos to forget the insurmountable social conflict and division so transparent to Machiavelli (where the whole is never the united), Abensour observes all these qualities in Marx's general concept of the demos as well. Marx speaks of the "*fluidity*" of the instituting activity, precisely that which becomes the object of hypostasis under the dictates of the State-form.⁸² Echoing Godwin, Abensour will therefore establish a stark irreconcilable opposition between two irreducible terms: the State=the One, the total, the fixed, the demos=the multiple, the fluid, the mutational. This is given an almost ontological expression. Democracy posits a creative, self-differentiating multiplicity against a static, integrated uniformity. It is the politics of becoming against being. *A Bergsonian democracy*. This is the basis and substance of its conflict with the State: "This conflict arises from the contrast between the qualities of life - dynamism, the continuous flux of experience, impulsion, overflowing spontaneity - and the characteristics of form as a crystallisation that acts as a power of conservation in view of maintaining the

81 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 59.

82 Ibid., 65.

cohesion of the whole.”⁸³ As a moment of the demos reified, the State represents the “crystallisation” or “petrification” of the creative self-instituting activity of the demos. Democracy is that which resists the predominance of this reified moment. It seeks to restore the *form* of the State to the *life* of the demos. Its basic mechanism is what Abensour calls *reduction*.

Arguably one of his most important concepts, Abensour will put forward a theory of reduction as the centrepiece of true democracy and the key to understanding its being-against the State: “By bringing to light reduction and its consequences, Marx was able to show as clearly as possible that the struggle against the State, as a form, is inscribed in the heart of democratic logic.”⁸⁴ If Marx’s thesis of democracy ultimately relies upon a notion of its constitutional exceptionality, Abensour finds this exceptionality primarily expressed in the implementation of reduction.⁸⁵ This operation is unique to democracy alone. Here, the relation between constitution and demos, part and whole, remains distinct from every other constitution. Simply put, in democracy, the constitution—or the objectification of the demos in the form of a constitution—is rendered the object of a reduction.⁸⁶ This does not imply the effacement or diminishing of the constitution itself (this is where Abensour differs from Wolin).⁸⁷ Nor is it simply a matter of the devolution of a centralised authority to more local or regional administration. Rather, in democracy,

⁸³ Ibid., 93.

⁸⁴ Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxiii.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 53.

⁸⁷ See Sheldon Wolin, “Norm and Form: The Constitutionalising of Democracy,” *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, eds. J. Peter Euben, John R. Wallach and Josiah Ober (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

reduction is the very mechanism through which the objectification of the demos occurs. Although never explicitly defined, political objectification may be appreciated as the mode in which the demos institutes, represents and encounters itself an objective form. As with Lefort, a society cannot experience itself directly (for Lefort, this is the entrance of the symbolic). Constitution is the *becoming-objective* of the demos, the giving itself a form, the making itself an object of social organisation and legislation. Reduction is the process that ensures the constitution, this moment of objectification, remains an ongoing process. Therefore, if democracy does not achieve the status of an abstract State, it is because its constitution is perpetually subjected to reduction. This is its primary strategy against the autonomy of the State. Democracy is not simply the name of the constitution reduced; it is the very exercise of reduction itself. Modern democracy, it could be said, appears as the reduction of monarchy. This is its revolutionary origin. It is what counters the State by reducing the constitution to what it is: a single moment of the demos and nothing more. This is how Abensour interprets Marx when he declares democracy to make the constitution for man as opposed to man for the constitution. Democracy means the constitution remains at all times subordinate to the demos and thus never appears an agent of its domination. It is specifically in this sense that the State can be said to disappear. By no means intuitive, in this context, the disappearance of the State does not attest to the obsolescence and eventual “withering away” of the State apparatus under the conditions of a realised communism. In true democracy, what disappears is the very presence of an abstract

organising principle, a universal that monopolises the particular, a total that dominates its parts.⁸⁸ As an instrument of the self-determination of the demos, this is precisely what reduction seeks to preclude and forestall. How should this unique mechanism of democracy be understood? Reduction entails blocking the State's means of transfiguration. It obstructs or impedes the very channels through which political objectification achieves a certain independence onto itself.⁸⁹ It prevents the very basis of what constitutes the demos from becoming an integrated, organising principle. It is here where Abensour's democracy against the State approximates something of Clastres' society against the State. It testifies to a politics that demands a certain institutional acuteness, a constant determination of limits, a mindfulness of the always possible threat of the emergence or reemergence of the State. For the State will always struggle to neutralise democracy, to resist reduction, to block blocking. For this reason, democracy's relation to the State must always remain critical, one of vigilance. To be a democrat is take on the task of constantly surveying the State, determining its limits, navigating its contours.

Against Hegel, who renders the State a subject and Hobbes, who grants his Leviathan the status of a "mortal god," part of what reduction implies for Abensour is the recognition that however alien or abstract in appearance, the State itself remains a quintessentially human object. The State is a social construct. This is why Marx finds democracy to resolve the riddle of the constitution itself. The reduced constitution is the constitution resolved. This alone has a liberating effect. At the

88 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 65.

89 Abensour, "Of Insurgent Democracy," xxxiii.

origin of every constitution, monarchy and democracy alike, Marx discerns a trace of the free creation of man. The difference lies in monarchy's capacity to close off, distort and distance this moment of free creation from its original instituting subject, at once elevating its constitution to that of a State and diminishing the demos to a mere moment of its existence.⁹⁰ Consequently, the State not only appears as an independent entity that enjoys a monopoly of agency in society, it likewise appears as a *natural* form, situated beyond the realm of political intervention. In this respect, much like the commodity of capitalist production, we may detect a certain fetishism inherent to the State-form itself. *Alienation, reification, fetishism*: before his critique of capital, all these terms are already inscribed in Marx's critique of the State. As an abstract form, the State appears to dominate the demos from a place beyond the demos itself: "Hitherto, the *political constitution* has always functioned as the *religious* sphere, the *religion* of the life of the people, the heaven of its universality as opposed to the *earthly existence* of its actual reality."⁹¹ Democracy dispels this mystification. In so doing, the basis of political alienation is conjured away. Reduction reveals the State for what it is: anthropological, institutional, artificial, contingent. It thereby inhibits the inclination to dissociate the State from the original activity that institutes it. In the language of Castoriadis, it reconciles the *instituting* and *instituted* moments of society. It immerses the constitution in the very process that produced it.⁹² Reduction initiates something of an eternal return,

90 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 60.

91 Marx, "Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'," 89.

92 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 56.

the perpetual process of returning to the moment of institution. Reduction may therefore be understood as the operation that exposes the State to politics, that renders the State a political problem precisely by reestablishing its essential relation to the political realm, the realm of the demos as a whole. The politicisation of the State is its restitution, its restoration to the very condition implicit in its origin: the self-institution of the demos. The general formula for reduction may therefore be expressed as follows: reduction=recognition=resolution=restitution. Accordingly, Abensour finds the moment of reduction itself to be composed of several isolatable moments: firstly, reduction is the moment of “going back,” the moment of returning or restoring the constitution to the condition of its original instituting activity; secondly, by redirecting the constitution back to its origin, it allows for what is realised in the constitution to be extended infinitely across other dimensions of social life.⁹³ Put another way, reduction contains both a negative and productive element: the very blocking that prevents the abstraction of the political moment is at the same time what inspires the propagation of politics itself, its introduction or dissemination to other objects, parts, places and spheres of society.⁹⁴ Hence, for Abensour, the mechanism of reduction is itself the very condition of extension (*irrigation*): “It is as if the movement of the return to an originary subject triggers a release, a retroaction of the subject’s activity into every field that requires its energy.”⁹⁵ This extension may be interpreted in the following manner. The reduction

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 65.

95 Ibid., 56-7.

of the State, the very resolution of the problem of political alienation, is at once the irrigation of politics itself, granting it new life and new energies. It sets politics in motion, reanimates it, exposing it to institutions and relations beyond the limits of those traditionally ascribed to the State itself. For Abensour, a theory of a democracy against the State is therefore a theory of *democratisation*. As that “impetuous river” incessantly overflowing its riverbanks, Abensour sees democracy’s resistance to the State constantly mutating into new challenges, new disputes, new polemics at increasingly diverse corners of society. Accordingly, reduction can be said to be composed of three identifiable moments or stages: *reduction*, *blocking* and *extension*: “It is this latter stage which allows for the irrigation of all the other spheres of the life of a people, according to a democratic mode of being, in such a way that we can say that all holds to democracy.”⁹⁶

Democracy is the perpetual politicisation of the objects it appears against. It exposes, as it were, what it is against to a unique political field, calling into question its foundations and challenging its premises. Reduction, therefore, should not be confused as a process of relinquishing politics to the domain of civil society. This is precisely what distinguishes Abensour’s reading of Marx from that of Pierre Rosanvallon. Offering his own interpretation of the 1843 *Critique*, Rosanvallon identifies the *political* with the State, the *social* with civil society. This results in a reading of Marx’s true democracy as the “reabsorption” of the *political* into the *social*, as the realisation of a society “immediate to itself,” attesting to a

96 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxiii.

prototypically liberal vision of the “self-sufficiency” of a distinctively apolitical civil society.⁹⁷ On the contrary, Abensour understands true democracy as a battle for the autonomy of the political itself. Democracy reminds us that politics is not subject to the State. It has a logic all of its own. Nor is civil society quintessentially apolitical. Politics is the very stage upon which the question of the autonomy or heteronomy of the demos is played out.⁹⁸ It has no proper domain. If anything, Abensour submits, civil society must be *repoliticised*, set up as a place of conflict, a site of confrontation between the people and the grandees.⁹⁹ And while the State is a structure that arguably can never itself be democratised, this does not deter democracy’s initiative to politicise the State, to render the State a political problem. This is implicit in its reduction. For this reason, Abensour finds a democracy against the State to reveal with great clarity what is at stake in the political realm itself: an experience of universality, the negation of domination, the establishment of an isonomic public space.¹⁰⁰ Although an activity invariably wrought with permanent struggle, he regards politics as a lived expression of the never-ending question of how people can live together to achieve liberty and free will.¹⁰¹ This is not a question that can be monopolised by the State.

For Marx, “true democracy” and the “disappearance of the State” are expressions which amount to the same. Accordingly, the *truth* of democracy will

97 Pierre Rosanvallon, “Marx and Civil Society,” *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 162-3.

98 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 71.

99 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxvii-xl.

100 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 92.

101 Ibid., 50.

function to deny the very proposition of a “democratic State.” Indeed, the democratic State appears to attest to the integration, meditation and moderation of democracy, a democracy reconciled with the State-form (Abensour understands Tocqueville’s project very much in this sense). In opposition to such a notion, which in light of Marx’s thesis can only be found inherently contradictory, Abensour will propose an alternative: “insurgent” democracy.¹⁰² For Abensour, this is the proper name of a democracy against the State:

In truth, democracy is not a political regime. Beyond being the conflictive political institution of the social, it is an action, a form of political activity that is distinctive in its eruption of the demos onto the public stage, its opposition to the *grande*es, its struggle to end domination. It is not a matter of a momentary act, but of a continuous activity over time, always ready to push back in the face of the obstacles it encounters. It is a complex process, constantly reinventing itself in order to better persevere and defeat the counter-movements that threaten its destruction and return to a state of domination. This is insurgent democracy.¹⁰³

If Abensour ultimately seeks, retaining his proximity to Machiavelli, a model of politics that locates the very possibility of emancipation precisely in that originary division of the social, in that irreducible conflict of the plebs against the agents of domination, he discovers such a model with insurgent democracy. But does Abensour really require a new concept? What is it that distinguishes insurgent democracy from savage democracy? And given savage democracy’s stubborn lack of formula or foundation, what are the grounds for such a distinction? According to Abensour, insurgent democracy opens up an agonistic scene that adopts the State as

¹⁰² Abensour will outline insurgent democracy in the foreword to the second French edition and preface to the Italian edition of *Democracy Against the State*.

¹⁰³ Abensour, Nancy and Rancière, “Instances démocratiques” (translation by Brian Singer).

its “natural” or “favoured” target.¹⁰⁴ Lefort’s savage democracy, he claims, explicitly identifies no such target. This marks a remarkable shift in Abensour’s appraisal of savage democracy. Here, Abensour appears to find savage democracy to lack a certain precision or specificity. Although he accepts savage democracy as a suitable expression for the dissolution of the markers of certainty, for the repeated test of indeterminacy, the logic of savage democracy, he ultimately determines, is not necessarily anti-Statist.¹⁰⁵ It is insurgent democracy that embodies this necessity. Perhaps insurgent democracy could therefore be thought as a savage democracy inscribed with a new object, a new target. Perhaps it takes everything that is savage about democracy, as it were, to what Abensour understands as its logical conclusion, its absolute end: *a being-against the State*. We occasionally encounter this interpretation.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, however indebted to the young Marx, perhaps insurgent democracy signals a concept of democracy no longer theoretically dependent on the critical framework his 1843 *Critique*. In many respects, Marx’s argument for democracy simply reverses the formal logic of Hegel’s theory of the State. Insurgent democracy is bound by no such logic. Instead, Abensour draws its basic framework from a still relatively obscure revolutionary tradition that repeatedly appears to manifest itself throughout modern history.¹⁰⁷ As a concept, insurgent democracy traces that unique political genealogy from the Paris Commune to the German revolution of 1918 to the Spanish civil war to the council

104 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxiii-xxxiv.

105 Ibid., xxxi-xxxii. Also see Breugh, “Le lien social entre utopie et démocratie,” 87.

106 See for example Mazzocchi, “Excavating Abensour: The Dialectics of Democracy and Utopia at a Standstill,” 295.

107 Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des “tous uns”*: *désir de liberté, désir d’utopie*, 136.

movement of the Hungarian revolution to the May '68 revolts. We could no doubt add a number of other examples to this list as well. For Abensour, what defines each of these events is a spontaneous irruption of the demos against the agents of the State in order to establish a state of non-domination. What we find at the root of insurgent democracy, therefore, is a rejection of the State as the natural or inevitable basis of social organisation. It invites us to consider the very possibility of a political community founded upon something other than the State: the self-determination of the demos, isonomy, an ongoing experiment in political freedom. As a resistance to the existing order, as a desire to live otherwise, perhaps this represents its utopian dimension.

Insurgent democracy conceives a democracy in perpetual conflict with the State, a democracy that not only accommodates conflict, but embraces, compounds and multiplies it. This is its defining attribute. Nevertheless, Abensour will carefully distinguish insurgent democracy from “conflictual” democracy (in which conflict is institutionally confined to the limits of the State itself).¹⁰⁸ For insurgent democracy does not situate itself immanent to the State, but identifies its primary site of conflict in an altogether different space: outside, beyond and against the State. It is the democracy that occurs in the streets and public squares, precisely that which is often regarded illegitimate or irrelevant by the State itself. It is what opens up a space for political action. It is what sets up the essential opposition between the people and the State: “In a Rousseauist vocabulary, insurgent democracy can be

108 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xl.

defined as an arising of the body of the people against the body of the State; in other words, the expression of the political rapport as it proceeds from the true subject, the ‘whole demos’.”¹⁰⁹ Insurgent democracy represents the irreconcilable clash of two distinct bodies, the demos and the State. And yet, always maintaining a relation of externality, insurgent democracy does not ultimately seek to seize the State or occupy its institutions, but to resist it, carving out new political spaces, devising alternative social structures and generating new forms of social bonds. Insurgent democracy is not a theory of revolution. It is the endless quest to discover horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-contractual modes of what Arendt calls “*being-together*.” It is therefore a question of creating the very conditions of new and inclusive ways of engaging collectively in the public realm.¹¹⁰

Occupying an entirely different space than the State, insurgent democracy likewise has a temporality all of its own. Clearly drawing conceptually from that pivotal moment of the French revolution, that brief interval between regimes, it corresponds to the time *in between* two State forms; it struggles against the State on two fronts at once: the State of the *ancien régime* and the new State to come.¹¹¹ To some extent, Abensour contends, even beyond those exceptional moments of revolution, every political community struggles with the State of the old regime, its history, its burdens, its relics. At the same time, we appear to be constantly confronted with the State’s perpetual restructuring and reform, its modernisation

109 Ibid.

110 Breugh, “From a Critique of Totalitarian Domination to the Utopia of Insurgent Democracy: On the ‘Political Philosophy’ of Miguel Abensour,” 242-3.

111 Abensour, “Of Insurgent Democracy,” xxxv.

and rationalisation (in Max Weber's sense of the term). Insurgent democracy installs itself precisely in the *caesura* between these two incarnations of the State, in that very opening, paradoxically, that defies installation and refuses permanent forms.¹¹² It occupies, as it were, that revolutionary moment, a time between the radical opening up of a system and its rapid reconsolidation. This is a temporality that lacks all reference to identity and self-presence. It is an experience defined only by incessant conflict on all sides, at all fronts: the true meaning of Lefort's *permanent contestation*. For Abensour, it is the first task of insurgent democracy to preserve this caesura, to maintain this rupture or opening for political action. It is precisely through this window that social transformation and democratisation may take place.

Although insurgent democracy may appear to maintain a rather precarious status, eternally anchored in the present, between regimes, destined to lack a certain stability or constancy, Abensour finds no reason to presume its inherent incompatibility or outright antagonism with institutions.¹¹³ What is democracy's relationship to its institutions? This is a question we have largely neglected throughout this study. We cannot do it justice here. But Abensour's comments will certainly help frame and orient this question for future consideration. Abensour remarks that his critics often take issue with what is perceived to be his purely *negative* conception of democracy (a democracy *against*), one that disregards positive institutions for the sake of binding democracy to the insurrectionary event. But this is to misunderstand Abensour and indeed, the nature of the against itself.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Abensour, "Insurgent Democracy and Institution," xxv.

Nevertheless, this is a criticism that legitimately raises a whole series of questions regarding the institution of insurgent democracy, a topic that Abensour would eventually address in a subsequent preface to *Democracy Against the State*. In principle, Abensour maintains, insurgent democracy is neither hostile nor resistant to institutional engagement. A democracy against the State is not necessarily a democracy against institutions. On the contrary, institutions can endow political experience with a certain sustainability. They can help insurgency to endure over time, to connect its present moment to events of the past and even to anticipate and prepare for events of the future. And yet, given its objectives and orientation, insurgent democracy's engagement with institutions must naturally remain *selective*. Even so, Abensour's criteria is relatively intuitive and straightforward: insurgent democracy distinguishes between those institutions that promote, support and advance the political action of the demos and those that discourage, prohibit or suppress it, those institutions that subscribe to a politics of liberty and non-domination and those that retreat from such a politics, those institutions that block and inhibit the desire of the *grande*s and those that allow their ambition to circulate freely.¹¹⁴ This is not the meeting or convergence of a vital, transient insurgency and a stable, institutional framework. It is not the old question of spontaneity and organisation. Institutions do not function to legislate or govern insurgency, giving it shape or direction. Their interaction is far more nuanced. Here, Abensour finds it helpful to distinguish between institutions and laws. Turning to an early essay by

114 Ibid., xxvi. As something of an archetypal example, Abensour sites the people's guarantee to the right to insurrection included in the stillborn French constitution of 1793.

Deleuze, who himself draws principally from Hume (a great thinker of institutions), Abensour explains that an institution is more of a matrix than a framework, a model or blueprint that engenders, creates and develops.¹¹⁵ Deleuze understands an institution as a *system of anticipation*: whereas laws intend to limit or prohibit action, institutions provide a positive model for it, whereas laws rely on penalty, institutions appeal to freedom: “Such a theory will afford us the following political criteria: tyranny is a regime in which there are many laws and few institutions; democracy is a regime in which there are many institutions and few laws.”¹¹⁶ For Deleuze, an institution is an organisation of means. It is essentially positive, innovative, a *way* of acting or acting in concert. This is the basic concept of an institution best suited to insurgent democracy. Far from an obstacle or obstruction to its cause, Abensour sees institutions as something of a launchpad for democracy, their durability and continuity allowing for new possibilities of invention and intervention.¹¹⁷ While institutions can inform and sustain insurgence, insurgence can direct and orient institutions. Institutions can be a friend of the against. They can themselves be placed against the State. This is just as true for Abensour and democracy as it is for Clastres and primitive societies.

In his conclusion to *Democracy Against the State*, Abensour returns his inquiry to the present, to the *here and now*: “Are we at a Machiavellian moment

115 Ibid., xxvii.

116 Gilles Deleuze, “Instincts and Institutions,” *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 19-20.

117 Abensour, “Insurgent Democracy and Institution,” xxviii.

today?”¹¹⁸ Do we have the capacity, as Machiavelli did, to think political affairs *politically*? For Abensour, figures such as Arendt, Merleau-Ponty and Lefort suggest a Machiavellian moment is indeed upon us. It is not a matter of returning to Marx or even to Machiavelli, but rather of returning to *politics* itself. Before a question of government, politics is a question of emancipation. This is the fundamental link Abensour’s work attempts to reestablish. Emancipation is the object of politics, democracy its form. Unlike Castoriadis and Lefort, Abensour does not draw a consistent conceptual distinction between *politics* and *the political*. It is qualified simply as the ongoing project to establish a state of non-domination. For Abensour, the State presents an enduring problem for such a project. In this regard, perhaps Marx’s revelation of the essential conflict between democracy and the State becomes an indispensable facet of what a contemporary Machiavellian moment must express.¹¹⁹ On the problem of the State, Abensour often finds Lefort’s formal opposition between democracy and totalitarianism at once too limited and too absolute. For the State is certainly not democratic if it is not totalitarian. At times, he rather finds it necessary to introduce a third term: *the authoritarian State*, that which is neither democratic or totalitarian, but signals the degeneration of our own political institutions without falling into totalitarianism absolutely.¹²⁰ A rapidly changing world inevitably brings with it the potential for new authorities and new instruments of repression. For Abensour, this is the use of philosophy. Abensour

118 Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 89.

119 Ibid., 91.

120 Abensour, “Pour une philosophie politique critique?,” 314-15.

envision the critical political philosopher as something of a “watchman” of authoritarian tendencies in society.¹²¹ The philosopher patrols, surveys, identifies and diagnoses the spaces, relations and technologies of domination, their emergence and evolution. Accordingly, a critical political philosophy can reveal just how exposed the so-called democratic form of society often is to subversion, corruption and authoritarianism. Not only from without, but *from within*. For Abensour, perhaps this only further demonstrates the necessity of a robust and vigilant insurgent democracy.

Although Abensour ultimately distinguishes the two, where insurgent democracy and true democracy inevitably collide and intersect is in their conception of a democracy explicitly oriented *against the State*.¹²² Indeed, this is a theme that Marx would eventually return to himself in 1871 following the events of the Paris Commune. However, in contrast to his early critique of Hegel, now it is no longer a question of the formal “disappearance” of the State, but as Abensour does not fail to observe, of a political programme to “break” or “smash” the “modern State power” itself.¹²³ Now it is not simply monarchy, but every form of State that is explicitly called into question. The State is the entity that not only unifies, reconciles and integrates the plurality of the demos into itself, but at the same time isolates and consolidates the organs of power into the hands of a few. As demonstrated by the

121 Breugh, “Critique de la domination, pensée de l’émancipation. Sur la philosophie politique de Miguel Abensour,” 69.

122 For a broader discussion on the relation between insurgent democracy and true democracy see Abensour and Enaudeau, *La communauté politique des “tous uns” : désir de liberté, désir d’utopie*, chapter 5.

123 Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” *Later Political Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 186. Also see Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, chapter 6 and Patrick Cingolani, “Interprétation de l’insurrection communale. La démocratie, l’état et la politique,” *Critique de la politique. Autour de Miguel Abensour*.

fate of the Paris Commune, this can be an egregiously violent act. The State-form is neither neutral nor instrumental. It contains no revolutionary potential. For Marx, perhaps this is the lesson of the Paris Commune. It was the position of the anarchists from the beginning. Ultimately a struggle for self-determination, a democracy against the State strives to *reduce* the State, to generate modes of association other than those on offer by the State, creating new and inclusive ways of engaging collectively in a distinctively public space. As he defiantly informs Gauchet, Abensour is committed to such a concept of democracy, a democracy that embraces conflict rather than conceals it, that multiplies the spaces of collective invention, that circulates the desire for autonomy and provokes experiences of political freedom.¹²⁴ In this respect, perhaps we should take care not to oppose Marx's true democracy to some false or incomplete notion of democracy, but to understand its "truth" to reveal and call attention to something essential about democracy itself: that democracy is not a State-form; democracy is against the State.

We have now encountered two contemporary models of democracy's being-against: Rancière's democracy against the police and Abensour's democracy against the State. My aim has neither been one of comparison, charting out affinities and points of disagreements between the two, nor a straightforward survey of their theses in an additive fashion. Although we have observed many parallels, crossings and points of intersection, in each case we have largely situated our analysis *within*

124 Abensour, "Lettre d'un 'révoltiste' à Marcel Gauchet converti à la 'politique normale'," 162. Also see Ingram, "The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy," 41.

the conceptual framework of each author, as a visitor or traveller, evaluating concepts, establishing relations, testing limits and boundaries. Our goal has ultimately been one of extraction: to isolate and draw out a general theory of the against intrinsic to democracy in order to consider its logic, objectives and broader social and political implications. The against is not a consequence of democracy. It is immanent to its very form. Whether it identifies the police or the State as its primary object, democracy is always generated in the form of an against, an against which is at all times integral to its composition, orientation and institutional expression. A theory of a democracy against is therefore a theory of a politics of transformation, a politics that initiates change precisely through its immanent resistance to that which it is against. Both Rancière and Abensour are exceptional thinkers of democracy in that the against is never overlooked, concealed or marginalised in their work. While their respective theories of democracy differ in many respects, by fixing the against at the centre of its concept, they help us think democracy in new and productive ways: not as a regime, government or institution primarily, but as a profound challenge to oppressive, hierarchical and exclusionary arrangements and practices in society. Perhaps in many ways, they compliment each other well. Against the backdrop of Foucault's concept of governmentality, Rancière provides a critique of the police organised around the problem of the proper order of society. Against the backdrop of Marx's concept of sovereignty, Abensour provides a critique of the State organised around the problem of political alienation. While Rancière sees democracy as the disruption of the police, Abensour understands

democracy as the reduction of the State. While Rancière grounds politics according to the claim of equality, Abensour centres politics around the question of emancipation. Whereas Abensour lacks a detailed account of the political subject as the primary agent or actor of democracy, this can readily be found in Rancière. Whereas Rancière is curiously reticent on the ultimate goals and objectives of democracy, this is something Abensour is only too willing to articulate. Although both offer a substantive critique of what Arendt calls the tradition of political philosophy, while Rancière elects to circumvent and abandon the discipline entirely, Abensour endeavours to refashion and reconstruct it a critical political philosophy. Ultimately, the object is not to synthesise or harmonise the two or to overlook their many tensions and discrepancies, but to gather from each new insights into the forms and practices of democracy's emancipatory, transformative politics. Democracy is the democratisation of society, of its institutions and relations. But this democratisation is neither a natural or inevitable process. It often occurs only through conflict, that is, in the form of a being-against. Both Rancière and Abensour help us to understand this.

Conclusion

“*Hic et nunc:*” thinking democracy as a critique of the present

When someone asks “what’s the use of philosophy?” the reply must be aggressive, since the question tries to be ironic and caustic. Philosophy does not serve the State or the Church, who have other concerns. [...] Philosophy is at its most positive as critique, as an enterprise of demystification.
-Gilles Deleuze

In a perceptive, but now completely obscure lecture on the issues of democracy, theologian and utopian socialist Henry James Sr (father of philosopher William James and author Henry James) will introduce the topic of democracy according to what it “protests.” For the elder James, what democracy opposes and inherently contradicts are those all too familiar claims to rule epitomised by the regimes of monarchy and aristocracy: “Against these two claims, Democracy is a protest. It denies the claim of any one man to govern other men, and the right of any one class to govern other classes. [...] Thus the Democratic idea exhibits a purely negative development. It is revolutionary, not formative. It is born of denial.”¹

¹ Henry James, “Democracy and its Issues,” *Lectures and Miscellanies* (New York: Redfield, 1852), 1-2.

Rather than a form, James sees democracy a destroyer of forms, rather than an institution, a way to deny established institutions. This denial is inscribed in its very origins and indeed, for James, what must define democracy itself. He continues: “Democracy is not so much a new form of political life as a dissolution or disorganisation of the old forms. It is simply a resolution of government into the hands of the people, a taking down of that which has before existed, and a recommitment of it to its original sources [...].”² Thus, however rudimentary in its presentation and at times utopian in its outlook, James is able to see something in democracy that many cannot: the *against* that remains indispensable to the idea of democracy itself. It is precisely this *against*, so often neglected, forgotten, overlooked, that has occupied our study throughout. While the *against* certainly does not encompass the totality of what democracy means, it is perhaps what is most often lacking from its analysis and history. It is this lack of analysis that has compelled this study. Democracy is not simply a question of a particular society or institution. It is a question of how societies and institutions that are not democratic become so. It is a question of democratisation. Democracy is never constituted in a void. It appears as a particular encounter or confrontation. It appears in the form of a being-against. It is this *against* that propels democracy forward, that informs its targets and objectives, that galvanises its resolve towards a more participatory, more egalitarian society. Democracy initiates a unique political controversy and dispute; it introduces a polemic to the polis. It throws what it means to govern and what it

2 Ibid., 4.

means to be governed into question. It renders the foundations of a given social order intrinsically problematic. This is not a natural or inevitable process. It requires a subject, the demos being simply its original and most generic name. Thinking democracy according to what it is against therefore necessitates a concept of democracy that binds the persistent democratisation of society to that distinct challenge of the demos, the excluded, those who do not count and do not have a voice. Democracy is the story of how those who lack political agency come to have it. Rather than a grand revolutionary moment, it testifies to a long trajectory, a becoming, a history or tradition of emancipation. Democracy is the democratisation of society, of its institutions and relations. This is the strange tautology through which democracy must ultimately be understood.

Developed through a series of immanent critiques, of Rancière, Lefort and Abensour, this is the basic concept of democracy I have sought to advance. Although their projects differ considerably, bound to no single theoretical framework, each of these authors offer a certain resistance to the customary strategies of distinguishing, formulating and evaluating what is called democracy today. Indeed, reading these figures, each individually and all together, a whole discourse on democracy appears to be called into question. Democracy will no longer correspond to a State-form, collection of institutions or style of government. Rather, their writings provide us the necessary tools to effectively disentangle its concept, so that it may be thought anew and put to use in creative and productive ways. Their work challenges us to explore the limits and potentials of what the

power of the people can mean. At the same time, it invites us to reexamine those structures in our own society that claim to be “democratic.” Inscribed in their respective theories of democracy, therefore, is a sustained critique of the present and the way in which our concept of democracy is appropriated and understood today. It is this resistance, this critique of the present, that renders their work on democracy *political*.

From Plato to Hobbes to Hegel, it quickly became apparent that much of what comes down to us under the guise of political philosophy is not in fact political at all. Rather, in the assessment of Arendt, Castoriadis, Rancière, Abensour and others we have encountered, political philosophy is routinely found to conceal and obscure the political question, to neutralise its polemics, to resolve what it is that makes it inherently controversial. At least since Plato, that this tradition begins with a tenacious campaign against democracy is no coincidence. With but a few exceptions, political philosophy consistently functions to shelter rule from the problems of politics, to supplant politics with reason, order, absolutism, to supply it a rational foundation, to undermine its anarchic condition. This is emblematic of the paradigm that Abensour associates with State thought, the philosophy that organises its models and analyses around the terms and relations of the State, the sovereign, governor and governed, ruler and ruled. And yet, notwithstanding this antipolitical propensity so pervasive across its history, contrary to Rancière, I have made the case that political philosophy’s critical and emancipatory potential should not be discounted too hastily. Indeed, as we have seen, against the predominance of State

thought, political philosophy can itself be placed against its very tradition, making another political philosophy possible, one that returns not to the foundations of its tradition, but as Abensour has appealed, to the matters of politics themselves, to the problems of the present time, our own institutions, modes of domination and possibilities of emancipation. Abensour is not alone in this view. Castoriadis would likely remind us that it is no accident that politics and philosophy have a common origin, a common birthplace. They are but two expressions of an ongoing project of autonomy, a project first betrayed by Plato himself.³ Throughout this study we encountered three general interpretations of philosophy useful for politics: philosophy as concept construction (Deleuze), as interminable questioning (Lefort), as permanent critique (Abensour). For our purposes here, these interpretations need not conflict. But for Deleuze, what ultimately makes philosophy *political* is less the topics and themes it considers, than the manner in which the concepts it generates can be engaged and put to use in a critical and political way. According to Deleuze, philosophy is not a descriptive science. It does not strive to represent the world in thought. Philosophy invents concepts to navigate and evaluate particular problems of its own time, its own historical milieu. Lefort is therefore entirely correct to locate the point of departure for political inquiry in the *here and now*, but this in no way limits the work of philosophy to a simple matter of grasping the conditions of the present state of affairs. Rather, following Nietzsche, Deleuze understands the first task of philosophy to counter, to challenge the present time and help us to think

³ See for example the essays contained in Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

against it. This is the basis of what we found Nietzsche to call *the untimely* and Abensour *the utopian*. In each case, what is realised is a political expression of thinking against, a resistance to *what is*, a critique of the present in the hopes of a better future to come. This is the use of philosophy. As Deleuze affirms: “When someone asks ‘what’s the use of philosophy?’ the reply must be aggressive, since the question tries to be ironic and caustic. Philosophy does not serve the State or the Church, who have other concerns. [...] Philosophy is at its most positive as critique, as an enterprise of demystification.”⁴ It is here that philosophy itself becomes political.

Thus, in the sense that it represents a prolonged exercise in concept construction, perhaps this study of democracy may ultimately be considered *Deleuzian*. Perhaps there is something of our own present time, our own *here and now*, that desperately calls for a new concept of democracy. By placing the against at the centre of its concept, my hope is that we may think democracy—its origins, aspirations and institutions—in new and productive ways. To think democracy according to what it is against is therefore an attempt to think democracy *anew* or think democracy *otherwise*. Along with a whole language of rights and equality, the concept of democracy can itself be fashioned an instrument through which a comprehensive critique of the present may be initiated and carried out. For Abensour, essential to the meaning of emancipation is the permanent critique of domination. It is in this respect that he envisions political philosophy not simply as

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 106.

a theoretical discipline, but like Marx, as a tool with the power to *change*. This is the first objective of his own critical political philosophy.

Perhaps the problem of democracy inevitably becomes a philosophical one as soon as we arrive at that inescapable and interminable question: *how should democracy be thought?* This is the broader theme that underlies the entire study. It is a question we have returned to again and again. As we discovered with Lefort, part of what democracy means is that there is no final word on the meaning democracy itself. Democracy will refuse its mastery or monopolisation by a given authority or class of purported experts. This is precisely what we found savage democracy to express. My use of Lefort in this project may be found rather peculiar. Although he can certainly be read to theorise a democracy against the regimes of monarchy and totalitarianism, I have not drawn on Lefort to consider yet another model of democracy's being-against. Instead, I have revisited those rather enigmatic references to "savage" democracy as an occasion to reflect upon the larger philosophical problem of *thinking* democracy itself, of organising its concept for political use. As Abensour testifies, savage democracy highlights the indetermination that stubbornly refuses to grant democracy finality, closure or resolution, raising the whole question over and over again. Loosening the constraints that so often determine its limits, rather than define democracy with greater precision, we found savage democracy to throw the concept into question, keeping the idea of democracy unsettled and perpetually open. In Deleuze's terms, savage democracy signifies a democracy *detrterritorialised*. From the French

Revolution to May '68, while Lefort tends to utilise the savage qualifier to incite those more revolutionary moments that punctuate the history of democracy's modern incarnation, its sheer indeterminacy must compel his readers to incessantly return to the question of what is most essential to democracy itself, its powers and potentials. "It is as if 'savage' connotes the inexhaustible reserve of turmoil that soars above democracy."⁵ It cautions us not to reduce democracy to a government or institution too quickly. It prompts us to conceive democracy in terms of what it can do, what it can become and what it can transform. Accordingly, savage democracy not only functions to keep the question of democracy unresolved, it urges us to perpetually push our thinking of democracy ever further. By evoking everything that is revolutionary about democracy, the savage emancipates the concept from all the limitations that typically restrict and confine what democracy can be and what it can mean, allowing us to reimagine it anew according to its most creative and transformative dimensions and capacities. It is in this respect that savage democracy can be taken as something of a heuristic device, an exercise of thought. *What savage democracy demands is that we think democracy in a savage way.* It is a symbol for the ambition, experimentation and indeed, the risk of thinking democracy in unconventional and challenging ways. It means distancing its concept from those mitigated, domesticated representations of democracy so ubiquitous today. It means constructing its concept according to its most uncompromised and resilient incarnation: its political acts of emancipation, its

5 Miguel Abensour, "'Savage Democracy' and the 'Principle of Anarchy'," *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 106.

endless capacity for conflict and contestation, its enduring momentum towards a more inclusive, participatory and egalitarian society. This is imperative for a theory of democracy's being-against.

Perhaps one of the first implications of such a theory is that it necessitates a complete revision of our general approach to politics. This was very much implicit in our initial point of departure. As Arendt recounts, where the tradition of political philosophy systematically fails is in its almost methodical obscuration of politics itself, its routine displacement of the problems of politics for the problems of government, sovereignty, the management of society and affairs of the State. For Arendt, this underlying fixation with rule effectively cancels out the very basis of political inquiry from philosophy altogether, creating considerable challenges for thinking about politics in its own right. Against this tradition, she therefore advocates the extraction of politics from its conceptual confinement to various theories of rule. This is just as essential to her own phenomenology of political activity as it is to our theory of democracy here. Politics cannot be reduced to a general framework dictated solely by the problem of how a given class of rulers, governors, sovereigns and kings are to exercise their rule over the community. Rather, following the example of Arendt, by circumventing the philosophical tradition entirely and revisiting the ancient Greek origins of the term, we found that in its original inception, politics describes something quite different. Politics is not the foundation upon which one rules another. It is the condition in which the foundation of rule is called into question. Politics is that which renders the polis, the

organisation of the social, its laws and institutions, inherently controversial. It is what renders problematic the very nature of government and who has the right to govern. Here, I have tried to draw a connection between the etymology of *polis*, *politics* and *polemics*. As for Christian Meier, politics implies the *politicisation* of that which was not political before: it widens the community's inclusion in the affairs of the polis, it makes public the question of what is public, common the question of what is common. Politics reveals that there is no proper order of society, that the problem of the organisation of the social is one destined to remain unresolved in any absolute sense. To Castoriadis' point, there is no abstract model of society provided by nature or intended by the gods. There is no ultimate closure to the question of the *good*, the *just*, the *true*. What is so profound about the Greek invention of politics, therefore, is precisely what Plato cannot tolerate about it: politics exposes the polis and the representation of the polis to an irreducible field dictated only by the rule of *doxa* and *agon*. What *doxa* and *agon* unconditionally refuse is that there somewhere exists an underlying truth of society, accessible, decipherable, realisable. The *political* society is the one that recognises, represents and indeed explicitly institutes the condition of its very indeterminacy, the contingency of the social, the lack of an absolute foundation. This is precisely the impetuous, unpredictable experience aboard Plato's allegorical ship of democracy. As Lefort illustrates so successfully, democracy's only foundation is the experience of indeterminacy itself, that which is not a proper foundation at all. This is why beyond the politicisation of the polis, the making political what was not political

before, politics can also describe a condition, the very condition that remains particular to democracy itself. This is the condition that Plato decries as *anarchy*.

As we discovered, what isolates democracy from every other regime is its merciless dissolution of the *archê*. This is the universal of democracy's being-against. Wherever and whenever it appears, democracy is against the *archê*. No meaningful sense of equality is possible as long as the *archê* remains intact, unchallenged. Equality is anarchic or it is nothing at all. The *archê* is that mysterious principle that haunts so much of political thought and analysis. At the basis of every hierarchy, every claim of privilege and priority, of a proper order of society, a proper allocation of parts and roles, it is there: posited, imposed, naturalised, rationalised. It functions not only to formally divide the categories of governor and governed, ruler and ruled, but at the same time, to distribute the community across these categories according to some given standard or criterion. The *archê* therefore intends to resolve the problem of qualification, of entitlement, of who is entitled to rule. It claims to discover a basis, a genuine foundation for the reason why one rules another, the few rule the many. For this reason, it represents the closure of politics, the effacement of its condition. As soon as the *archê* is postulated theoretically, the organisation of the social is discerned a rational problem as opposed to a political one. This inaugurates a philosophical project of deciphering the grounds, the underlying principles, which claim to account for various hierarchical relations and systems of rule. But as Plato observes with great clarity, democracy is that strange anomaly which not only lacks a proper *archê*

itself, but operates to undermine the archê of every other order. What it disputes, what it renders intrinsically problematic, is the very basis upon which any such entitlement to rule may be ultimately established. By disrupting the foundations upon which rulers distinguish themselves from the rest of the community, democracy reveals the inherent artificiality and arbitrariness of every hierarchical relation. By exposing the essential groundlessness upon which the apparatus of rule is constructed, it reveals the sheer contingency of every social order. As John Keane will attest, democracy involves the “denaturing of power.”⁶ It demonstrates that whether it be birth, wealth, virtue or expertise, every conventional standard to rule is just that: convention and convention alone. This is why Rancière can uncover an essential anarchy beneath every hierarchical relation, an underlying equality implicit in every system of inequality. Democracy is that which replaces the order of the archê with the order of politics. It not only deposits the problems of the polis in the hands of the community itself, it institutes those problems in such a way that they remain political and ultimately irreducible. Democracy is not the rule of the demos. It is that which challenges the very division between ruler and ruled. This is what it means to be against the archê.

As preserved in its very name, democracy is that without archê, without measure. As such, it can make no claim, no reference to any principle or standard of rule. Beyond the field of politics itself, it has recourse to no foundation, no frame of reference which may validate its claims or justify its institutions. Democracy can

6 John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009), xii.

provide no absolution, no guarantee. There is simply no proper archê of the demos to which it may appeal. Indeed, the generality or indecipherability of the demos as a category renders the very logic of the archê inoperative. This is precisely what is inscribed in Rancière's "anarchic title" and Abensour's "demos as a whole." Rather, from ancient times, democracy means only this: the *power of the people* (the *kratos* of the *demos*). But in this respect, what exactly is meant by "power" and perhaps more importantly, what is meant by "people" is something that appears destined to remain indeterminate. This is not simply a consequence of democracy. This is the basis of its very strategy. Accordingly, perhaps this entire study could be read as a series of interpretations of what the *power of the people* can mean, in different contexts, at different moments: the *power of the people* is the power of those without title or qualification to subvert and destroy the archê of every other order, making problematic the very foundation that divides governor and governed, ruler and ruled, revealing an underlying anarchic equality (chapter 2); the *power of the people* is the power of the excluded, the marginalised, the *invisible* to manifest a political subject and dispute the categories, classifications and distributions of the police, frustrating its symbolic representation of society and creating new possibilities of perception (chapter 4); the *power of the people* is the power of those subject to the State to *reduce* its unifying, totalising structure to but a single moment of the demos, generating alternative social arrangements, new public spaces and new forms of social bonds (chapter 5). These interpretations are in no way contradictory. Nor are they exhaustive. On the contrary, particularly in the

modern age, the expression of the *power of the people* appears to take on multiple forms, in different places, at different times. As Lefort and Rancière seem to concur, the experience of modern democracy is one of increasing political conflicts engendered by an increasingly diverse body of actors unfolding at increasingly divergent regions of society. Who the subject of democracy may be, the objects that democracy concerns and the spaces where democracy occurs all appear, in its modern incarnation, to be broadened exponentially. Perhaps this is what ultimately distinguishes modern democracy from its ancient antecedent. In this regard, perhaps the precise meaning of the *power of the people* can only be appreciated against the backdrop of its particular struggle, its particular objective, its particular mode of being-against. Beyond the politics of Athens, this remains a testament to the proliferation of the against and its forms in the modern world.

And yet, as the *power of the people*, democracy cannot be thought a natural or inevitable process of a society. It requires a subject and it is only through the agency of a subject that its challenge to what it is against may be initiated and set in motion. This is particularly important for Rancière. In *Disagreement*, Rancière defines democracy in terms of a political mode of subjectivation, the appearance of a subject that disputes the prevailing distribution of the social via a defiant claim of equality. Although at times this may appear rather narrow, it serves as an important reminder that the underlying agents of democracy, its powers or forces, must ultimately be located in the political activity of a subject. Traditionally this subject is known as the demos, but as Rancière demonstrates, it may take many names.

According to Rancière, the political subject is not a sociological entity; it cannot be ascertained by demographic, identity or interest. Nor is the political subject bound necessarily to a specific set of conditions, social, historical, economic. Akin to the “principle of anarchy” to which Abensour appeals, both its origin and destination can never be known in advance. Rather, Rancière regards the manifestation of the political subject as something unpredictable, incalculable, *accidental*. Whenever the marginalised, the excluded, abandon their allotted status, part or position and challenge the prevailing categories of a given social order, a distinct political subject comes into being. The political subject is that which imposes itself on those very places and times where it does not belong. It is that which makes itself of some account. It makes problematic what was not problematic before. It throws the established correspondence between bodies, spaces, roles and functions back on its own inherent contingency, transforming at once the identity of the subject itself as well as its prescribed relations, limits and parameters in society. For Rancière, this is an act of dissensus, the enactment of a wrong. What Rancière supplies this project, therefore, is a working theory of the subject. It concerns the question of agency, of instrumentality. Even beyond the scope of Rancière’s model, this is essential for locating the against more generally. In democracy, more than an institution, the against is embodied in the activity of a subject. It is through the subject that the against primarily finds expression. Being-against is a subject acting. It is therefore quite phenomenal. It can be seen and it can be heard. It has a name and it has a face. It is voiced, demonstrated, performed, by one or by many, in

public buildings or in the streets. It intervenes, opposes, contests and protests. It calls into question and it holds to account. In this regard, if Abensour associates democracy with the qualities of spontaneity, free creation and ongoing self-institution, it is because democracy remains inextricably bound to the demos as a *living* subject.

At the same time, this emphasis on the subject and the agency of the subject does not intend to diminish the significance of institutions. As we saw with Abensour, even an “insurgent” democracy is aided by a robust institutional engagement. An institution is a *system of anticipation*, an organisation of means; it provides a positive model for action, a *way* of acting or acting in concert.⁷ It is therefore quite senseless to oppose democracy and institutions in general. Rather, the argument is that democracy remains irreducible to its institutions and cannot simply be defined by them. However its institutions are organised and arranged, there is always something of democracy that exceeds them. Consequently, the institutional question is one that does not anticipate democracy, but logically follows from it. The problem must be framed in terms of *which* institutions best serve democracy and which do not, *which* institutions best express democracy and which do not. When can an institution be considered democratic? Quite simply, a “democratic” institution is one that facilitates, fosters and sustains democracy’s radical democratising initiatives as opposed to neutralising, curtailing or inhibiting them. Democracy seeks institutions that bolster and broaden its project of

⁷ Once again, I am relying on Deleuze. See “Instincts and Institutions,” *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

democratisation. The very concept of *democratisation* implies that the limits of democracy are never absolute, never determined in advance. As a politics of transformation, democratisation means just that: perpetually confronting its own arbitrary limits. The impetus of this process, its motive force, is the against. The against, it could be said, situates democracy precisely according to its margins, according to what obstructs, denies or negates it. This is why it is so crucial for a theory of democracy to closely consider the objects it confronts and disputes in society. In the final chapters, we considered two such objects in detail: the *police* and the *State*. While other various models of democracy's being-against could have been considered, there is something of these two objects that appears to merit particular attention. As theorised by Rancière, the problem of the police is emblematic of the aspiration to implement the proper order of society. The police can be taken as a symbol for the harmonious, productive society sheltered from the complications of politics, the well managed, well regulated community that functions without disruption or dispute. It determines what is public and what is private, who is included and who is excluded, who can be seen and heard and who remains invisible. The police is a regime of representation, a government of the sensible, an administration and management of what is visible, what is thinkable and what is possible. It not only concerns the distribution of the social, but its symbolic constitution, the very modes of perception that render a social distribution intelligible. Likewise, as theorised by Abensour, the problem of the State is emblematic of the socio-historical phenomenon of political alienation. The State is

the constitution of the social abstracted from the political dimension of its very institution and thus, from the demos as its originary subject. As a moment of the demos reified, it represents the crystallisation of its creative, self-instituting activity, its everlasting invention and innovation. The State is a system of integration, unification and mediation that elevates itself over and beyond the plurality of the demos. As an abstract organising principle, a total that dominates its parts, it not only assumes autonomy over the demos, but monopolises its particular moments as a universal form. For this reason, it is a form that very much facilitates the concentration of power, the isolation of the organs of power from the whole community. Clearly, the challenges that the police and the State present to the project of democracy are considerable. And yet, for Rancière and Abensour, they are precisely what animate and reanimate a defiant and resilient democracy against. As Abensour reminds us on more than one occasion, *democracy is the always possible emergence of human struggle*.⁸

Perhaps the lesson of Machiavelli is that politics must always remain a question particular to the *here and now* (*hic et nunc*). It must be grounded firmly in the present, according to the conditions and situations of today. Likewise, perhaps the lesson of Nietzsche is that philosophy must always remain contrary to the present. It must counter *what is* and help us to think against it. As I have argued throughout, this is precisely how the exercise of political philosophy should be approached. A *political* philosophy is one that puts its concepts to use, as a critical

⁸ See for example Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, 100 and “‘Savage Democracy’ and the ‘Principle of Anarchy’,” 123.

tool, as a means to critique the present. The concept of democracy must be organised accordingly. As a concept, democracy need not simply represent the society that so boastfully calls itself a “democracy” today. It can be forged an instrument of critique. It can help us evaluate the present state of our institutions and relations. It can help us identify modes of domination and strategies of emancipation. It can help us clarify how we desire the future of our society to be. It can help us resist the existing order and participate in its transformation. When this project commenced, the events of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were still very much in their infancy; it concludes under the shadow of the reactionary departure of Britain from the European Union, the absurd accession of a wildly populist American president, the widespread vilification of Muslims, immigrants and refugees and the increasing prominence of so-called “alt-right” nationalism. It would appear, therefore, that for the present moment and for the foreseeable future, we will have much to critique. And democracy will have much to be against. To recite Whitman once again: *Strike with vengeful stroke!*

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