

# Enemies, Adversaries & Unlikely Allies:

## Reimagining Agonal Democratic Theory Through a Classical Sociological Lens

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## **Abstract:**

Set against the backdrop of increasingly polarized and dysfunctional political discourse within western democratic nations, this dissertation aims to consider the ways in which critical sociology can contribute to, and potentially expand, emergent accounts of an alternative radical democratic politics premised on productive contest. While the mainstream of democratic theory remains dominated by notions of deliberation, compromise, and consensus; a challenge has emerged out of a small but important paradigm of social and political theory - one that conceptually re-prioritized the political ideal of *agon*. Rejecting notions of post-political compromise or consensus, contemporary scholars of *agonal* democracy propose perpetually open contest, legitimated struggles, and irresolvable tensions as the proper and desirable content of 'the political.' Yet as richly as these varying accounts have mapped the political character of such agonal principles, very little attention has been paid to their implicit or explicit *social* dimensions. Through the creative adaptation of certain sociological perspectives of Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and Jürgen Habermas; this project attempts to rethink *the social* in the context of radical agonistic democracy. Taking up the work of Chantal Mouffe as an exemplar of this agonal paradigm, this project challenges the often-shallow accounts of the social, ultimately suggesting an alternative, though complimentary, theoretical vocabulary through which to explore the important, but consistently underexplored, social dimensions of a (re)turn to the political ideal of *agon*.

**Keywords:** agon, the political, radical democracy, classical sociology, the social, Mouffe, Schmitt, Tönnies, Simmel, Weber, Habermas, critical sociology.

*For Barbara Higgins (1963 – 2021). Barb you will never know how much your kindness, friendship and steadfast support helped me and countless other students over the course of your life. Thank you.*

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## Introduction

Let us assume. It is with these words that, just over a half century ago, that American moral philosopher John Rawls set the context for his now seminal treatise on justice and democracy in *A Theory of Justice*. Let us assume, Rawls suggested, that society is, more or less, a self-sufficient association of persons who recognize certain binding rules of conduct that govern their interactions, and, more or less, adhere to them. Let us assume, he continued, that these rules specify a system of cooperation designed to advance the good of those taking part in such democratic societies. Let us assume that society, here a moniker for modern western democratic societies, is a cooperative venture oriented towards mutual advantage, and that conflict is not oriented towards whether to continue such cooperation, but rather focused on the quality and quantum of benefits distributed to each participant. Let us assume, in short, that the trajectory of modern western democracy is sound, and that the question of justice can be answered through the abstraction of interests and reasonable justifications amongst the imagined signatories to an essentially functional and well-ordered social contract. (Rawls, 1999: 4)

Although some twenty years later, in his second most influential work - *Political Liberalism*, Rawls begins by accepting that his assumptions regarding a 'reasonably well-ordered society' might have been too generous, the underpinning premise - that western democratic societies are essentially well founded, maintained, and functional – continued to haunt the mainstream of political and social theories of democracy. This is because, far from creating such assumptions, those notions Rawls asked us all to assume in *A Theory of Justice* were

articulations of the something deeper and older – an underpinning confidence, perhaps to the point of arrogance, that the institutions and structures of modern western democracies, and with them, certain fundamental philosophical assertions about the nature and potential of conflict and consensus within them, were essentially good, and sound, and stable. Of course, in the decades since, many have challenged elements of Rawls’ work. Indeed, for over five decades, the majority of academic engagement with notions of democracy and justice, have positioned themselves for or against Rawls, and subsequently as time passed, vis a vis his most famous advocates and critics. Yet, for the most part, and even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, the underlying assumption that democracy is premised on consensus has remained woefully unchallenged.

One very notable exception takes the form of radical (agonal) democratic theory. A small, but vibrant, subset of political theory – drawing heavily from political philosophy – radical democratic theorists fundamentally rejected the central role of consensus and stability underpinning the mainstream of post-Rawlsian democratic theory, instead prioritizing conflict and perpetual tension as the essential defining character of democracy, and politics more broadly. Building on a core distinction between *antagonistic* (destructive) and *agonistic* (productive) conflict within the body politic, these radical democratic theorists offered a new vision for western democratic societies – one which challenged and disrupted the stale confidence of the old guard. Yet, despite its many promises, the agonal democratic vision has not, I argue, lived up to its full potential. Narrow ontological accounts of *the political*, have overshadowed and shackled the transformative potential of a new democracy premised on an ideal of political agon – and have, systematically, led to dismissive or anemic accounts of any broader social context.

But for this pervasive dismissal of the social, or at its extreme, reduction of the social to mere sediment of ‘real’ political outcomes; the critical normative commitments underpinning agonal democratic accounts could well have made radical democratic theorists natural allies to a range of critical sociologist. Both groups focus on illuminating systemically obscured inequalities, injustices and power imbalances, and both are equally committed to opening new spaces – both conceptual and real – through which diverse perspectives and positions can be better recognized and considered. This is, I believe, a missed opportunity. Despite its shortcomings, I contend that the radical agonal democratic challenge represents an essential conceptual trajectory for anyone interested in equality, justice, and democracy. Though this body of writing has become trapped within a myopic and anemic conception of *the social*, the transformative potential of the agonal (re)turn and the possibilities it offers to expand the contemporary democratic imaginary are too important to abandon.

To this end, this project looks to inject these radical democratic accounts with selected critical sociological insights to better consider and map what such accounts might offer both disciplines were they to take seriously their own obscured assumptions and necessary foundations vis a vis a more robust understanding of *the social*. Concurrently challenging the predominant logic of determinism in agonal democratic theory – under which the social is understood to be byproduct of political struggle – and exploring and expanding nascent assumptions and conceptions of the social within and around such accounts, I will aim to reprioritize a lost, but essential, question: *what are the underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon?* However, as opposed to traditional critique, I am proposing a different approach. Through a process of

*creative adaptation*, I am proposing to introduce selected classical and contemporary sociological insights, alternative understandings and conceptual vocabularies through which to reimagine and transform elements of agonal democratic theory while supporting, and potentially advancing, the normative aims and underlying commitments of the radical democratic critique.

To this end, this project is organized into four chapters. First, I begin with an exploration of Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic perspective – taken as an exemplar of the agonal (re)turn - with an emphasis on her conceptual foundations, from her early work with Ernesto Laclau to her selective deployment of Carl Schmitt. Here I will examine both the intended and unintended consequences of Mouffe's post-Marxist recovery of Schmitt's pro-fascist political theology, as well as her overarching frameworks and distinctions between *the ontic* and *the ontological*. In the following chapters, I will introduce and propose adapting selected insights from certain classical and contemporary sociological perspectives. Specifically, I will explore selected insights from Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and finally, Jürgen Habermas, aiming concurrently to contextualize these thinkers vis a vis the political and intellectual landscape that enabled Schmitt; and to identify and deploy certain foundational elements of how these seminal thinkers understood the social, and at times its relationship to the political, in order to expand and nuance Mouffe's self-described 'purely political' account of agonal democracy.

Through this critical and creative adaptation of these various sociological perspectives, I not only aim to rethink *the social* in the context of radical agonistic democracy, but also to demonstrate the lasting importance and applicability of classical sociology – both directly, and through its contemporary interpretation. At the same time, throughout this project, I will consider the relationship between political and moral associations and intellectual commitments – implicitly exploring the boundaries between creative adaptation and selective memory – asking

what can be gained, or possibly lost, when taking on intellectual heritages steeped in normative commitments antithetical to one's own. Both in terms of Mouffe's deployment of Schmitt, and the contrasting perspectives I wish to inject from Weber, Tönnies, Simmel and even Habermas, this project also cannot help but touch on the implicit parallels between the current socio-political challenges radical democrats are seeking to address, and those that seminal thinkers grappled with throughout the rise, reign, and fall of Germany's infamous National Socialist German Workers' Party. History here, it would seem, demands a certain amount of recognition.

Taken together, throughout the following four chapters I hope to offer a path from an essentially one dimensional, or 'purely-political', account of the radical agonal challenge to Rawls – and the still dominant assumptions about well-ordered, consensus centered, western democracy that his work exemplifies - to a fuller, more vibrant, multi-dimensional conceptual framework that allows us, in equal measure, to consider both *the political* and *the social* breadth and depth of agonal democracy. Or indeed, of any vision for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on perpetual productive, and not toxic or destructive, tension and disagreement in the context of diversity, difference, and change.

## Chapter 1

### ***Problématique: Limitations of a ‘Purely Political’ Account of Agonal Democracy***

While the most mainstream of democratic theory remains dominated by notions of deliberation, compromise, and consensus (Habermas, 1998 & 1999; Rawls, 1999 & 1996; Giddens, 2000; and Beck, 1997), that vision has also been challenged as part of an alternative paradigm - one that conceptually re-prioritized the political ideal of *agon*. As a small but prominent subset of Western social and political thought, agonal democratic theory contends that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate genuine conflict from the realm of politics (Connolly, 1991 & 1995; Honig 1993 & 2009; Tully, 1995 & 2006; and Hatab, 2002, Mouffe 2005a & 2005b). Challenging the mainstream of democratic theories which posit one or another form of social consensus or balance of interests among rational agents as the central ideal of the political, proponents of agonal democracy contend that such visions not only misunderstand the core character of ‘the political’ in both its present and historical forms, but “put in jeopardy the [very] future of democratic politics.” (Mouffe, 2005a: 7) Instead, drawing on the ancient Greek term *agon* - productive conflict between mutually respecting adversaries - agonal democratic theorists advocate an alternative vision of democracy constituted by and through perpetually open contest, and legitimate, though irresolvable, struggle. Yet, while considerable attention has been paid to this interest in agonal democracy (for example - Deveaux, 1999 or Schaap, 2009), existing scholarship has predominantly focused on the ethical, philosophical and broadly

‘political’ dimensions of such scholarship. Notwithstanding the importance that concepts such *ethos*, *demos*, *pluralism*, and even *society* have occupied in these emergent perspectives, the role of *the social* has largely been ignored, and where it has been considered, the social dimensions of agonal democracy are generally relegated to a sort of sedimented by-product of the political.

Belonging to the broad genre of critical theory, agonal democratic theory shares with a critical sociological approach the normative emancipatory aim of exposing and overturning existing systems of inequality and domination. At the heart of a call for agonal democracy, is a normative commitment to concurrently defend core democratic principles, and to expand notions of inclusivity to new, at times quite radical, heights. Despite the problematic treatment of the social, the agonal-democratic turn in political theory contains significant normative and analytic capacities worth exploring. Understood in the broad context of the ongoing expansion of a neoliberal capitalist economic logic into the political sphere, engaging with the under-theorized social dimensions of agonal democratic theory offers a unique opportunity to consider an alternative orientation to the neo-liberal conception of competition and conflict that dominates the contemporary socio-political spectrum. By challenging the logic of determination in political theory’s consideration of agonal democracy under which the social is essentially determined by the political, and ultimately expanding the nascent conceptualizations of the social underpinning this proposed agonal (re)turn, we are able to begin to ask a distinctive, hitherto ignored, and deeply important sociological question, namely: what are the underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon?

That said, before one can address the question of underlying social conditions of possibility for a normative agonal democratic ideal, one must consider the theoretical understanding of the social in such perspectives. This task offers its own set of challenges.

Despite an overarching orientation towards a democratic ethos that privileges productive contest over antagonistic conflict, and, less productively, a shared tendency to neglect the implicit social dimensions of their work, agonal democratic theorists offer a diverse range of perspectives, an exhaustive summary of which would be impractical. Instead, I propose to begin our engagement with this important sub-field through a more detailed consideration of analytic and philosophical foundations underpinning the work of one of its more well-known contributors. Specifically, this chapter considers and interrogates the concept of the social embedded in the agonal democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe, taken as emblematic of this contemporary agonal (re)turn, by exploring its origins in both Mouffe's early writings as well as the intended and unintended consequences of drawing on a certain, somewhat infamous, anti-liberal liberal thinker to found her radical democratic vision.

Like much of the contemporary scholarship around agonal democracy, Mouffe's recent work oscillates between conspicuous silence and problematic reductionism in relation to 'the social.' Marking a considerable shift from the elusive and complex conception of the social in *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), her work on agonal democracy describes the social as a collection of sedimentary "[...] practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted [...]" (Mouffe, 2005a: 17). The social here is reduced to little more than its most doxic qualities, multitudes and complexities summed up in terms of the wool that has been pulled over our collective eyes. Though perhaps more explicit than many of her fellow agonal democratic theorists, Mouffe's anemic conceptualization of the social remains representative of a broader tendency to neglect any meaningful consideration of the social when exploring agonal democratic possibilities. At its core, this neglect represents both an ideological and methodological gap. For Mouffe, the social

is the ‘naturalized’ byproduct of the political – of interest only in so far as a potential outcome of purely political contests. Since, according to this view, the social is not a meaningful ground of contestation, but the continual, and unreflexive, project of articulating an imaged space where all such contests are already resolved; any normative commitments to strong critical theory condemn it to near irrelevance. A critical sociological perspective explicitly rejects these assumptions, asserting instead that not only can the social be a site of important contestation, challenge and change, but that it is a conceptual precondition of the political. It is from such a perspective that I seek to engage with the notion of a radical democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon.

To these ends, this chapter is organized in terms of four interrelated tasks. First, the chapter begins by considering the philosophic and ratiocinative context in which Mouffe outlines her ontological account of ‘the political,’ its significance for a symmetrical account of ‘the social,’ as well as the implications of such an account given contemporary sociological debates on the analytic validity and practical usefulness of the notion of ‘society’ itself. Second, the significantly different account of society and ‘the social’ as proposed in Laclau & Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Structure* is examined. This considerably more detailed account is taken up in terms of both a conceptual background to, and an implicit trajectory toward, Mouffe’s later orientation to ‘the social’ as presented in more recent works. Third, I turn to Mouffe’s ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy, aiming to explore its key theoretical foundations, with an emphasis on the central role of her partial adaptation of the political theory of Carl Schmitt. Here Schmitt’s work is also explored in its own right, with an eye to identifying both the elements Mouffe explicitly borrows and adapts, as well as the possibility that there may be further conceptual inheritances which are neither desirable nor acknowledged. Finally, this chapter concludes by critically

engaging with the explicit and implicit assumptions underlying the conceptualization(s) of the social across Mouffe's work, both in their own right, and as emblematic of a broader under-conceptualization of the social across agonal democratic theory writ large. Arguing for the creative adaptability of classical sociological thinking<sup>1</sup>, I propose an alternate path for agonal democratic theory – one which continues to emphasize the political, without reducing or abandoning the social. Such a path offers a chance to reconsider the social through an alternative conceptual vocabulary; ultimately attempting to deploy a more robust conceptualization in order to strengthen this radical democratic vision by exposing the social conditions of possibility implied and required in such radical agonal democratic projects.

### *Contingent Ontologies*

At the outset of *On the Political*, Mouffe begins by distinguishing between 'politics' – the empirical field of political activity, and 'the political' – the core essence or primary conceptualization of that field. Specifically, Mouffe suggests that:

Politics refers to the 'ontic' level while 'the political' has to do with the 'ontological' one. This means that the ontics has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which [political] society is instituted. (Mouffe, 2005a: 8)

This distinction, borrowed from Heidegger<sup>2</sup>, is central to Mouffe's overall project, and important

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of creative adaptability is premised on the two-fold assumption that, first, classical sociological 'canon' is neither immutable nor infallible, and, second, that the true value of these lasting intellectual contributions – and indeed all such works across any discipline – is achieved through their ongoing adaptation, evolution and application to ever changing social inquiry; as discussed in the introduction to the edited collection: *Interrogating the Social: A Critical Sociology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. (Kurasawa, 2017: 20)

<sup>2</sup> Though not identical, Mouffe's ontic/ontological differentiation is drawn from Heidegger's distinction between *dasein*-ontological (essence of being) and *dasein*-ontical (existence of being). (Heidegger 1962: 32)

for agonal democratic theory writ large. The basic argument is that in order to understand and critically engage with the manifold practices of day-to-day politics, the ontic, one must first correctly understand what the political is at its essence, the ontological. The problem with much of mainstream contemporary democratic theory, according to Mouffe and other theorists of agonal democracy, is that it fundamentally misunderstands and misrepresents the ‘true’ ontological character of the political.

Of course, the language of 'ontics' and 'ontologies' can be problematic. Following Heidegger, 'ontological' implies the essence or essential character of a thing in objective terms. The ontological character of something is its 'true' essence, risking a conception that appears both acultural and ahistorical. However, Mouffe's discussion of the ontological character of 'the political' is less about asserting an objectively true 'essence,' and more about illuminating an essential character as it has been instituted, practiced, and replicated in specific cultural contexts – a sort of contingent ontology. Implying more than a broad generalization, but less than an immutable essence, the notion of a contingent ontology suggests a reference to a core character, which, though historically and culturally produced, none the less represents a constituting element of a thing as it has been instituted and practiced. Though Mouffe does not herself use the language of contingency directly with regards to her deployment of 'ontology,' her account of the character of the political suggests neither the eternality nor the immutability of a classical ontological claim. Further, read in the context of her earlier work on hegemony, upon which I will reflect further on below, a non-essentialist deployment of 'ontological' seems, however counterintuitive, to be necessary. Indeed, the critical normative bent of Mouffe's work on radical democracy hinges on the potential mutability of the political; first identifying the essential character of the political, and then immediately suggesting the need for its transfiguration.

Building on this notion of contingent ontology, I contend that a critical sociological perspective can similarly distinguish between the multiplicity of interactions, practices and institutions which constitute any given society, and the core – though historically contingent and politically contestable – 'essence' of *the social*. Just as Mouffe claims that “[...] the origin of our current incapacity to think in a political way [...]” (2005a: 9) is our misunderstanding of the ontological dimension of the political, I argue that the failure to critically consider the myriad social underpinnings of an agonal conception of democracy fatally impoverishes the inherent critical capacities of such perspectives, and obscures the fact that any ontological account of the political, however contingent and mutable, relies on a similar, and *a priori*, account of the social.

That said, it is important to distinguish a historically and culturally contingent ontological account of the social from the call for a consolidated corpus of sociological theory – a normalizing collection of research procedures, conceptualizations, and acknowledged meanings 'unifying' the discipline as a whole, which could include a single standardized account of the social. (Caillé, 2007: 179) Nor should it be confused with what Anne Sophie Krossa describes as the attempt to overcome the complexities of contemporary concepts of society by normative means (Krossa, 2009: 256), leveraging a particular theoretical understanding of the essence of the social to constrain or modify sociological study. The goal here is not to provide a unifying account of society, but rather to provide a theoretical lens through which to render visible the obscured social dimensions of the political ideal of agon. It is precisely because sociology is constantly navigating its own theoretical pluralism with regard to its object of enquiry, what Laurent Thévenot described as the result of the founding discordance between *the social* and *the science* of social sciences (Thévenot, 2007: 242), that it is uniquely qualified to contribute to such a perspective.

*Origins of a perspective – Laclau & Mouffe’s Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*

The introduction of a critical sociological perspective into the field of radical democratic theory is not merely a matter of addressing a gap; to varying degrees, many of the political philosophers and theorists who forward perspectives around agonal democracy do not only neglect, but in some cases actively oppose the notion that a critical study of society can be well served by taking ‘society’ or ‘the social’ as its object of inquiry. While Mouffe’s more recent work on political agonism may appear to arbitrarily dismiss ‘the social,’ her orientation towards sociological insights in this regard is not without significant foundation. To trace the trajectory of Mouffe’s contemporary lack of regard for what I am proposing to call the social dimensions of, and the conditions of possibility for, a radical democratic order premised on an ideal of agonal contest, it is useful to map Mouffe’s agonal democratic theory from its nascent presence in her earlier, and perhaps most famous, work – *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*.

Originally published in 1985 with co-author Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* presents both a thorough exploration of Marxism(s)’ various attempts to overcome what the authors describe as an inevitable crisis, and a compelling vision for a nuanced and theoretically rigorous path beyond the limitations they see as inherent in any traditional Marxist approach – aptly described at the time as post-Marxist theory. Simultaneously deeply committed to, and vigorously critical of, the various streams of Marxist theory and practice that inspired the majority of socialist action for the better part of century, Laclau and Mouffe move beyond obvious critique and offer a brilliant opportunity to rescue and adapt some of the central

objectives of this tradition. Exploring a wide range of Marxist theorists responding to the crisis of more contemporary Marxism/Socialism, the authors, through a sort of discursive archeology, unearth and consider the earliest seeds of what they see as the only path forward for any viable socialist strategy: a politically oriented conception of hegemony. Yet even more crucially for our purposes here, Mouffe and Laclau also present a clear and conceptually rich understanding of society and social relations. Although doubtless the theoretical foundation from which Mouffe's later, and by my assertion problematic, unique emphasis on 'the political' is borne; I propose that the rich and nuanced understanding presented in this earlier work - itself partially drawn from critical perspectives with deep sociological currents - neither requires, nor need desire, such a dismissal of 'the social' as a useful object of inquiry.

In order to properly consider the conceptualization of society and 'the social' as presented by Laclau and Mouffe, it is key to locate it within the specific project as part of which it is presented. As clear in its very title, Laclau and Mouffe's work had a very particular objective. As they themselves describe in the introduction to the second edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2000), their original project had been to reread, or *reactivate*, Marxist theory in light of the myriad of social conditions, crisis, and contemporary problems which the traditional field had been unable to respond to. To this effect Laclau and Mouffe present their original project in terms of:

...[a] reactivation [which] had to show the original contingency of the synthesis that Marxist categories attempted to establish. Instead of dealing with notions such as 'class', the triad of levels (the economic, the political, and the ideological) or the contradiction between forces and relations of production as sedimented fetishes, we tried to revive the preconditions which make their discursive operation possible, and asked ourselves questions concerning their continuity or discontinuity in contemporary capitalism. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: *viii*)

Mouffe and Laclau chart a path away from what they understand to be the problematic essentialism underpinning even a Gramscian inspired Marxism to a new theoretical landscape

that fully appreciates the contingent and discursively constituted character of social relations. Given this radical break from even the most generous re-imagining of the historical materialism contained in nearly every Marxist perspective, Laclau and Mouffe work hard to establish what they call ‘the process of articulation’ as not merely necessary to understanding why essentialist conception of class identity and interests no longer function, but as the primary constituting process for every dimension of what one could refer to as society itself. Drawing on the likes of Althusser, Wittgenstein, and Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe chart a course for their vision of socialist strategy beyond Marxist notions of base/superstructure, historical necessity, class unification, and even hegemony (in the Gramscian sense) by presenting a view of society understood as wholly the product of this discursive articulation.

The core of Mouffe and Laclau’s notion of the discursive constitution of social relations, while certainly radical when initially published, is not particularly controversial in a contemporary context. Armed with the early ‘postmodern’ and poststructuralist insights of Foucault, they propose that “society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.” (98) Society, and every social identity is not described via discourse, which would imply a primary plane of existence prior to such a mediated presentation, but rather exists only through and by the process of articulation. Yet such discursive composition is neither ever complete nor symbolically ‘clean.’ Such processes have as their necessary character elements of perpetual modification and symbolic remainders. As Laclau and Mouffe specifically outline:

Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (113)

This perspective of course is by no means alien to contemporary sociological inquiry. Indeed, the relationally constituted nature of social identities and structures has been a topic of debate and refinement for some time. Indeed, one could even argue that while most clearly articulated in the (post)modern theory aiming to move beyond traditional structuralist accounts of society, the core insight that social identities and relations are, to varying degrees, constituted via a multiplicity of social interactions, has been a thread of sociological inquiry dating back to classical perspectives.

There is not, and can never be according to Mouffe and Laclau, a fixed or even momentarily 'sutured' instance of a unified *society*. The social is by its very nature perpetual movement, and therefore any conception of a unified whole can only be understood as an artificial, and political, attempt at discursive domination. Specifically, they conclude:

The incomplete character of every totality necessarily leads us to abandon, as a terrain of analysis, the premise of 'society' as a sutured and self-defined totality. 'Society' is not a valid object of discourse. There is no single underlying principle fixing – and hence constituting – the whole field of differences. The irresolvable interiority/exteriority tension is the condition of any social practice: necessity only exists as a partial limitation of the field of contingency. It is in this terrain, where neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible, that the social is constituted. (111)

Armed with this radically contingent understanding of the social and society, Mouffe and Laclau are able to return to their central question – how to comprehend and forward socialist struggle in a field, which can never truly be fully constituted, of constant partial articulations? Their answer, as somewhat evident from Mouffe's later work, is to (re)turn to the political. While not explicitly or thoroughly defined in this early work, Laclau and Mouffe present the political as the field of *antagonisms*, understood as the external limits on the social preventing its objectification. In this sense "the constitution of the very identities which will have to confront one another antagonistically, becomes now the first of all *political problems*." (134)

This is the crux of Laclau and Mouffe’s attempt to reorient a socialist project beyond the limits of a historical materialist Marxist philosophy. Social relations are understood as constant and incomplete articulations, while society itself is the ever incomplete and impossible unification of those constant articulations. More importantly, antagonisms, understood as the necessary limitations of any discursive articulation, are presented as equally contingent and transitory boundaries of possibility of society and the social. “...[I]f society is never transparent to itself because it is unable to constitute itself as an objective field, neither is antagonism entirely transparent, as it does not manage totally to dissolve the objectivity of the social.” (129) Because society and social relations are infinite and incomplete discursive articulations in constant motion with the antagonisms which represent their ever-shifting limits, the only viable direction for a socialist agenda is through political struggle – wherein the boundaries and limits of such articulations are, to some extent, more openly contested. Revolution is thus replaced with, or transposed to, the political struggle for discursive domination, the establishment of a new, although always contingent, partial hegemonic order.

Without any need or interest in debating the extent to which the ever shifting discursively constituted dimensions of any ‘society’ is such that there is no other dimension *before, beyond* or *adjacent* which might be worthy of analytic consideration, it remains unclear why such a viewpoint necessarily means abandoning ‘society’ or ‘the social’ as a valid, and particularly rich, object of inquiry. Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of the materiality of discursive articulation would seem to provide ample theoretical space to explore a rich and nuanced social field – without any need to disprove or dissemble a perspective that sees such an object of inquiry as both symbolically constituted and materially ‘real.’ Nor is it clear from why a perspective accepting the infinitude of discursive nodes which can never completely create any unitary

symbolic object of the social outside a hegemonic projection in any way insulates the field of ‘the political’ from a similar set of insights. Surely if we understand that all social identities and relations are articulations, so too must we understand that any and all political identities or relations are equally such. Indeed, it would seem that the thin basis for the move to the political here could only be premised on the rhetorical move to distinguish the two by means of asserting a sort of self-reflexivity as more inherent in one – that is to say if we were to consider the political as more useful as a field of study, and as a space for action, in so far as we contend that it is more acutely aware of its discursively constituted nature. An assertion that would seem difficult, at best, to forward.

### *A New Agonal Imaginary*

As noted at the onset of this chapter, there is a significant distance between the conceptualization of society and ‘the social’ as initially laid out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and how that vision is summarized and distilled in Mouffe’s later works on radical pluralist democracy. The social gradually shifts from an incompletable attempt to present perpetual contingent articulations of identity as a unified ‘society,’ to the veiled sediment of past political struggle – the passive product of hegemonic deployments. That said, understanding the theoretical explorations and propositions deployed in her previous work with Laclau, a clear trajectory can be mapped. The starting point for Mouffe’s ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy, and the emphasis of a (re)turn to the political, is an explicit conceptual move away from the perceived burdens and limitations of Marxism(s). It is an alternative to the ‘objective’ analysis of a materially determined society, class structure and identity, power relations, and

‘necessary’ character of inevitable revolution. Mouffe’s proposed ‘radical and plural democracy’ is presented as a “...reformulation of the socialist project that avoids the twin pitfalls of Marxist socialism and social democracy, while providing the left with a *new imaginary*...” (Mouffe, 2005b: 10 – *emphasis added*)

At the core of this new imaginary is the proposed decentering of society and return to ‘the political’ as the chief object of study and landscape for social action. Mouffe proposes that it is *the political*, in both its ontic and ontological dimensions, which must become the focal point of any normative project to promote a new conception of democracy. From this basis, Mouffe takes on what she, and many other agonal democratic theorists, see as the imminent and eminent failures of modern liberal democratic theory through an analysis of how such perspectives (mis)understand the essential character and content of politics and the political. As mentioned above, this misunderstanding relates primarily to how many contemporary democratic theorists conceptualize *antagonism* and *conflict* within the political. However, it extends beyond these elements to the conceptualization of *identity* and *difference*, the *nature of collective human existence* or ‘*civilization*,’ as well as the appropriate *objectives* and *ideals* underpinning a vision of a just democratic social order. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Chief among the claims that theorists of radical pluralist democracy reject from the mainstream of liberal democratic theory, is the notion that conflict and social antagonisms eventually will, or even can be, overcome. For Mouffe and other theorists of agonal democracy, the crisis in contemporary Western politics is not about a failure to establish new consensus-based national or international orders with which to contest and replace the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, but rather the pressing need to establish the conditions for a continuing interplay with, and productive conflict between, a multiplicity of new *identities* and *differences*

constantly forming and reforming throughout the social world as well as the various collectivities and interests to which they give rise. All identities in this sense are deeply political, as are differences. As another agonal democratic theorist, William Connolly, explains:

An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctiveness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies, themselves in need of exploration, to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or into one of its numerous surrogates... ..Identity stands in a complex, political relation to the difference it seeks to fix. (Connolly, 1991: 64)

It is in a comparable sense that Mouffe contends that, by their nature, collective identities always entail a we/they distinction or discrimination. (Mouffe, 2005a: 5) In relation to such identities and differences, agonal democratic theorists contend that the task of democratic politics “is not to overcome them through consensus but to construct them in a way that energizes the democratic confrontation.” (6)

It is, at least in part, from this perspective that agonal democratic theorists so vehemently reject consensus as a viable ideal for democracy or politics. Consensus, in the context of identity formation, inherently both political and confrontational, implies nothing less than the domination of the field by one or few congealed, or normalized, we/them discriminations. Spaces for new identities to emerge, fight for recognition, and ultimately articulate themselves and the collective interests they bring to the fore, cannot be guaranteed under a conception of politics that privileges agreement and unity. As Mouffe explains:

The new rights that are being claimed today are the expression of differences whose importance is only now being asserted, and they are no longer rights that can be universalized. Radical democracy demands that we acknowledge difference – the particular, the multiple, the heterogeneous, in effect, everything that had been excluded by the concept of Man in the abstract. (13)

Yet this is not the exclusive reason why democratic theories proposing politics can overcome conflict so concerns proponents of radical pluralist democracy. Beyond any reference to

identity/difference, Mouffe also invokes the insights of psychoanalytic tradition, and suggests that any viable conception of politics must "...acknowledge that 'the state of nature' in its Hobbesian dimension can never be completely eradicated but only controlled..." (6) Conflict, violence, and antagonisms are, according to Mouffe, more channeled than mitigated by democracy – and can never be completely resolved or eliminated. They are inherent and inescapable elements of *collective human existence*, and where democracy fails to provide a viable channel for such tensions, they may find expression in far more destructive articulations of "confrontations between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities." (6)

From this perspective, democracy as a political order is neither necessary nor safe. For Mouffe, the democratic project is inherently fragile. One of any number of permutations of collective human existence; an organized attempt to order, contain or control the immutable realities of perpetual tension and conflict. Mouffe's project, and indeed the aim of most agonal democratic theorists, is to deepen and strengthen contemporary democracy so as to ensure its continuation as the principle means by which more vicious alternatives remain suppressed, while harnessing the (literally) creative power of human contest.

This is by no means to suggest that agonal theorists generally, nor Mouffe specifically, promote radical pluralistic democratic social orders only in so far as they constrain or contain other more violent alternatives. On the contrary, Mouffe proposes that a radically pluralistic democracy represents the clearest path to promoting the *objectives* and *ideals* of a so-called just society. In conversation with the likes of John Rawls, several agonal democratic theorists equate the need to protect the role of conflict in political orders with the principles of justice. However, whereas Rawls famously offered a political theory capable of proposing such core principles, agonal democratic theorists focus on the need to keep such contestations forever open. As

Mouffe notes in direct response to Rawls' Theory of Justice:

Political philosophy in a modern democratic society should not be a search for foundations but the elaboration of a language providing us with metaphoric redescriptions of our social relations... ..It should therefore be possible to combine the defence of pluralism and the priority of right characteristics of modern democracy with a revalorization of the political understood as collective participation in a public sphere where interests are confronted, conflicts resolved, divisions exposed, confrontations staged, and in that way – as Machiavelli was the first to recognize – liberty secured. (57)

In this way, far from being detached from empirical considerations, most theorists of agonal democracy pursue a deeply critical normative commitment to the transformation of the manifold practices of conventional politics in various (predominantly Western) social and cultural contexts. Agonal democratic theorists do not demand a particular set of values, but rather aim to make clear that all values must be understood as contingent and contestable – and that the strengthening and deepening of democracy depends not on congealing and insulating certain foundations, but rather acknowledging and productively channelling the inevitable tensions and conflicts that will, and must arise around any and all values. It is this, for Mouffe, that constitutes a return to *the political*.

### *Against Consensus*

As noted above, agonal democratic theory fundamentally opposes the idea that consensus can be a viable aim of politics. While this can certainly be seen as a direct response to certain explicitly 'post conflict' theories of democracy, it is more broadly a philosophical position taken in contrast to some of the most influential contemporary political theorists, specifically: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Indeed, many agonal democratic theorists locate their positions explicitly in contrast to Rawls, Habermas, and the various communitarian, liberal, and libertarian

critiques of their writings. In this way, like a large portion of political philosophy touching on matters of democracy or justice, agonal democratic theory emerges, at least in part, in terms of an alternative perspective vis-à-vis decades of debate and conversation surrounding John Rawls' seminal *A Theory of Justice*, and its subsequent modification in *Political Liberalism*.

Originally published in 1971, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* has been widely understood to represent a renewal of contemporary moral and political philosophy in North America. Building on several decades of disparate ideas regarding justice as fairness, distributive justice, liberty, civil disobedience, and deliberation, *A Theory of Justice* aimed to articulate a comprehensive philosophy of justice. As Rawls himself noted of the original project's ambitious objective:

My ambitions for the book will be completely realized if it enables one to see more clearly the chief structural features of the alternative conception of justice that is implicit in the contract tradition and points the way to its further elaboration. Of the traditional views, it is this conception, I believe, which best approximates our considered judgements of justice and constitutes the most appropriate moral basis for a democratic society. (Rawls, 1999: xviii)

While the work inspired a generation of adulation, agreement, rejection, critique and counter-critique across the social sciences, few would argue against its importance. Though perspectives vary, many, including Mouffe, have noted that Rawls' early work represented an important step forward for a liberal conception of justice. As Mouffe notes, *A Theory of A Justice* is noteworthy to agonal theorists for three key reasons: **1)** it attempts a defence of political liberalism independent of economic liberalism; **2)** it tries to provide an alternative to the 'hegemonic' utilitarian thought dominating the mainstay of liberal moral philosophy; and **3)** it begins to move away from the idea of a universalistic theoretical framework, in favour of a more 'situated' or contingent perspective. (Mouffe, 2005b: 42-43) Of these three elements, it is Rawls' attempt to move beyond a universalistic moral framework that Mouffe believes is most important; an

attempt which Rawls continued in his restatement of his principles of justice in his later work - *Political Liberalism*. In this way, understanding Rawls' work, at least in its barest outline, is a useful point of reference for understanding the ways in which agonal democratic theorists both built upon and rejected the theoretical landscape it helped to shape.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls sets out to determine the principles of justice which could be agreed to by reasonable members of a liberal democratic society. Rawls proposes a core conception of justice as fairness, representing two core principles of justice:

[First, that] each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all. [Second, that] social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (Rawls, 1999: 266)

From a sociological perspective, one of the most interesting elements of this account is that, explicitly building on the theoretical tradition of the social contract, Rawls considers the question of justice as fairness from the perspective of principles which not only provide the basis for political, social, and economic institutions; but that also belie a basic social unity as agreed upon by reasonable members of a liberal democratic society – a social contract. In this way, the principles of justice laid out in *A Theory of Justice* are less interesting than the conditions under which Rawls' contends they can be extrapolated.

For Rawls, the key question for *A Theory of Justice* was to determine which traditional conceptions of justice, or variants thereof, were the best principles for realizing liberty and equality? Assuming society could be viewed as a fair system of cooperation, how are the 'fair terms of cooperation' to be determined? (Rawls, 1996: 22) The answer, argues Rawls, is in adapting the doctrine of the social contract, specifically:

...the fair terms of social cooperation are conceived as agreed to by those engaged in it, that is, by free and equal citizens who are born into the society in which they lead their lives. But their agreement, like any other valid agreement, must be entered into under the appropriate conditions.

In particular, these conditions must situate free and equal persons fairly and must not allow some person greater bargaining advantages than others. Further, such things as threats of force and coercion, deception and fraud must be excluded. (23)

This leads Rawls to propound on his most well-known conceptions – the ‘original position’ under a ‘veil of ignorance.’ Under this abstract construction, persons do not know their social positions or their particular beliefs/views, what Rawls later describes as their comprehensive doctrines. Similarly, the hypothetical participants have no knowledge of their ethnic origins, sex, gender, sexual preferences, or any of what Rawls describes as their ‘native endowments’ – intelligence, health, strength, etc. Thus the principles of justice are those principles which one could reasonably imagine all participants in a hypothetical original moment of deliberation would reasonably agree to, assuming that all notions of identity and difference could be temporarily veiled.(25) These principles could be imagined to remain relatively stable, assuming what Rawls’ described as a ‘well ordered society.’

Of course, both the notion of a well-ordered society, and a hypothetical agreement between participants veiled from nearly every potential source of disagreement, is problematic from a sociological perspective. Indeed, while an undeniably seminal and central piece of work, *A Theory of Justice* drew as much critique as it did acclaim. Notably many argued that Rawls had fallen short of his goal of providing a non-universalist account of justice – instead ‘veiling’ his views of human nature, natural law, or psychology under his complex thought experiment. Responding to nearly two decades of critiques and contributions, Rawls made the rare move of amending many of his original conceptions through his subsequent restatement in *Political Liberalism*. As Mouffe points out, one of his important developments was to clarify his intentions vis-à-vis the contingent nature of society. Rawls makes explicit that he never intended to define universal principles of justice, but rather historically contingent ones. As Mouffe points out of this shift:

Now, he also emphasizes that the task of articulating a public conception of justice is primarily a practical social task, not an epistemological one, and that ‘what justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent and given to us, but its congruence with a deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, given our history and the tradition embedded in our public life, it is the most reasonable doctrine for us. (Mouffe, 2005b: 43)

Rawls himself characterizes the essential change in his thinking between *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* as recognizing what he describes as the fact of reasonable pluralism.

Justice as fairness as originally outlined, admits Rawls, was, at least in part, conceived in terms of a comprehensive doctrine. (Rawls, 1996: xviii) The problem is that a modern democratic society, in contrast to a community<sup>3</sup> centred around a single unifying comprehensive doctrine.

Instead, Rawls argues that liberal democratic societies are, in their contemporary context, characterized by what he calls the fact of reasonable pluralism. Specifically, he says:

A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all citizens. (xviii)

The fact of reasonable pluralism, Rawls argues, leads one to realize that the conception of a well-ordered society – as laid out in *A Theory of Justice* – is unrealistic. Instead, the question of stability over time requires a vision of justice that can be accepted by a society which operates under the ever-present conditions of a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible world views. As such, Rawls recasts justice as fairness as a purely political conception of justice – one which he then aims to show can be justified and remain stable in a contemporary democratic context. To do this, Rawls introduces the concept of an overlapping consensus. As he explains:

In such a consensus, the reasonable doctrines endorse the political conception, each from its own point of view. Social unity is based on a consensus on the political conception; and stability is possible when the doctrines making up the consensus are affirmed by society’s politically active citizens and the requirements of justice are not too much in conflict with citizens’ essential

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction Rawls makes between a contemporary society and a traditional ‘community’ is particularly interesting in relation to the work of Ferdinand Tönnies, which we explore in greater detail in chapter 3.

interests as formed and encouraged by their social arrangements. (134)

Rawls is also careful to be clear that this overlapping consensus is more, or ‘thicker,’ than a simple *modus vivendi*. In order for an overlapping consensus amongst reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines to serve as the basis for a public justification of principles of justice, such a consensus cannot be mere compromise. Indeed, assuming such an overlapping consensus is feasible, Rawls posits that it, and the principles it endorsed, would become the foundation for a stable public reason – the criteria by which key questions of justice are weighed and by which the power of the state is exercised. (139)

Despite recognizing the fact of reasonable pluralism and attempting to recast justice as fairness in purely political terms, for many, Rawls does not go far enough. Indeed, for Mouffe, Rawls cannot escape certain core assumptions he carries throughout his work. Mouffe argues that Rawls’ perspective as a moral philosopher sabotages his attempts to think politically.

Specifically, Mouffe charges:

As far as politics is present in Rawls, it is reduced to the ‘politics of interest,’ that is, the pursuit of different interests defined prior to and independently of their possible articulation by competing alternative discourses. The aim of his theory is to regulate that pursuit by establishing agreed-upon, neutral rules. (Mouffe, 2005b: 48)

The problem is, for Mouffe and all agonal democratic theorists, there can be no ‘neutral rules’ outside of the political process of establishing, supporting, or contesting them. This is why, while Mouffe is sympathetic to many of Rawls’ aims, she ultimately rejects his theoretical trajectory. The core of the call for a democratic ethos premised on political agon, is precisely the belief that any ‘rules’ can never be understood as neutral. As Mouffe concludes on this point:

Rawls’ claim that he has found the rational solution to this question has to be rejected outright. For there cannot be such a solution, providing an undisputed and ‘publicly recognized point of view from which all citizens can examine before one another whether or not their political and social institutions are just.’ It is the very characteristic of modern democracy to impede such a final fixation of the social order and to preclude the possibility for a discourse to establish a definite structure. Different discourses will, indeed, attempt to dominate the field of discursivity and create nodal points through the practice of articulation, but they can only succeed in

temporarily fixing meaning. (52-53)

In this way, Mouffe, and agonal democratic theorists writ large, reject the core of Rawls' attempt to account for the fact of reasonable pluralism. To believe that principles of justice, organizing and stabilizing principles for society's social and political institutions, the very basis of what is considered 'reasonable' in a public sphere, could be fixed and determined outside of the perpetual contestation and power relations of the political not only threatens to present an *apolitical* conception of society, but an *anti-political* one.

### *Carl Schmitt and the 'nature' of the Political*

If one cannot overstate the importance and impact of John Rawls' work on the (re)emergence of a liberal theory of justice in contemporary western moral and political theory, it is likewise difficult to understate the more recent effects of the (re)discovery and popularity of Carl Schmitt's political writings by a number of contemporary political philosophers, including Mouffe, which have propelled Schmitt's previously academically censured materials (back) into the mainstream. Though much of his work would seem naturally at odds with any contemporary pluralistic theory of society or politics, his conceptualization of the political, as well as his incisive critique of liberal economic-centric political orders, has found resonance among many left leaning scholars, and is at the heart of Mouffe's proposed 'purely political' account of agonal democracy. That said, prior to exploring the ways in which Mouffe, and others, have been selectively inspired by, and have creatively adapted, many of Schmitt's core insights, it is worth considering Schmitt's perspectives in their own right. Specifically, it is important to understand Schmitt's core arguments, both those taken and those rejected by contemporary scholars, as laid out in one of his most influential works – *The Concept of the*

*Political.*

While there has been considerable recent work which has focused on Schmitt's contributions and their merits, for our purposes this chapter considers Schmitt in terms of five of his core assertions about: **1)** human nature; **2)** pluralism and liberalism, **3)** relatively independent endeavors of human thought and action,' **4)** the state as 'sovereign,' and **5)** the distinctions between friends, enemies, and monsters. That said, before exploring these five pillars, it is necessary to take a moment to consider Schmitt's contemporary re-emergence, the various perspectives on the relevance of his Nazi heritage, as well as the ethical and practical implications of drawing on his work.

An influential political theorist leading up the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, Carl Schmitt's personal and intellectual legacy has become inextricably intertwined with his decision to join and support (many argue both practically and intellectually) the National Socialist party. Yet even the degree to which Schmitt influence should and has been limited by his infamous political orientations is hotly debated. While many continue to express concerns about the continued (re)emergence and influence of Schmitt's legal and political writings, others accuse recent Schmitt scholars of having "uncritically bought into a questionable German tradition that since the 1950s has sought to checkmate Schmitt out of any legitimate political discourse." (Piccone and Ulmen, 2002: 3) While it is not necessary to explore all the contours of this debate, it is important to at least consider some key points. First, Carl Schmitt did, as a matter of historical fact, choose to align himself with the Nazis party on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1933. (Mehring, 2014: 282) More to the point, this was not the passive defensive 'joining' the party that characterized a necessary survival mechanism for so many under Hitler's oppressive regime<sup>4</sup>, this was, while no

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<sup>4</sup> Schmitt's alignment with and intellectual support of the Nazis regime as an already established and influential political theorist and legal scholar needs to be properly distinguished from many other German intellectuals who had

doubt a complicated decision, an active commitment. As Reinhard Mehring writes in his detailed biography of Schmitt:

Schmitt put his collaboration into the context of a general decision and general responsibility: he did not delude himself over the fact that he had crossed the Rubicon, leaving the bourgeois Rechtsstaat behind, and he knew that there was no way back into bourgeois scholarship [bürgerliche Wissenschaft]. From the very beginning, Schmitt saw the National Socialist state as also an anti-Semitic state. There were very few others who saw politics from the perspective of fundamental conflicts and battles to quite the same degree. That Schmitt had entered the 'Reich of the nether demons', as Ernst Niekisch put it, and cooperated with a gang of vandals, robbers, murderers, and madmen, would soon become apparent." (285)

Schmitt's involvement with the Nazis party was also not minimal. As another matter of historical fact, Schmitt was identified as a 'significant figure' at the end of the second world war and was incarcerated as a potential war criminal for a year and a half (from September 1945 to March 1947) by American and German authorities. (Piccone and Ulmen, 2002: 14)

Of course, many, including Mouffe, argue that Schmitt's keen insights into democracy, politics and liberalism should not be ignored on the basis of his questionable political allegiances. As Mouffe argues:

Though Schmitt's criticisms were developed at the beginning of the century, they are, in fact, still pertinent and it would be superficial to believe that the writer's subsequent membership of the National Socialist Party means that we can simply ignore them. On the contrary, I believe it is by facing up to the challenge posed by such a rigorous and perspicacious opponent that we shall succeed in grasping the weak points in a the dominant conception of modern democracy, in order that these may be remedied (Mouffe, 2002b: 118)

Others go further still, and characterize resistance to accepting Schmitt in terms of a mainstream liberal 'campaign' to delegitimize radical critiques that are viewed as potentially dangerous to modern capitalist-liberal-democratic regimes. On the far side of this perspective, Piccone and Ulmen suggest that:

...[H]ostility toward Schmitt's work is so intense that it spills over onto what anti-Schmittians smear as "Schmitt apologists" – those who view Schmitt as someone more interesting and relevant than a mere Nazi ideologue. This intensity cannot be explained solely in terms of

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little choice but to join the party. Notably Jürgen Habermas 'joining' the Hitler Youth in 1940 (at age 10) and brief time on the Western Front in 1945 (at age 15) would serve as a counterexample on the far other end of the spectrum.

differences of scholarly opinion. It is rooted in more subtle political issues. While the motivation seems to be clear, i.e., that the “apology” somehow is related to a diabolical conservative attempt to re-habilitate fascist or Nazis ideology by de-Nazifying Schmitt and legitimating his dangerous ideas, the charge makes no sense and is a typical result of the confusion of European and American political realities. (Piccone & Ulmen, 2002: 11)

Interestingly, many of those who feel Schmitt is unduly discounted by some for his involvement with and support of the Nazis regime, including, to some extent, Mouffe, implicitly present Schmitt the political theorist as analytically distinguishable from Schmitt the Nazi whose legal scholarship supported many of the changes that enabled the Third Reich. As another matter of historical fact, while being interrogated during his incarceration at Nuremberg, it is clear that post-war authorities were equally interested in Schmitt’s practical and intellectual support of the National Socialist Party. As the following except from an interrogation of Schmitt by Robert Kempner on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1947 clearly demonstrates:

**Kempner:** It concerns the theoretical foundation of aggressive warfare. You surely know that it was an aggressive war?

**Schmitt:** I wrote a work on the discriminatory concept of war.

**Kempner:** You can assume that everything you have written is well known and these demonstrate that you have theoretically established the foundations for war crimes, wars of aggression.

**Schmitt:** No, that is not correct.

**Kempner:** Would you not admit that your influence in this area is much more significant and much more dangerous than when, on the basis of your work, some members of the SS ultimately invade foreign countries and shoot people en masse?

**Schmitt:** That is taking things too far. I would very much like to address that matter. That is a complicated subject. (as republished in Telos 2007(139) 35-43)

It was, as a point of historical fact, very much Schmitt’s political philosophy, as much as his legal scholarship, which Kempner and others in Nuremberg believed made Schmitt responsible if not culpable for much of the wars’ atrocities. Schmitt maintained, throughout his interrogations, that his writings did not explicitly legitimize Nazis activities and often reiterated his support for free academic expression. While this ultimately was accepted, in so far as Schmitt was not eventually released and not charged with any war crimes, Kempner made his thoughts clear on this subject near the end of this interview noted above “We are the last ones who would deny that right. But

we will not allow democracy attacked with the apparent means of democracy and have men murdered.” (43)

There is of course no easy way to navigate this fundamental disagreement as to whether Schmitt’s insights can or should be disentangled from the Nazis party he helped legitimize and support. Though Mouffe draws primarily from Schmitt’s writings which predate his affiliation with the National Socialist party, the intrinsic pragmatic amorality of Schmitt’s understanding of conflict, enemies, war and the very essence of the political remains difficult ground to navigate. At the same time, there is a logic and symmetry to Mouffe’s desire to face Schmitt’s critiques of liberal democracy head on; as an agonal theorist, it only stands to reason that Mouffe would look to generate productive tensions from oppositional points of view. From a critical sociological perspective, what is important to recognize is both the promise and the potential pitfalls of the rich theoretical terrain Schmitt presents. While Mouffe explicitly aims to creatively adapt Schmitt’s work to her own purposes while explicitly rejecting significant elements of his theoretical trajectory – there remains a significant possibility that even a selective adoption of Schmitt’s conceptual vocabulary may bring with it significant if subtle theoretical assumptions and implications.

With this in mind, we turn our attention to the first of five pillars of Schmitt’s thought as noted above: his view of human nature, and his assertions regarding the impact of such views on political theory. Though not necessarily one of the insights contemporary scholars have emphasized, Schmitt writes clearly and passionately about his assumptions regarding human nature, and, perhaps more importantly, how such assumptions are necessary to any viable understanding of politics or the political. Human nature can for Schmitt, without question, only be understood in negative terms. Furthermore, Schmitt contends that recognizing the ‘negative’

nature of humanity is essential to being able to grasp, in any useful manner, the essence of politics and the political. Near the end of *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt concludes that:

What remains is the remarkable and, for many, certainly disquieting diagnosis that all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e., by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being. This can be easily documented in the works of every specific political thinker. Insofar as they reveal themselves as such they all agree on the idea of a problematic human nature, no matter how distinct they are in rank and prominent in history. (Schmitt, 2007: 61)

Schmitt supports this assertion by way of reference to a range of political thinkers, most notably: Machiavelli, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Hobbes, and Hegel – although he grants that the last “to be sure, at times also shows his double face.” (61) Each, in their own way, demonstrates this essential recognition of humanity’s nature by reference to either the concept of evil, the construction of a violent ‘state of nature,’ or both. Of course, any student of the theorists above will be quick to note the problems with attempting to group such figures together – even in the most general sense. To suggest that Hobbes’ view of human nature and the nasty, brutish and short character of life outside the social contract is equivalent to Nietzsche’s contention that man nature is a rope strung between man and overman above an abyss – is trite at best. That said, taken at its most generous reading, Schmitt’s claim is that all truly ‘political’ theorists have a view of human nature that acknowledges humankind as “dynamic and dangerous.” (61)

In contrast, Schmitt argues that those who hold that human nature is, at its core, noble and ‘good,’ cannot ever come to any viable articulation of politics or the political. This is because, as noted above, Schmitt defines the political in terms of the ever-present possibility of war – which he does not, contra a shallow reading, have any delusions about its ignoble character. War is authorized murder for Schmitt, necessary at times, but never ‘good.’ For Schmitt, a starting point which, in his view mistakenly, takes the essential character of humankind to be noble or good, cannot help but emphasize society over politics. As he contends:

Without being actually anarchist they are polemically directed against the intervention of the state. Ingenuous anarchism reveals that the belief in the natural goodness of man is closely tied to the radical denial of state and government. One follows from the other, and both foment each other... . . . This means that society determines its own order and that state and government are subordinate and must be distrustingly controlled and bound to precise limits. (60)

Leaving aside the problematically totalizing and reductionist tendencies of Schmitt's argument, the position he advances raises an interesting sociological question: namely, does an understanding of conflict as productive, or even constitutive, of a sphere of human endeavour as important as the political necessitate a view of human nature as, to use Schmitt's implied simplification, 'bad?' The answer, from a sociological perspective, is quite clearly: no. Indeed, many canonical and classical sociological thinkers posit complex and productive roles for social and political conflict, even violent crime and unrest, without relying on a conception of human nature as inherently violent or aggressive. Several examples of such influential sociological conceptions we will explore later in this work, including political and sociological thinkers Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies. This is not, however what Schmitt concludes. For Schmitt, the folly of those who cannot recognize the dangerous nature of the human animal is that they promote *unpolitical* or *anti-political* conceptions of the political which subordinate or dissolve politics in favour of amorphous or disingenuous notions of society. This, of course, ties in directly with the far more prominent second pillar of Schmitt's thought: his deep distrust and critique of liberal pluralism.

The radical rejection of the political and government is, according to Schmitt, proportional to the degree to which one believes in "the goodness of man's nature." (61) Quoting Thomas Paine, Schmitt reminds us that "society is the result of our reasonably regulated needs, government the result of our wickedness." (61) Liberalism, for Schmitt, is one of the most dangerous examples of such non-political theories. Schmitt's critique of Liberalism is twofold. First, Schmitt fundamentally believes that liberals' focus on pluralism, as expressed through the

relatively autonomous liberal individual, privileges society over politics and represents conditions which necessarily weaken and ultimately destroy the sovereign state, demos, and the political itself. Specifically, he contends that:

A pluralist theory is either the theory of state which arrives at the unity of state by a federalism of social associations or a theory of the dissolution or rebuttal of the state. If, in fact, it challenges the entity and places the political association on equal level with the others, for example, religious or economic associations, it must, above all, answer the question as to the specific content of the political. (44)

Liberalism, Schmitt charges, deploys this latter form of a pluralist conception of the state, which lowers the sovereign state to the level of other societal associations. This, he contends, effectively reduces the sovereign government to “a mere servant of the essentially economically determined society” (44) either as one of many equal associations, or as the head of a conglomerate of diverse, but relatively equal, associations. For a state to function, according to Schmitt, there can be no challenge to its sovereign power – that is to say its monopoly on the political.

The second major charge Schmitt levels against liberalism is that it is, in effect, a fraudulent political ideology. While, according to Schmitt, liberalism is necessarily oppositional to the sovereign state, he charges that it neither produces any meaningful plan to repair or reform the state, nor advances any positive theory of the state. Instead, Schmitt accuses liberalism of substituting the essential character of the political (the friend/enemy distinction) with the logic of another sphere of human activity. He argues that:

Liberalism in one of its typical dilemmas [...] of intellect and economics has attempted to transform the enemy from the viewpoint of economics into a competitor and from the intellectual point into a debating adversary. In the domain of economics there are no enemies, only competitors, and in a thoroughly moral and ethical world perhaps only debating adversaries. It is irrelevant here whether one rejects, accepts, or perhaps finds it an atavistic remnant of barbaric times that nations continue to group themselves according to friend and enemy, or hopes that the antithesis will one day vanish from the world, or whether it is perhaps sound pedagogic reasoning to imagine that enemies no longer exist at all. The concern here is neither with abstractions nor with normative ideals, but with inherent reality and the real possibility of such a distinction. (28)

This critique of a liberal understanding of the political, or the lack thereof, is, alongside other of Schmitt's historical critiques of liberal parliamentary democracy, at the heart of what Mouffe believes should be considered and partially recovered from Schmitt. According to Mouffe, Schmitt was absolutely correct in his charge that liberalism instrumentalizes politics in terms of intellectual and especially economic logics. As she notes:

While not accepting the consequences Schmitt draws, we can nevertheless acknowledge that he has to be taken seriously when he points up the deficiencies of liberal parliamentary democracy. To the extent that its institutions are perceived as mere instrumental techniques, it is improbable that it can be assured of the type of adherence which would guarantee effective participation. The 'political virtue' Montesquieu regarded as indispensable to democracy and which he identified with 'the love of laws and the fatherland' cannot develop in such a context. (Mouffe, 2002b: 120)

This brings us to the third and fourth pillars of Schmitt's concept of the political, that human endeavours of thought or action can be understood in terms of relatively independent 'spheres' (in the Habermasian sense) which have their own distinct logics, and that the essential logic underpinning the political absolutely necessitates the sovereignty of a single political entity – the state.

While Schmitt's clear focus is on the essential character of the political, he frames the core distinction upon which the political rests – the friend/enemy distinction – in contrast to similarly core distinctions all other spheres of human endeavours are based. While Schmitt does not go into great detail as to why the core of any of these realms can be understood in terms of the final distinction they render, he offers several as examples. In the realm of the moral, Schmitt points to the distinctions between good and evil. In the aesthetic and economic spheres, he points to the distinction of beautiful/ugly and profitable/unprofitable as core. This is an important assumption within Schmitt's work, one which is simultaneously seductive and potentially problematically essentializing. The emphasis on core distinctions provides Schmitt with a vehicle to offer ontological (albeit potentially and problematically essentialist) accounts of

these spheres via a core binary opposition around which each is organized. There are of course interesting parallels here with Hegel (although Schmitt is clear that he is not proposing a dialectic tension); and with Habermas' description of the dangers of allowing the logic of one sphere (the economic for Habermas) to colonize and dominate other distinctive spheres (most notably the civil or public sphere). Indeed, very much in a way that resonates with some of Habermas' early work, Schmitt notes that the overlap or deployment of the non-political distinctions into the sphere of the political can have significant consequences. Liberalism, as we have seen, makes such a move according to Schmitt, by prioritizing the core distinctions or logics of the economic sphere and consequently weakening and potentially dissolving the sovereign state. At the same time, Schmitt also notes that the logics of other spheres can be deployed, either organically or strategically, to intensify otherwise purely political distinction. He concludes this point, however, by cautioning us:

A war need be neither something religious nor something morally good nor something lucrative. War today is in all likelihood none of these. This obvious point is mostly confused by the fact that religious, moral, and other antitheses can intensify to political ones and can bring about the decisive friend-enemy constellation. If, in fact, this occurs, then the relevant antithesis is no longer purely religious, moral, or economic, but political. (Schmitt, 2007: 36)

By this Schmitt means that, regardless of what he describes as the 'human motivations,' these are always translated into a distinctive political antithesis, and deployed by a sovereign state to make the ultimate decision – the waging of war. Indeed, the state must be sovereign according to Schmitt entirely because it necessarily holds the monopoly on two key decisions – to identify enemies and defend against them with all necessary means up to and including physical violence, and to ask one's own people (demos) to both do that violence and risk being killed in the process. That said, and somewhat counter-intuitively, Schmitt makes it clear that he does not valorize war in this context. In fact, for Schmitt, the irrationality of such armed conflict reinforces his assertion that it can only be seen as justifiable in political terms. As he explains:

There exists no rational purpose, no norm no matter how true, no program no matter how exemplary, no social ideal no matter how beautiful, no legitimacy nor legality which could justify men killing each other for this reason. If such physical destruction of human life is not motivated by an existential threat to one's own way of life, then it cannot be justified. Just as little can war be justified by ethical and juristic norms. If there really are enemies in the existential sense as meant here, then it is justified, but only politically, to repel and fight them physically. (49)

For Schmitt, there can be no just wars. No noble principles that elevate organized murder to the realm of good and evil, right and wrong, profitable or unprofitable. War only functions as the extreme pragmatic necessity of the political. The continuation of the political entity. Of course, in the same philosophical movement, Schmitt denies the existence of unjust wars. By so thoroughly insisting on the autonomy of the political monopoly on the friend/enemy distinction and the mobilization against it, up to and including asking the people of one sovereign state to kill the people of another, Schmitt's account concurrently insulates the sovereign state from extra-political critique (economic, moral, legal) and places with it the absolute responsibility and accountability for such decisions. It is the sovereign state alone, as the decisive political entity, which is responsible and accountable for rendering the essential political distinction between friend and enemy – “it implies a double possibility: the right to demand from its own members the readiness to die and unhesitatingly kill enemies.” (46)

This leaves us with the fifth and most leveraged pillars of Schmitt's conception of the political – the autonomous antithetical distinction between friend and enemy which uniquely is rendered within, and indeed defines and organizes, this sphere of human thought and action. Schmitt has a very particular understanding of both friend and enemy in the political sense. As noted earlier, Schmitt is adamant that the antithetical binary distinction between friend/enemy is not reducible to any other distinction, be it economic, moral or aesthetic. Both friend and enemy for Schmitt are composed and understood at the level of nation states and peoples. The friend is not the close personal acquaintance, any more than the enemy is the individually despised. With

reference to Plato's *Republic*, Schmitt cautions that the enemy in this context is *hostis* not *inimicus*. "An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity." (28) In a parallel tract, the collectivity of 'friend' also exists and makes sense only in the context of a plurality of other distinctive political entities, with which, at least potentially, antagonistic relations (culminating in war) may arise. More so, the demos, collectivity, people, must be a united and homogeneous force. As strongly alluded to above, for Schmitt, the integrity of the state depends upon the unity of the collectivity and its superiority over any other form of (as)sociation. As he warns:

If the political power of a class or some other group within a state is sufficiently strong to hinder the waging of wars against other states but incapable of assuming or lacking the will to assume the state's power and thereby decide on the friend-and-enemy distinction and, if necessary, make war, then the political entity is destroyed. (38)

Though not discussed explicitly in terms of cultural pluralism, it is here that Schmitt's contemporary deployment by democratic theorists runs into certain challenges. For Schmitt, political identity cannot be fractured, and he implies rather heavily that a politically homogeneous demos must subsume, repress, or outright eject any diversity of association (ethnic, religious, class based, or other) which grows strong enough to challenge supremacy of the political collectivity.

The true ontological character of the political, for Schmitt, can only be understood in these terms and is antagonistic in nature. As Schmitt clearly asserts:

The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. (29)

The political is defined by and through the sustained conflict between friend and enemy, culminating in the ever-present possibility of open war, understood as the ultimate negation of the enemy. That said, Schmitt is not entirely consistent in describing the enemy as the 'most

extreme' antagonistic figure. Though mentioned only once in *The Concept of the Political*, and not taken up by contemporary agonal theorists like Mouffe, Schmitt does very briefly introduce the idea that – in cases where the political category of the enemy becomes intermingled with other 'non-political' distinctions – another (potentially political?) category of radical antagonism can emerge.

### *Friends, Enemies and Monsters*

For Schmitt, “nothing can escape the logical conclusion of the political.” (36) The political distinction between friend and enemy, is, by virtue of its monopoly on grand scale killing, the most intense of the binary oppositions distinguished between in other fields. No matter what the distinction being rendered, it culminates in the friend/enemy distinction should human motives be sufficiently strong to make it political. This is equally true for what he sees as liberalism's attempts to replace the political enemy with the economic competitor or intellectual debating partner, as it is for what he describes as the “pacifist hostility toward war.” (36) Yet in the same breath, Schmitt acknowledges that some motivations can essentially transcend the normal boundaries of the political – as when the enemy becomes intermixed with categorizations normally reserved for the moral or another field of human thought. As he explains:

If pacifist hostility toward war were so strong as to drive pacifists into a war against non-pacifists, in a war against war, that would prove that pacifism truly possesses political energy because it is sufficiently strong to group men according to friend and enemy... . Such a war is necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categorizations and is forced to make him *a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed*. In other words, he is an enemy who no longer must be compelled to retreat into his borders only. (36 – *emphasis added*)

Schmitt puts very little emphasis on the notion of the monster and does not expand on or return to any potential implications a conception of a hybrid categorization, something at the

intersection of two or more binary oppositions from distinctive spheres of human endeavor, might have for his concept of the political. Nor does Schmitt offer any additional consideration of the plausibility or consequence of this ‘monstrous enemy’ outside the specific example he provides. Yet despite the relatively minor appearance of the monster in *The Concept of the Political*, its potential implications, both to Schmitt’s overarching conceptual framework and to his contemporary interpretation and deployment, are considerable.

The introduction of the monster into the friend/enemy binary concurrently represents three ‘openings’ in Schmitt theoretical landscape. First, it represents the only place where Schmitt explicitly complicates one of the antithetical binary oppositions through which he defines the distinctive spheres of human thought and action. For a moment, the binary opposition of friend/enemy becomes the triad of friend/enemy/monster – fundamentally altering, albeit only for a moment, the essentialist binary logic upon which Schmitt insists. Secondly, the notion of the monster, or ‘monstrous enemy’ opens a space within Schmitt’s field of core distinctions for a discussion of degree or intensity. Everywhere else, Schmitt speaks of a single distinction, a binary opposition between one or another category – friend or enemy. Yet with the introduction of the possibility of a radical enemy, an ultimate or penultimate enemy greater or treated to a more intense antagonistic relation to the collective unified demos; Schmitt opens up the possibility of degrees of political friendliness or enmity – a nuance that extends beyond pragmatic action to the core conceptual landscape. Finally, and, from a sociological perspective, perhaps most interestingly, Schmitt’s conception of the monster as resulting in the crossing of boundaries between purely political and other types of core distinctions – in his example the moral distinction between good and evil – opens a space in his theoretical landscape to consider the overlap of, interplay between, and liminal conceptions or figures betwixt these otherwise

discrete fields and logics.

This having been said, although Schmitt introduces the concept of the monster into his work, he offers little with which to chart its content or character. As noted above, a more thorough consideration of a monstrous enemy in Schmitt offers certain possibilities within his broader conceptual framework, but such openings remain relatively modest. To consider the three implications of the monstrous enemy more fully, it becomes necessary to build on such a concept by drawing outside of Schmitt's work. Very much in parallel to the broader objective of this project, here I propose to supplement Schmitt with certain sociological insights in order to more thoroughly explore what the notion of the monster may offer Schmitt or the contemporary adaptations of his work. From a sociological perspective, the monster represents only one of a myriad of liminal figures with which the discipline has been traditionally concerned. From Erving Goffman's *stigmatized*, to Renee Girard's *scapegoats*, to Georg Simmel's *strangers* (the latter conception being one to which we will return in Chapter 3), the study of social outsiders and borderline figures has been, and continues to be, a central theme in sociology. However, the study of the monster, or more specifically the human monster, while narrower in scope, has also been considered within the discipline. Most notable of these is the attention paid to the human monster by Michel Foucault. One of the most influential contemporary considerations of the human monster, Foucault's consideration of the monster is located in two of his published works: *Lectures at the College de France on The Abnormal* (Foucault, 1999), and, to a lesser degree, *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1994). Of course, Foucault's understanding of the monster did not emerge in a vacuum. Much of Foucault's account of the human monster drew from the earlier work of his teacher and advisor, George Canguilhem. For Canguilhem the monster represented simultaneously the antithesis and valuation of ordered life. As he contends:

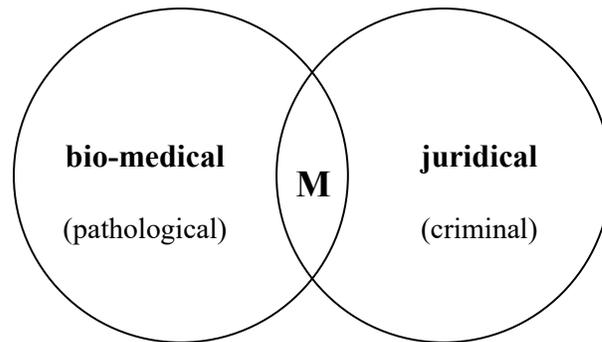
By demonstrating how precarious is the stability to which life has accustomed us - yes , only

accustomed, but we made a law out of its custom - the monster gives an all the more eminent value to the specific repetition, to morphological regularity, to successful structure; it makes us realize that these are not necessary. It is monstrosity, not death, that is the counter-value to life. (Canguilhem, 1964: 29)

The monster, Canguilhem posited, must be understood in terms of the distinctive but interrelated elements of *monstrosity* and *monstrousness*. For Canguilhem, these are “a duality of concepts with the same etymological root,” (30) which “are at the service of two forms of normative judgement, the medical and the legal...” (30)

Through Canguilhem, Foucault inherits what, to use Schmitt’s language, amounts to an overlapping binary representation of the socially constructed human monster. The monster, from this perspective, is produced when there is both an overlap, and a remainder, in the negative valuations according to the central (antithetical) distinctions rendered in two fields of human endeavor. This presents a conception of the human monster as a double breach, understood as a liminal figure both intermixing and challenging the boundaries of the *bio-medical* and the *juridical*. Following this view, the human monster is understood as a figure whose existence breaches the accustomed regularities of two separate but interrelated spheres of normative judgement, or what Schmitt would describe as logics of distinction: the bio-medical distinction between health/illness, and the juridical distinction between innocence/guilt. The monster in this sense is the concurrent ‘degrading’ (to use Schmitt’s language) of the pathological to the criminal, and the criminal to the pathological. This can be represented in a relatively simple dualistic conceptual framework, illustrated in figure 1.1 below:

figure 1.1



It is with this dualistic account of the human monster that Foucault begins his contemplation of this liminal figure, and its eventual ‘giving way’ to other more modern conceptions. However, while Foucault upholds this two-part conceptualization throughout his discussions, he also, despite not acknowledging the fact, brings into sharp relief an error within this conceptualization. The dualistic account of the human monster errs in so far as it conflates two distinctive fields of normative judgement, or what Schmitt would call autonomous fields of human thought and action. While the bio-medical functions as an autonomous field of normative judgement with its own unique core antithetical distinction, Foucault’s description of the juridical, at times, implies a third field subsumed within or conflated with the second. This, I contend, is evident in Foucault’s account of the form of human monster that emerges in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – *the moral monster*.

Until the end of the end of the seventeenth century, monstrosity, argues Foucault, can be understood in terms of “...the natural manifestation of the unnatural...” (Foucault, 1999: 81) Though the monster was nearly always seen as an indication of potential criminality, the unlawful or immoral behaviours themselves were understood as consequences not causes of the monstrous status. This, however, begins to change at the start of the nineteenth century.

As Foucault explains:

...starting in the nineteenth century, the relationship is reversed and monstrosity is systematically suspected of being behind all criminality. Every criminal could well be a monster, just as previously it was possible that the monster was a criminal. (81)

Though previously an aberration of nature might have been inscribed as a transgression of law, even extreme transgressions of law were considered in terms of abhorrent natures. (81)

Yet as Foucault maps his account of the slow interweaving of juridical and medical power, he contends that the punitive and the pathological become more and more conjoined – giving rise the extremity case of the *moral monster*.

For Foucault, the moral monster is a transient category that emerges as an initial liminal or limit case in the application of the medical distinction between healthy and pathological to criminal activity. According to Foucault, the figure of the human monster will ultimately be subsumed within the emergent modern category of the abnormal. Foucault's argument, to use Schmitt's terminology, is that a new binary antithetical distinction – between normal/abnormal – overtakes and subsumes previous categorizations as traditional logics of the juridical and medical merge to form new techniques and technologies of power – what he describes as *discipline*.

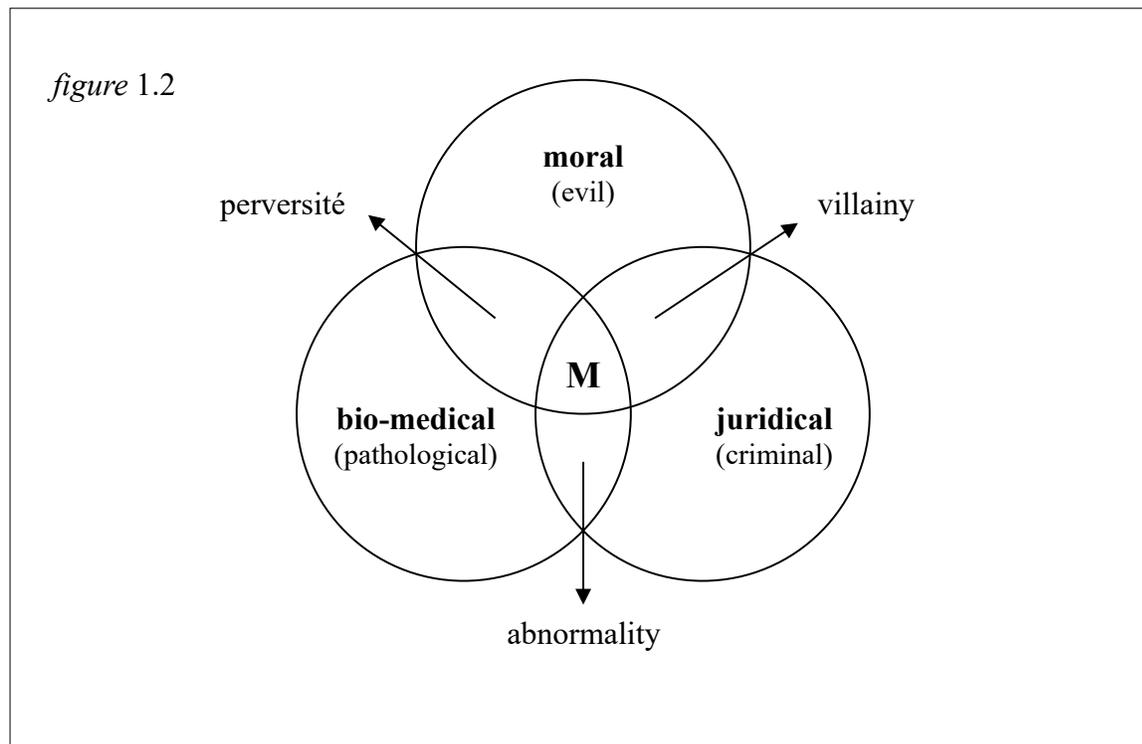
That said, Foucault's conceptualization of the moral monster offers interesting insights in the context of Schmitt's (brief) use of the term. For Foucault, the extreme breach of the moral monster is understood in the previously mentioned dualistic framework of human monstrosity. What is different about the moral monster, for Foucault, is that a legal breach becomes capable of implying an underlying medical breach, whereas this relationship was almost always previously reversed. Foucault draws our attention to a key shift, from the embodied monster to the monstrous mind. Unlike many of the previous types of monsters Foucault and others considered, the moral monster bears no physical mark of his or her

monstrosity. The moral monster therefore also can be seen as the first human monster to break with the tradition of teratology - the aberration of the body is here replaced with an aberration of the soul or self. Yet despite Foucault's commitment to the language of a 'double' breach in the formation of the monster, his conceptualization, and indeed his very taxonomy, strongly insinuates that the *moral* monster is formed at the centre of three distinctive fields of human thought and action as opposed to two: the *medical*, the *juridical*, and the *moral*.

Foucault draws on rather compelling (and morbid) examples of the sorts of extreme criminality that mark the first moral monsters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jean-Pierre Peter, who murdered, butchered, and ate her own daughter. A solitary shepherd, named Léger, who killed a young woman, then raped her body and cut out her sexual organs. Bertrand, a French soldier, caught digging up the corpses of freshly buried women, then having sex with and disemboweling the bodies. (102) It is ultimately the insufficiency of the initial normative strength of this cross-disciplinary cooperation between juridical punishment and medical pathologizing that necessitate the overflow category of *monstrous criminal illness*. Though Foucault strongly implies that a collective reaction of shock, and explicitly describes the need for the sovereign powers to manage and reassure society that such extreme acts can be understood, classified and properly dealt with; he does not identify this element with an autonomous field of human thought. Still, the third breach, or the third autonomous distinction being rendered, remains clearly present: a breach of what a society might collectively understand as right or good, a categorization along the antithetical binary opposition of good and evil. Therefore, while a collective social morality, materialized by and through various social and cultural institutions and discourses, penetrates and permeates the bio-medical and juridical fields – as they do it, the moral concurrently persists as a distinctive

field of individual and collective normative judgement, both culturally specific and historically contingent.

With this in mind, through Foucault's analysis of the historical emergence of the moral monster, and by considering, independently, the three normative judgements fields (logics of human thought and the core distinctions rendered within them) a new conceptual diagram can be considered. Taken together *the bio-medical*, *the juridical*, and *the moral* form a tripartite explanation of the monster – see figure 1.2:



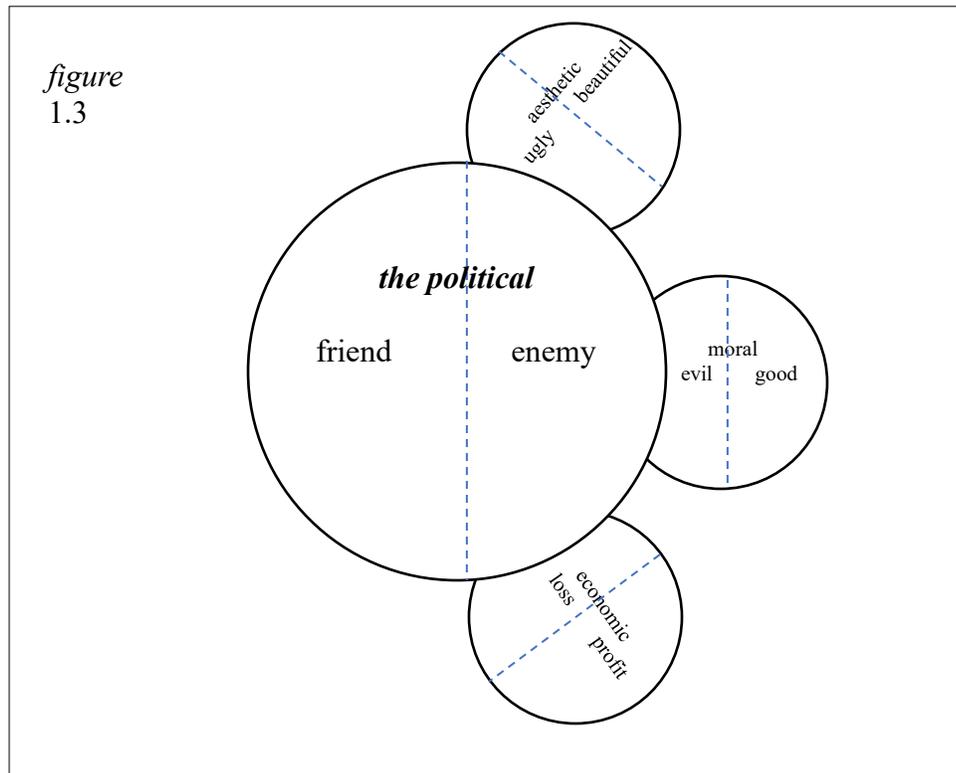
By disentangling the third dimension of the moral from its subsumed position within the juridical, the conceptual framework gains considerable depth. As with the dualistic conception, the moral field is populated by its primary negative signifier. Drawing on the philosophical vocabulary of Canguilhem, we can identify what he described as the *negative-*

*value conception* in each field; what Schmitt would describe as part of each fields' core antithetical binary opposition through which its defining distinctions are drawn. To the *pathological* and *criminal* of the bio-medical and juridical fields, we add the *evil* in the moral field. Moreover, we can locate three distinctive categories of not-quite-monsters in the three related dual breaches. At the intersection of the juridical and the medical we can locate Foucault's famous conception of the individual to be corrected – the notion of *abnormality*. Similarly, at the intersection of the moral and the juridical we can identify the evil criminal or the conception of *villainy*, and at the intersection of the bio-medical and the moral the hybrid conception of repugnance and illness or *perversité*.<sup>5</sup>

How then, to return to the question of friends, enemies and monsters, does such a conceptualization help understand and develop the monstrous enemy as introduced by Schmitt? In the majority of Schmitt's account, any field of human thought or action – when it becomes sufficiently strong as to establish its negative pole as 'enemy' – becomes political itself. In this sense, we can depict the general account the manner in which these distinctive distinctions interplay as illustrated below in figure 1.3:

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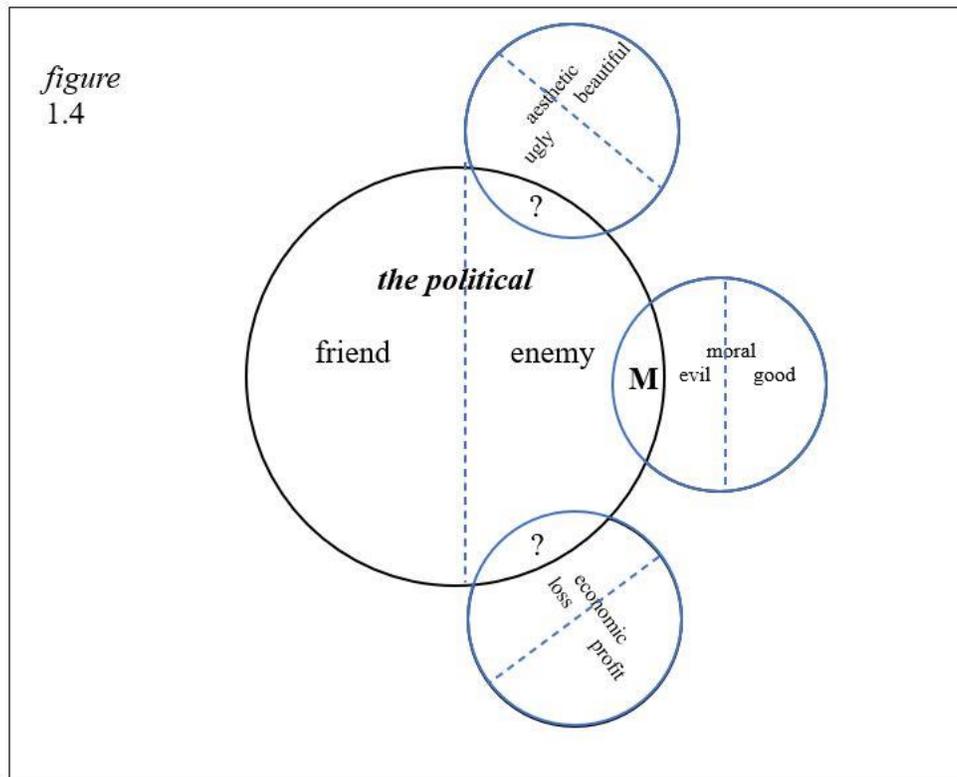
<sup>5</sup> The French term 'perversité' has been intentionally chosen over the English word 'perversity' in so far as the latter tends to carry a sexual connotation, though not formally included in its meaning, while the former remains understood in terms of 'un tendance pathologique à faire le mal' or 'a pathological tendency towards doing evil.'



The political, argues Schmitt, is not defined by the concept of war *per se*, instead it is to be understood in terms of a mode of behaviour which is formulated by the ever-present possibility of war – the real and ‘concrete’ need to be able to correctly distinguish between enemies and friends. (37) Other spheres are therefore subsumed within the political when they themselves become sufficiently ‘political.’ “Every religious, moral, economic ethical or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy.” (37)

That said, and as noted above, Schmitt’s account here is not entirely consistent. In introducing, however briefly, the notion of a hybrid moral/political category that is different in context and character from the typical categorization, and treatment, of the enemy; Schmitt, perhaps inadvertently, opens up the theoretical terrain around the political. Even if only in the

extreme case of a ‘war against war,’ Schmitt allows that the political framework can be transcended, resulting in a hybrid categorization which “...simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categorizations and is forced to make him *a monster...*” (Schmitt, 2007: 36 – *emphasis added*). Not only does Schmitt admit the possibility of a different ‘type’ of political enemy (the morally monstrous enemy), but he also alludes to the ability for other relatively autonomous fields to potentially affect the core political distinction as well. Such possibilities can be represented in the slightly reframed figure below:



The possibilities opened by the distinction of enemy and monster are two-fold. First, the mere possibility of a hybrid between antithetical distinctions provides a significant space to consider the implications of Schmitt’s concept of the political in the context of other logics, including but

not limited to, the social. Secondly, though not completely independent of the first point, the explicit discussion of a condition, however rare, under which non-political logics (be they moral, economic, or other) are capable of changing the otherwise immutable character and treatment of the political enemy offers theorists of agnostic democracy generally, and Chantal Mouffe specifically, an interesting point of departure from which to consider an alternative form of the enemy. Both such possibilities will be revisited and further considered in chapter 4.

*Conceptual Inheritances: the acknowledged and unacknowledged consequences of drawing on Schmitt's theoretical foundations*

Mouffe is careful to note that she does not take on Schmitt's work without reservation. Yet, despite her explicitly selective appropriation of Schmitt and open rejection of certain consequences of his thinking, I contend that Mouffe inherits certain core conceptual implications alongside those she intentionally selects. Specifically, Mouffe's selective reading of Schmitt's core conceptualization of 'the political' in terms of an autonomous realm of human endeavour characterized by the core antithetical distinction drawn between friend and enemy, brings with it three unavoidable inheritances. First, though like Mouffe, Schmitt spends little time discussing 'the social' as a distinctive sphere, his account of the political strongly implies an ontological distinction between the 'political' and the 'social.' Second, Schmitt's conceptual vocabulary depends heavily on a theoretical assumption that politics and the political, in both their ontic and ontological dimensions, assumes a multiplicity of sovereign 'states' or 'nations.' Finally, the third, and only conceptual inheritance Mouffe explicitly addresses, is Schmitt's fundamental belief that any stable political order depends on a homogeneous *demos*. Let us consider each in

turn.

First, Schmitt's conceptualization strongly implies a distinction between the ontological category of 'the political' and that of 'the social.' This point is made clear in his clarification of the 'friend' and 'enemy' monikers. Specifically, following a distinction emphasized in *The Republic*, and as noted above, Schmitt emphasizes that:

An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship. The enemy is *hostis*, not *inimicus* in the broader sense [...]. (Schmitt, 2007: 28)

That the public enemy must be distinguished from any other private antagonisms makes clear the fact that: **a)** there is a distinction between political and social relations; and **b)** antagonistic relations are possible in both spheres. Were antagonistic relations resulting in personal 'enemies' or *inimus* not possible, there would be no need for Schmitt to so directly distinguish between them. Indeed, Schmitt goes on to point out that misunderstanding the unique nature of the political enemy, or confusing it with other forms of non-political antagonistic relations, can be exceedingly problematic. As Schmitt takes pains to explain:

As German and other languages do not distinguish between the private and political enemy, many misconceptions and falsifications are possible. The often quoted "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27) reads "diligete inimicos vestros," [greek text removed], and not *diligite hostes vestros*. No mention is made of the political enemy. Never in the thousand-year struggle between Christians and Moslems did it occur to a Christian to surrender rather than defend Europe out of love toward the Saracens of Turks. The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one's enemy, i.e., one's adversary. (29)

Schmitt goes on to say that the antagonism in the political sphere, that which renders the distinction between friend and enemy, represents the most intense of all possible antagonisms. Indeed, "every [other] concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping." (29)

This is of course intuitive from a sociological perspective. Even if one grants that **i)** the

‘true’ ontological character of the political is to be understood in terms of the antagonism between friend and enemy, and **ii**) that this particular antagonism and grouping represents the most intense form of conflict possible – it does not by any means follow that there are not other similar or even foundational forms of conflict conceptually possible in other spheres of human thought or endeavour. This point is particularly important in so far as I contend that the transformation from antagonistic political relations to agonistic political relations which Mouffe and other agonal theorists propose, may well depend on a comparable reorientation to an underlying antagonism within a parallel antithetical distinction rendered within the social.

Secondly, Schmitt’s understanding of the political emphasizes its international, or at least inter-state, character. For Schmitt, politics occurs firstly between sovereign ‘nations’ or ‘states.’ What he describes more broadly, between ‘fighting collectivities.’ “The political entity presupposes the real existence of an enemy and therefore coexistence with another political entity. As long as a state exists, there will thus always be in the world more than just one state.” (53) This ‘pluralistic’ character of politics, which is tied to Schmitt’s understanding of the friend/enemy dichotomy, is also reinforced through his understanding of war. While Schmitt clearly states that “[w]ar is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of politics” (34), he also contends that the political – specifically understood in terms of the friend/enemy distinction – depends on the ever-present possibility of war. Schmitt goes as far as to contend that “[a] world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics.” (35) Since the political is only to be understood in terms of oppositional collectivities, the practice of politics, according to Schmitt, occurs almost entirely between states.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> While Schmitt certainly envisioned politics as occurring between nation-states, in theory his conceptualization of ‘the political’ necessitates only war between collectivities or between different *demos*. It is certainly plausible, as

Finally, the third conceptual implication inherited from Schmitt is perhaps his most well-known theoretical contribution to political theory, and also the only one that Mouffe explicitly addresses. For Schmitt, in open hostility to liberal conceptions of plurality, any stable political order absolutely depends on a homogeneous ‘people’ as *demos*. While the external category of the ‘enemy’ is constituted through political will, the ‘friend’ category is only possible given a homogenous *demos*. For Schmitt, then, liberal pluralism represents nothing less than a fundamental attack on the stability of political collectivities. Mouffe acknowledges this third inheritance, but seeks to shift the trajectory of its conclusions, choosing to:

[...] refuse Schmitt’s dilemma, while acknowledging his argument for the need of some form of ‘homogeneity’ in a democracy. The problem we have to face becomes, then, how to imagine in a different way what Schmitt refers to as ‘homogeneity’ but that – in order to stress the differences with his conception – I propose to call, rather, ‘commonality’; how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a ‘demos’ but nevertheless compatible with certain forms of pluralism: religious, moral and cultural pluralism, as well as a pluralism of political parties. (Mouffe, 1998: 55)

This move allows Mouffe to propose a direction for radical democracy that follows Schmitt’s core conceptualization of the political, while rejecting its third implication/claim – that a functional *demos* must be ethnically, religiously, and ultimately ‘culturally’ homogeneous. However, I contend that her work remains subject to the two prior implications: that politics occurs between ‘fighting collectivities’ (sovereign states or nations built around a ‘people’ for Schmitt), and that ‘the political’ is ontologically distinct from ‘the social.’

By contrast to her Schmitt-inspired account of the political, Mouffe attempts no similar conception of the social. Instead of positing a parallel conception of the social in terms of some core antithetical distinction upon which it relies, Mouffe describes the social in terms of sedimented practices that conceal taken-for-granted originary acts of its own political

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with the Nazi treatment of Jews and other minorities, to construct an enemy people within the state, yet such a construction, for Schmitt, would ultimately rest on the understanding of those collectivities as other ‘peoples’ illegitimately present within a sovereign state.

constitution (Mouffe, 2005a: 17). Whereas the political (in a hegemonic sense) involves “the visibility of acts of social institution” (17), the social is presented as **a**) the inert consequences of past political struggles, and **b**) a process through which the outcomes of such struggles are obscured into doxa. While clearly built on the far more complex conception of society as a constant incomplete and incompletionable contest of discursive articulations, it is, I contend, also a problematically shallow conception of the social. Agree as one might that every society “is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency” (17), or that the hegemonic character of every social order needs be recognized, it does not necessarily follow that the social is a purely dependent variable simultaneously determined by and obscuring past political struggles. Nor, I contend, does one need to accept the implication that all meaningful conflict with regards to competition for the partial hegemonic dominance of a particular discursive articulation is purely ‘political’ in nature.

It is with these conceptions of the political and the social that Mouffe theorizes radical democracy beyond hegemony. Just as the appropriation of Schmitt's concept of the political lies at the heart of Mouffe's critique of the mainstream of democratic theory, her call for its transfiguration rests at the centre of her own normative project. In order to move beyond late modern capitalist liberal democracy, towards what she describes as a radically pluralistic politics of partial hegemonies, the core antagonistic character of the political must be changed. The enemy of antagonistic politics must be transformed into the adversary of agonistic politics. This proposed transfiguration of the core antithetical distinction rendered by, and constitutive of, the political represents simultaneously one of the most interesting and ambitious elements of Mouffe's political theory.

*(Re)Turning to the Social – Challenges and Opportunities*

Despite the problematic weight that Mouffe grants to the political vis-à-vis the social, I want to argue that both agonal democratic theory broadly, and Mouffe's contributions specifically, can make substantial contributions to a critical sociology interested in democracy, inclusivity, and justice. Indeed, perspectives that call into question the character and quality of conflict in democratic political orders can be considered particularly fruitful at a time when "in style, as well as substance, the whole idea of political debate in North America is getting polarized — a forum with no middle ground." (Delacourt, 2012) That said, the limitations of a purely political articulation of agonal democracy are considerable. Having reduced the social to a mere sediment reflecting and obscuring past political struggles, Mouffe is left to articulate the notion of an ethos of productive contest in purely political terms. Couched in this way, the pivotal transformation from the enemy to the adversary appears to rest solely on a relatively thin concept of legitimacy. Whereas the challenges stemming from the enemy are considered inherently destructive and dangerous, those from the adversary are seen as legitimate and necessary. The implied shift is from the goal of annihilation to that of overcoming. The enemy, outside of, and dangerous to, the unity of the demos, must be destroyed; the adversary, understood as part of a heterogeneous demos, need only be contested and potentially overcome. To put this another way, while the enemy is a homogenous representation of opposition to the demos, the adversary is more of a hybrid figure. The adversary is simultaneously a genuine opponent and a legitimate participant – a notion we shall revisit later on.

This simultaneous call to think beyond conventional pluralism and re-imagine the very nature of the political in terms of productive legitimated contest lies at the heart of all critically-

oriented agonal democratic theory. That said, articulated in purely political terms, the transformative potential of the ideal of political agon appears problematically shallow. While the normative aspirations supporting such a shift in political ethos are clear enough, the processes by which this transfiguration might be possible are not well explored. Certainly, the aim of a more inclusive democratic order presents a degree of incentive in and of itself, but the underlying conditions of possibility remain, in both Mouffe's work specifically and agonal theory more broadly, systematically under-theorized.

It is, I contend, in the realm of the social that one can explore these underlying conditions of possibility, and consequently, it is the failure to take the social seriously that hinders the contemporary field of agonal democratic theory. That said, agonal democratic theory does provide a range of interesting insights into the nature of antagonistic and agonistic tensions within the social body, even if it theorizes them as purely political constructs. The foundational distinctions between productive and destructive conflict, enemies and adversaries, and legitimated opposition as opposed to required 'consensus' that agonal theorists draw upon simultaneously offer fresh perspectives on, and resonate with, some of the core questions of sociology. A fuller account of agonal democracy, one that considers both its explicit political expression and its implicit social foundations, has much to offer critically oriented sociological and political theorists alike. With this in mind, chapters 2 and 3 of this work consider a selection of classical sociological perspective, both canonical and more marginal, in order to draw forth alternative conceptualizations of society, conflict, and 'the social' which are both complimentary and supplementary to those deployed by Mouffe. Armed with creative adaptations and selective insights offered in these classical sociological texts, I return to agonal democratic theory broadly, Mouffe's vision thereof specifically, and to the question with which we began: what are the

underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order  
premised on the ideal of political agon?

## Chapter 2

### **Between Agon and *Auslese* - Recovering Political Contest through the work of Max Weber**

To fully consider the underlying conditions of possibility for a democratic ethos premised on a (re)turn to an ideal of political agon, one must, I contend, understand and consider ‘the social’ alongside ‘the political.’ While agonal democratic theorists offer a range of interesting insights into the nature of antagonistic and agonistic tensions within the social body, these conceptions are predominantly explored in terms of ‘purely political’ constructs. As noted at the end of Chapter 1, the foundational distinctions deployed by agonal theorists - between productive and destructive conflict, enemies and adversaries, and legitimated opposition as opposed to required ‘consensus’ - simultaneously offer fresh perspectives on, and resonate with, some of the core questions within the field of sociology. However, agonal theorists generally, and Chantal Mouffe specifically, have, for the most part, abandoned any serious consideration of ‘the social’ as a distinct element of their political theories. For Mouffe, this is very much grounded in a need to move beyond the constraints of Marxism. Yet while Marx may be considered one of the founding fathers of contemporary sociology, his conceptions of society and ‘the social’ are far from monolithic. Indeed, Marx occupies a place in the classical canon of sociology alongside a very different ‘founding father’ – Max Weber. Considering this alternate ‘pillar’ of classical sociological thinking, this chapter begins to explore how one might expand and nuance Mouffe’s account of ‘the political’ in order to (re)open a conceptual space in which to offer a more robust conception of ‘the social’ compatible with, and even sympathetic to, a so-called ‘purely political’

account of agonal democracy.

That said, in exploring the classical sociological insights of Max Weber, one begins with the complex task of deciding 'which' Weber to engage with. As with many, so-called, canonical figures, Weber's various contributions and their interpretations vary both by time period and author. Somewhat more unique however, is the fact that unlike other canonical figures such as Emile Durkheim or Karl Marx, many of the 'unifying' elements of Weber's work were assembled posthumously. As a Weberian scholar, and a scholar of Weberians, Lawrence Scaff writes at the onset of his book on Weber's intellectual legacy:

The narrative of the emergence of Weberian concepts, analysis, or 'theory' is unusual and contested. As an historical artifact, the Weberian imprimatur is only contingently related to a clearly identifiable body of leading ideas or principles presented systematically by Max Weber in his own work and in his lifetime. No clearly demarcated Weberian school of thought has existed over time, as it has for Marx, Durkheim, or Freud. Weber certainly had a 'circle' of colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and partners in discussion, but he never intended to found a school of thought. (Scaff, 2014: 1)

This is, of course, by no means to minimize the scope or intensity of Weber's impact on the modern social sciences. Weber's legacy stretches across the field in powerful and disparate ways. From friends and associates like Karl Jaspers or Karl Loewenstein, to later explicit scholars of his work such as Talcott Parsons, C. Wright Mills, Reinhard Bendix, or Jürgen Habermas, to other very different theorists and scholars who critically engaged with, if only in passing, some of Weber's core ideas, including Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt, or Michel Foucault, Weber's influence on the contemporary study of society is difficult to overstate. (2-3)

Yet despite the diverse and eclectic understandings and applications of Weber's work, some generalizations can be observed. Most notably for the purposes of this work, are the divergent ways in which the clear tension between Weber's sociological and political views, writings, and implied values have been acknowledged, taken up, or ignored by later scholars. In this regard we can take note of two very different drives within Weber's work – what Wolfgang

Schluchter has described as a dialectic of *dedication* and *detachment*. (Schluchter, 1996: 8) It is, in many ways, a tension most clearly articulated between Weber's two famous orations: *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*. These two speeches, carefully added to the corpus of Weber's written work posthumously through the efforts of Marianne Weber, represent, according to Schluchter, not simply additions to Weber's scholarly treatises or academic lectures, but rather Weber's core 'philosophical' texts. As Schluchter posits, the two speeches:

...pursue a different goal. They are "philosophical" texts, intended to lead the listeners (and later, the readers) to recognize facts and to encourage self-reflection, to win them over for responsible efforts on behalf of a realistic cause... ...they were and are speeches about political and human self-determination under the conditions of modern Western culture. (8-9)

In this way, Schluchter concludes, Weber can be understood not only to have contributed to sociology and to politics, but also to political theory/philosophy. This is a Weber fraught with tensions, but not reducible to a simple contradiction between the detached, restrained social scientist and the passionate, though unsuccessful, political statesman.

Drawing on Schluchter's careful and novel reading of Weber's sociological and philosophical contributions to modern understandings of politics and society, this chapter aims to introduce a new, explicitly sociological, conceptual vocabulary into the 'purely political' articulation of political agon, as well as simultaneously considering the ways in which Weber's political philosophy might compliment or challenge the foundational assumptions Mouffe adapts and adopts from the work of Carl Schmitt. To this end this chapter is organized in terms of four interrelated tasks. First, we begin with a brief intellectual portrait of Weber as well as his initial introductions to English audiences. In this first section, the chapter presents a short contextual starting point from which to engage with this eminent figure's diverse contributions, and some of the influential interpretations his work has inspired. Second, the chapter considers Weber's overarching views on 'the social' and the content and character of conflict within society. Here

the task is to consider the conceptual landscape on which Weber's sociology is built, and explore the foundations and core assumptions *vis a vis* conflict within the social body. With an eye to potentially deploying some of these core conceptualizations into a consideration of agonal democracy, this section also explicitly takes up Weber's ruminations on the nature of politics and 'the political.' Considering the ways in which Weber differentiates political action and social action, the section ends with the question of how Weber defines, explicitly or implicitly, the 'essence' of the political as a field of human thought and endeavour. Third, the chapter explores the account of Weber as political philosopher, unpacking and considering Weber's typology of ethical orientations to both social and political action as posited by Schluchter. Here Weber's famous ideal types of *Wertrationalitat* (value rational) and *Zweckrationalitat* (instrumental rational) social action are considered *vis a vis* his, slightly less famous, distinctions between ethical orientations to politics: *Gesinnungsethik* (ethic of conviction) and *Verantwortungsethik* (ethic of responsibility). Finally, drawing on the various new conceptual vocabularies adapted from Weber, the chapter concludes by comparing and contrasting these underlying assumptions about and orientations toward society, politics and conflict with the foundational assumptions Mouffe adapts and adopts from Carl Schmitt. The chapter concludes by considering where Weber's insights open new conceptual spaces for a consideration of the social conditions of possibility necessary for a radical democracy premised on an ethos of political agon, and, where they do not, which additional classical sociological insights might further such an exploration.

*Karl Emile Maximillian Weber – 1864-1920*

Max Weber was born April 21<sup>st</sup> 1864, in Erfurt, part of what was not yet a unified Germany. Eldest of eight brothers and sisters<sup>7</sup>, Max was raised as the first son and heir in the Weber household - a position which, according to the well-known biography penned by his wife Marianne following his death, instilled in him a “profound sense of the privilege of ‘primogeniture,’ which soon gave him the feeling of responsibility for his youngest brothers and sisters.” (Weber, 2003: 31) It is, of course, atypical to dwell on the childhood or more generally ‘mundane biographic details’ of the theorists, great or small, with whose ideas we engage. Yet, in the case of Weber, so much of whose character and body of thought has been (re)constructed after his death, certain core details have become integral parts of the various intellectual portraits of this canonical figure in the social sciences. Most notable of these biographical vignettes are Weber’s childhood illness, his brief military service in his youth, and his short but distinguished time of as a university lecturer. This latter point often being discussed in terms of the deep sense of anxiety and difficulty he was reported to have felt with regard to academic lecturing, juxtaposed to the verve and passion with which he was said to have delivered his more politically oriented speeches. Without a need for an in-depth exploration, a few comments on these central, and oft repeated, biographical elements in the dominant ‘image’ of Weber as a founding father of contemporary sociology are of use.

Weber’s famous childhood illness, often referenced with regards to his later issues with anxiety and general health challenges, was indeed a serious event. As a young child, Weber became ill with unilateral meningitis, “...which left him susceptible to cramps and congestion for

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<sup>7</sup> As detailed in Marianne Weber’s comprehensive, if not at times strange, biography of her husband, Max Weber was preceded by seven brothers and sisters. Of Helen Weber’s eight children, only six grew to maturity. Two of Weber’s sisters died – one soon after the birth, and the other in early childhood. (Weber, 2003: 31)

years.” (32) The illness, which, for the time, the young Weber was fortunate to survive, had long lasting impacts on his health. Following the illness, descriptions of Weber as a child describe him as both weak and sheltered, with a shadow cast over the eldest son in the Weber household in terms of a constant “danger of dying or of becoming an imbecile.” (32) Also noted, though perhaps less often, is Marianne Weber’s account of the physical consequences of the illness, which she described in strangely detailed terms:

During his illness, little Max’s head grew conspicuously, while his limbs remained girlishly small. The doctor predicted either hydrocephalus or room for a great many things under the arching cranium. Max suffered all kinds of nervous anxieties as an aftereffect of the disease. (33)

While the anecdote is likely true, given Marianne Weber’s tremendous attention to detail throughout the famous biography, one can still see the *naissant* beginnings of an origin story. Whether by design, happenstance, or an honest mix of the two, the abnormally intellectual child, frail but brilliant often persists as part of the intellectual portrait of the later Weber.

In ways that both parallel how much of Weber’s intellectual legacy would come to be characterized, as well as, for that matter, how the personalities of his parents are described by Marianne, the image of the frail, reserved, intellectual child Weber is juxtaposed to the corpulent and gregarious young man Weber in his early university and military experiences. Here Marianne Weber describes a striking transformation, from a timid boy of striking intellect to boisterous youth:

In his third semester he fought the customary duels and received the ribbon. He now indulged wholeheartedly in the gaiety of student life, became a jolly fellow, and soon distinguished himself by his outstanding capacity for alcohol. This was of no small significance in those days, because it was part of a brother’s education for manhood that he should be able to pour in the greatest amount of alcohol without losing his self-control. Moreover, the food, which got worse every week as the semester wore on, forced people to drink more beer. This way of life soon completely changed Weber’s physical bearing, and the desire with which he had come to university was fulfilled. The increase in his physical girth was even more striking than the expansion of his intellect: the lanky youth became broad and strong, and he inclined toward corpulence. (69)

Of his military training, his wife writes mostly of his distaste for both the monotony and intensity

of the exercises he was forced to endure. Again, in ways that haunt the scholar's later work, Weber is noted to have disliked most of all that element of his early (basic) military training "the tremendous waste of time that is used to turn thinking beings into machines that react with automatic precision upon command." (72) That said, once more presented in nearly dialectic tension, Marianne Weber also points out that, by the end of his officer training, Weber none the less was left with a "a great admiration for the 'machine' as well as a martial and patriotic mentality." (78)

The third piece of biographical detail often referenced in the mainstream understanding of Weber the sociologist is the relatively short and difficult time he spent lecturing in the university proper. In total, Weber spent only six and half years in university professorships, with few students or followers. (Scaff, 2014: 1) Most of these were in the early part of his career, though he would return to lecturing near the end of his life, and those close to him worried actively about the strain that academic duties put on the ambitious scholar. At this point recently married, his wife described her husband's first foray into professional intellectual work with clear concern.

Was it really absolutely necessary for him to overload himself with work? His teaching assignments – about nineteen hours of lectures and seminars – were enough of a strain by themselves, especially since the young professor, who was replacing his famous teacher, was immediately obliged to take part in the civil service examination for jurists. And in addition there were so many self-imposed tasks. Hardly one was completed when his restless intellect took hold of a new one. (Weber, 2003: 195)

Of course, the strain was not a result of work ethic alone. Weber's approach to teaching was fundamentally different than that of the majority of his contemporary colleagues. In line with his famous (later) speech on Science as a Vocation, Weber's philosophical approach to the appropriate role of the contemporary university broke with tradition.

Almost alone among German academics of his time, Weber believed that the German universities of the early twentieth century had to abandon the traditional ideal of personal *Bildung* [self

cultivation] and confine themselves to conveying specialized knowledge to future professionals and officials. While his colleagues agonized about the need to preserve or to recover the old link between *Wissenschaft* [pursuit of knowledge], *Bildung*, and *Weltanschauung* [world view], to derive morally and socially profitable insights from learning by means of “synthesis” or the “viewing” of “essential” meaning, Weber opted for a deliberately modest view of *Wissenschaft*. He repudiated the neo-humanist ideal of “cultivation” as self-perfection and focused exclusively upon the transmission of expert knowledge and the exercise in logical analysis. Indeed, he took a position quite similar to that of his French colleague Emile Durkheim, who scoffed at the yen to turn the isolated individual into a self-sufficient work of art by means of “general culture” (*culture generale*). (Ringer, 2004: 225-226)

Weber’s struggles to live up to his own extremely high standards of academic professionalism, alongside, because of, or perhaps contributing to, long struggles with anxiety and depression led him to leave the university setting both in 1899 – Weber spent a brief period in a sanitarium in 1900 – and again in 1903. Weber would not return to an official lecturing role until 1919, a year before his death.

This brings us to the final piece of biographical detail relevant to our exploration of Weber, perhaps the most important for my purposes: Weber’s lifelong political involvements. Alongside his famous academic analysis of socio-political concepts like leadership, authority, law and bureaucracy; Weber was engaged in many of the great political debates of his day. He wrote and spoke on early issues relating to the industrialization of agriculture in Germany, the events leading up to, during, and following the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the need for significant reform of the German parliamentary system. As Marianne Weber observed, “Weber lived in constant political excitement and could not bear concentrating exclusively on scholarly work.” (Weber, 2003: 583) It is also important to acknowledge a certain similarity between some of the debates surrounding Weber’s political views and those surrounding Schmitt’s work discussed in chapter 1. Not unlike Schmitt, some scholars have suggested that Weber’s clear nationalist political leanings throughout his lifetime, and his periodic attacks on the viability of Germany’s democratic structure, speak to political views that might compromise

the validity or usefulness of his intellectual contributions.<sup>8</sup> That said, it is even more important to underscore the fundamental difference between these two discussions. Whereas Schmitt lived through, joined, and actively supported the Nazi regime, Weber's extensive political interventions predated, though perhaps both foresaw and misdiagnosed, the potential rise of the National Socialist Party. Still, Weber's work as an amateur politician, informed citizen, or perhaps what we might call today 'political activist,' did, especially in his early American reception, give many serious cause for concern. Weber was, by all accounts, politically engaged and active for most of his adult life. While his views changed and evolved with the times, he remained throughout his life a German nationalist. Having said that, even a summary review of his public positions is sufficient to alleviate much of the concern that surrounded his initial post-WWII reception outside of Germany.

Weber's public participation and political commentary began soon after he began his academic career in 1892. (Ringer, 2004: 41) He became involved in one of the large debates of the time, which revolved around commercialization of agricultural sectors in East Elbian Germany, and the changing roles of workers, landowner and migrant labourers in the region. While the specifics of his political interventions here are not necessarily relevant, this early issue offered a young Weber the opportunity to begin to articulate the core of his political position. Presenting at a meeting of the Protestant Social Congress in 1894, one of the first articulations of Weber's core political thought can be found in part of a dissenting speech he gave which took on themes presented in the opening address of the session. Specifically Weber said:

In the welcoming address of pastor Naumann yesterday, we heard an infinite yearning for human

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<sup>8</sup> For the most part, any serious attacks on Weber on the basis of 'proto-fascist' elements of his political commentaries are historical artifacts. Most of the real concern regarding Weber's political orientations came to the fore in the years following the Second World War – specifically in the context of his introduction to English speaking academics in the United States. That said, elements of these concerns, and how they were dealt with remain part of the Weberian legacy to this day.

happiness, which surely moved us all. But precisely from our pessimistic standpoint... I believe we must renounce the idea of fostering... happiness by means of... social legislation. We want something else... That which seems to us of value in human beings, autonomy, the profound drive upward, toward the intellectual and moral goods of mankind, that is what we want to... support even... in its most primitive form. (45)

This early articulation, which Weber would both repeat (though in some ways also refute) in his later political and academic writings, is notable in its contradistinction to his stance against *Bildung* as a proper aim of the modern University. Weber explicitly rejected a utilitarian objective for public policy and political decision making, a position he reiterated a year later in his Freiburg Inaugural Address in 1895:

*The question that moves us when we think beyond the grave of our own generation is not whether the human beings of the future will feel well, but what sort of human beings they will be... Not well-being but the qualities... that make up human greatness and nobility of our nature are what we want to breed into human beings. (48)*

This later excerpt casts Weber's stance against utilitarianism as a sound political ethos in slightly darker terms, not least of which because it is difficult to read, with the full hindsight of history at our disposal, and not glimpse parallels with the genocidal rhetoric that would appear just three decades later.

That having been said, it is important to also recognize that many of such imagined parallels would have had something to do with the very strong influence of Nietzsche's writings in Germany at the time – a pervasive conceptual vocabulary widely known in intellectual circles of the day, and that would later be misappropriated and used by the Nazis. More so, as Fritz Ringer points out in his intellectual portrait of Weber, the above excerpt should not be reduced to a 'cold' argument for what Weber would later describe as power-politics. As Ringer contends:

Weber's inaugural address should not be read only as an expression of his commitment to power politics or to nationalism. For he also identified the ultimate aims of social policy with "human greatness," the aspiration to "freedom," and the desire to share in the "intellectual and cultural goods of mankind." His purpose was not only to exclude charitable grounds to pursue human well-being, but even more urgently to deny that social policy could be based on such intra-economic norms as "productivity," or upon such implicit aims as the preservation of rural values or the disarming of the radical Social Democrats. (49)

What is particularly interesting, in the context of putting some of Weber's core ideas in conversation with contemporary theories of agonal democracy, is the way in which Ringer describes what he calls Weber's 'instinctive liberalism.' (57) According to Ringer, Weber not only clearly had 'humanist' ambitions for effective political leadership, he fundamentally embraced some of the core principles of liberalism. Specifically, and in direct contrast to Schmitt's concerns regarding pluralism, Ringer contends that Weber fundamentally accepted and embraced difference within a polity. As he explains:

I mean to point out that his [Weber's] *cultural individualism*, which echoes Wilhelm von Humbolt and is recaptured in John Stuart Mill's ideal of an open intellectual community. In such a community, **radical differences among a plurality of conflicting beliefs and ways of life are preconditions of intellectual progress.** The model suits not only Weber's insistence upon the toleration of heterodoxy, but also his vision of economics as a "human science" that tries to affect the qualities of future populations, rather than securing their welfare. Weber admired autonomous individuals who act upon carefully considered principles. He insisted that intellectuals must be capable of swimming against the tide of established opinion, and he despised those whose pliable natures could adjust to almost anything in their environment that would help them succeed. (57 – **emphasis added**)

Weber's political interventions, of course, evolved over his life and alongside his academic explorations. While he undoubtedly remained a German nationalist, and, like many of the time, supported political reforms which ultimately were leveraged by the Nationalist Socialist Party, his commentary remained grounded in a strong commitment to human rights (*Grundrechte*) and the need to check the rise of technical bureaucrats and experts, who he described as *technicians*, from de facto running the country. His later public columns near the end of his life offered incisive critiques of the German political system as it then stood. Set against the backdrop of his academic work surrounding the rise of bureaucracy in modern societies, Weber argued that there "...were no responsible political leaders, [and] no one to restrain administrative rule by the bureaucracy." (65)

All this having been said, at the time of Weber's proliferation to American (English)

audiences, truly beginning in the 1950s, Weber's political views and commentaries were carefully disassociated or censured from his academic work. Even now, with Weber's place in the western canon of the social sciences long since secured, the distinction between Weber the rigorous and non-partisan social scientist and Weber the excited/excitable life-long amateur political player who presented explicitly normative visions of politics and the political, has remained, for the most part, conspicuously intact. This distinction, and the ways it may have helped shaped the dominant understandings and applications of Weberian thought, will both be revisited and, to some extent, challenged further below.

### *On the Weberian 'Legacy'*

While the proliferation of Weber's writing and thought began, in earnest, in the mid 1950s, many of his insights were initially brought to American academia with the wave of German scholars escaping Nazis Germany. As Lawrence Scaff observes:

The recognition of Weber's work and the growth of interest in some of his key concepts, such as 'charisma' and 'bureaucracy', was significantly affected by the emigration of scholars and intellectuals from Germany after 1933: distinguished scholars like Karl Mannheim and Friedrich von Hayek at the London School of Economics, Franz Neumann and Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia University in New York, and of course the many faculty concentrated at the New School for Social Research in New York. In the United States five universities with prestigious and influential graduate programs became crucial in the 1930s for the development and propagation of knowledge about Weber: Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, the New School, and Wisconsin. (Scaff, 2014: 14)

More broadly, the 1930s brought a wave of ‘*Émigré*’ intellectuals, many of whom had been acquainted with Weber personally or professionally. Notable examples include Alexander von Schelting – on whom Talcott Parsons depended on for guidance in his early reading of Weber, as well as Hans Gerth – who worked with the likes of Mannheim, Adorno, and later C. Wright Mills. Indeed, Gerth’s work with Mills is understood to have been deeply influential, and contributed both to Mills’ widely accessible *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* in 1946, as well as Mills’ use of Weberian concepts in *White Collar* and *The Power Elite*, in 1951 and 1956 respectively. (15)

Notwithstanding the gradual introduction of Weber’s concepts to English (American) intellectual audiences, the real proliferation of Weber’s work – understood as a cohesive corpus – did not truly begin until 1950s. While Weber’s core concepts had been discussed and even influential among a subset of important American academics for nearly three decades, “...by 1960 in the Anglophone world a substantial body of Weber’s writings was widely and inexpensively available to scholars, teachers, students, and the general public” (17) It was at this time that two very different Weberian scholars rose to prominence, bringing with them two very different interpretations of Weber: Talcott Parsons and Reinhard Bendix.

It is difficult to overstate the incredible influence that Talcott Parsons played on the early (mass) reception of Weber to American (anglophone) audiences as translator, teacher, and theorist. Parson’s *The Social System*, published in 1951, was very well received, and made great strides toward “the creation of a ‘Weber-Parsons tradition of social theory,’ which gradually ‘assimilated’ Weber’s diverse writings on religion, capitalism and Western rationalism...” (Caldwell, 2016: 197) Of course today, Parsons’ role in the Weberian legacy has been reduced to something between a cautionary tale and the figure of the defeated ‘villain.’ Parsons reading of

Weber, what one could call Parsons' Weber, though initially well received and very influential, was eventually rejected by many and resulted in a relentless 'de-Parsoning' of Weber. (197)

Parsons' efforts to understand and present Weber in the context of a unified theoretical perspective, in the 'grand theory' tradition, remain an influential moment in the development of a Weberian 'legacy.' As Lawrence Scaff describes:

The 'action frame of reference' is the phrase Talcott Parsons used to describe his earliest efforts to appropriate Weber's work for his own systematic general theory of action. Parsons' interpretation of Weber actually unfolded in two distinct phases: first, the elaboration of a theory of social action that retained in modified form a Weberian commitment to the postulate of the subjective interpretation of action. This action theory was then followed by a radical turn toward general theory in the form of a full-blown structural-functional theory of the social system. (Scaff, 2014: 77)

The second part of Parsons' work revolved around addressing what he saw as failing in Weber's work. Parsons, a believer in grand theory narratives, posited that while there were the foundations of a 'generalized theoretical system' in Weber's writings, Weber himself had failed to expand or explore such *naissant* possibilities. For Parsons, it was a matter of moving the Weberian project forward, and illustrates a key debate regarding social theory more broadly.

Specifically:

Parsons' critique of Weber and extension of his ideas reveals a fundamental disagreement about the nature of 'theory' in the human sciences, a sharp divergence in viewpoints that should be underscored. The reason to insist on this emphasis is that the disagreement runs like a red thread through the disputes of modern social theory, creating a kind of caesura with Weberians on either side of the divide: there are those like Weber immersed in the efforts to grasp the nature and meaning of cultural and historical configurations; versus those like Parsons focused primarily on the abstract analytic schema of general theory; or in a few instances, those like Anthony Giddens or in parts of his work even Jürgen Habermas who on occasion have tried to explore both sides of the divide and provide a bridge connecting them. (79)

As is evident, of course, Scaff is not neutral in this matter. Like most contemporary scholars, he presents as objective the fact that Weber himself was, and should be read as having been, on the side of 'efforts to grasp nature and meanings of cultural and historical configurations' as opposed to the construction of any generalized 'grand' theoretical narrative. While this divide is not

reducible to the distinction with which we are primarily interested – between Weber the ‘objective’ social scientist and Weber the ‘normative’ political theorist – neither is it entirely distinct.

While not nearly as influential, another major figure involved at the same time in the mass popularization of Weber across Anglo-academe was Reinhard Bendix. Bendix’s 1960 *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, was one of the first significant challenges to Parsons’ Weber – presenting a characterization of Weberian thought far more focused on a thematic of historical sociology. It was, in many ways, a far less polemic rejection of Parsons than many contemporary challenges – to the point where it was not universally acknowledged as sufficiently ‘breaking’ with the Parsonian project. While it certainly opposed Parsons’ functionalist account of Weber, it was also criticized for itself either presenting an exaggerated ‘instrumental’ Weber, or, on the other hand, overemphasizing a ‘softer’ cultural Weberianism. Yet, As Raymond Caldwell posits regarding the contemporary value of re-reading Bendix:

Bendix sought to provide a synthetic overview of Weber’s oeuvre as a whole, effectively rebalancing the earlier interpretive focus on The Protestant Ethic and the studies of the world religions by giving equal weight to the analytical treatise of *Economy and Society*, which includes studies of economics, religion, politics, power, law and the state. In doing so, Bendix challenged Talcott Parsons’ powerful alternative theoretical reading and helped extricate Weber’s historical sociology from the claims of functionalism and modernization theory. (Caldwell, 2016: 196)

In this way, while a close re-reading of Bendix is not, for our present purposes, necessary, it is useful to acknowledge that “Bendix’s Weber” (201) offers one of the first (popularized) English language examples of work that aimed to free the ambivalence and complexity of Weber’s social and political analysis from Parsons’ totalizing adaptation. Most interesting in terms of exploring and potentially introducing some of Weber’s conceptual language into contemporary theories of agonal democracy, is the emphasis Bendix put on Weber’s complex consideration of what we could describe as both ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ dimensions of his analysis. Specifically:

...Bendix opened up Weber's realistic and often disturbing analysis of the political dynamics of modernity. By analyzing 'domination combined with administration' and legitimacy as the legal enactment of domination, Bendix (1962) argued that Weber avoided any 'idealization' or utopian vision of modern society, of the state or the nation as realms in which social values, norms, moral standards no political ideals are in harmony, or are likely to be in the future. There can be no conflation of modern society with the nation *or* the state; for society is a precarious entity, and the nation and the state are rarely identical. Nor can 'modern society' as a normative ideal define the contingent outcomes of political modernity in Western or non-Western societies. In this way, Bendix replaced the Parsonian *sociological* problematic in which the political analysis of power and legitimacy cannot fully account for the enduring nature of social order, and, conversely, the sociological analysis of interests, ideas and values [that] cannot fully account for the enduring nature of politics and government. At the core of modern capitalist society is a marketplace dominated by conflicting instrumental interests that cannot be resolved. At the core of the modern nation *and* state is a form of legal domination founded on the 'insolvable conflict between the formal and substantively rationality of law. (207)

The invocation of concepts like 'insolvable conflict' and 'unresolvable conflicting interests' is, of course, particularly relevant to the task at hand. Indeed, elements of this influential reading, no doubt echo in contemporary explorations which will revisit further below – specifically Wolfgang Schluchter's consideration of Weber as political philosopher.

This all having been said, as this chapter moves to consider some of Weber's core concepts and ideas, I do so while acknowledging the breadth and scope of diversity that exists amongst post-Parsons Weberians. At the same time, it is also important to note that decades of effort to 'free Weber,' both from Parsons and other instrumental adaptations, has largely been successful. There is no dearth of access to Weber's writings – political or sociological. With this in mind, the next section moves to present a number of Weber's core concepts and 'ideal types' – with an emphasis on the ways he understood 'society' and social conflict – before proceeding to consider Schluchter's interesting synthesis of Weber's science *and* politics.

### *On Society and Social Conflict*

At the heart of the various calls for a radical democracy founded on an ethos of political

agon, is the core ‘contingently ontological’ claim that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate genuine conflict from the realm of politics. This is, as discussed in chapter 1, true of this sub-genre of political theory broadly, and of Mouffe’s account specifically. As such, in considering alternative theoretical perspectives through which to (re)open a space for the meaningful consideration of ‘the social’ alongside a ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy, the question of what is conflict, and how it operates within the social body is of central importance.

Of course, the question of ‘what is conflict’ can be nearly existential in scope if left unrestricted. Thankfully, my task here is considerably narrower. The task at hand is to consider, through some of Weber’s key conceptualizations, what in many cases he described in terms of ideal types, the overarching treatment of social and political conflict across Weber’s disparate works. This exploration is best begun with what Weber explicitly wrote on the topic. Despite the fact that Weber considered various forms of social and political turmoil across both his works of political sociology and sociology of religion, he most clearly considered the core meaning of conflict in society once in particular. In the first volume of his seminal work *Economy and Society*, Weber defines, and delineates between, the sociological terms: *Kampf* (conflict), struggle (including *Konkurrenz* or competition), and *Auslese* (selection). Specifically, Weber contends that:

A social relationship will be referred to as “conflict” (*Kampf*) insofar as action is oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor’s own will against the resistance of the other party or parties. (Weber, 1978: 38)

This definition of conflict is further clarified when one considers it in tandem with Weber’s broad understanding of power as the imposition of a person’s will on the behaviour of another. In this sense, conflict can be understood, even more succinctly, as the intersection of power and resistance. (Bendix, 1977: 290) Weber goes on to distinguish between various forms of such

conflict. First, Weber notes that conflicts in which “actual physical violence is not employed” (Weber, 1978:38) are defined as peaceful conflicts. Yet the distinctions between violent and peaceful conflict are not always clear, as Weber explains:

There are all manner of continuous transitions ranging from the bloody type of conflict which, setting aside all rules, aims at the destruction of the adversary, to the case of the battles of medieval chivalry, bound as they were to the strictest conventions, and to the strict regulation imposed on sport by the rules of the game. (38)

In-as-much as peaceful conflicts are oriented towards opportunities and advantages desired by multiple parties, Weber defines these as *Konkurrenz* (competition). Like ‘conflict’ proper, Weber suggests that competition can vary from completely unregulated – for which he uses the example of the competition between suitors – to formally restricted and bound in rule and convention – like that found in economic sectors.

In contrast to both broad *Kampf* (conflict) and specific *Konkurrenz* (competition), Weber brings a third *type* into play by defining the latent struggle for advantages and for survival as *Auslese* (selection). By selection Weber refers to the fact that, given sufficient time, struggles occurring on a large scale will lead to a ‘selection’ of those individuals with the qualities (social, biological or other) important to success. These processes of selection are, according to Weber, social when considering individuals within given lifetimes, and biological when considering survival of a species via hereditary inherited characteristics along longer time lines.<sup>9</sup> (Weber, 1978: 38)

It is via the concept of *Auslese* that Weber grants the principled ‘necessity’ of conflict. While not all forms of selection need necessarily imply relations of conflict, Weber does contend

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<sup>9</sup> Though certainly not to be conflated with Nietzsche's claim that life is, at its core, the drive towards *overcoming*, there remains none the less an interesting resonance between Weber's notion of selection and some of Nietzsche's accounts of the will to power.

that:

...even on the utopian assumption that all competition were completely eliminated, conditions would still lead to a latent process of selection, biological or social, which would favour the types best adapted to the conditions, whether their relevant qualities were mainly determined by heredity or by environment. On an empirical level the elimination of conflict cannot go beyond a point which leaves room for some social selection, and in principle a process of biological selection necessarily remains. (Weber, 1978: 39)

Selection is, in this sense, *Ewig* (eternal) for Weber. Taken together then, *Kampf*, *Konkurrenz*, and *Auslese* begin to provide the conceptual landscape for how Weber understands the power in social and political relations. As Peter Breiner contends, there is an important sociological aspect to the nexus of between *Kampf* and *Auslese*:

...[E]very social relation has the effect of selecting for one set of character types and against another. Without such selection there could be no social relations whether in the form of societal purposeful undertakings or communal reciprocity based on shared customs and sentiment. But beyond the fact that all social relations involve selectivity (*Auslese*), Weber claims, we have selection in every social relation in which conflict (*Kampf*) takes place, and as Weber defines the concept, conflict turns out to be identical with his definition of power (*Macht*): ‘Conflict [*Kampf*] is a social relation in so far as the action is oriented toward the intention of imposing one’s own will against the resistance of the partner’s, and peaceful struggle is designated as competition. And power ‘means every chance within a social relation to impose one’s will over resistance irrespective of what this chance depends on’. Therefore, every social conflict is at the same time a struggle for power.’ (Breiner, 2004: 291)

Conflict for Weber, at least in so far as it relates to selection, cannot be completely removed from human association. Yet *Auslese* also holds interesting implications for Weber’s conception of political struggle, a consideration to which we will return below.

In addition to the tripartite of concepts describing social and political struggle discussed above, Weber also considered the notion of struggle in terms of the prototypical question of ‘class conflict’ – a set of considerations impossible to imagine outside of a thinly veiled dialogue with Marx’s own assertions on the topic. Class struggle, argues Weber, rests on the distorting assumption that a ‘class’ necessarily constituted a community. While Weber concedes that communal action can be, and has been, taken on the basis of common economic interests, he is quick to warn against generalizing this possibility. Weber argues that:

...men in the same class situation regularly react in mass actions to such tangible situations as economic ones in the direction of those interests that are most adequate to their average number is an important and after all simple fact for the understanding of historical events. Above all, this fact must not lead to that kind of pseudo-scientific operation with the concept of 'class' and 'class interests' so frequently found these days, and which has found its most classic expression in the statement of a talented author, that the individual may be in error concerning his interests but that the 'class' is 'infallible' about its interests. (Weber, 1958: 184)

In an attempt to contribute to and complicate Marx's discussion of the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, Weber conceptualized *class* alongside the complementary notions of *status groups* and *parties*.

Class, contends Weber, is more rightly identified as class situation, and is wholly determined by economic situation. Classes do not, insists Weber, represent communities in and of themselves; classes rather represent potential bases for communal action. (Weber, 1978:181)

More specifically Weber suggests:

We may speak of a 'class' when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. (Weber, 1978:181)

If then a class is the embodiment of economic situation, Weber argues that a status group is the embodiment of social situation. Whereas the class distinction rests on property and income, the status distinction rests on various social markers of honour.

In contrast to classes, status groups do normally also constitute communities. (Weber, 1978:185) Unlike crude economic situation, with status comes a myriad of legally and socially protected rights. Where such groups are able to evolve without interruption, Weber posits that status groups will become 'closed castes.' (Weber, 1978:188) Weber's main point is to illustrate how social status can and does constitute an important variable in the social struggles between groups, yet he does continually concede that the various rights, privileges and status symbols of such groupings remain closely tied with property, opportunity, and income.

In distinction to both classes and status groups, Weber also postulates the *party*. As

Weber describes:

Whereas the genuine place of the ‘classes’ is within the economic order, the place of ‘status groups’ is within the social order, that is, within the sphere of the distribution of ‘honour.’ From within these spheres, classes and status groups influence one another and they influence the legal order and are in turned influenced by it. But ‘parties’ live in the house of ‘power.’ Their action is oriented toward the acquisition of social ‘power,’ that is to say, toward influencing a communal action no matter what its content may be. (Weber, 1978:194)

Parties, as opposed to classes or status groups, argues Weber, are unique in so far as they are the vehicles for the exercise of power. Whereas a class may act communally based on common interests, and a status group may more often do the same, only parties have the internal organization through which to manifest communal action towards shared – and usually explicitly discussed – common interest.

While these distinctions certainly complicate Marx’s account of the final stages of historical class antagonisms present in the capitalist order, and give some context to Weber’s abstract conceptualizations of conflict, they do not speak to the social or political productivity of such conflicts. Whereas Marx was quite explicit about the productive character of (at least material) conflicts under certain conditions, Weber is not as clear in his account.

Armed with Weber’s concepts of *Kampf*, *Konkurrenz*, and *Auslese*, as well as a sketch of his differentiation from Marx via a vis ‘class struggle,’ this section concludes with a first consideration of Weber’s most explicit consideration of politics and the political: *Politics as a Vocation*. As the title suggests, *Politics as a Vocation* speaks less to the content of politics proper, and more to the question of “...which personal qualities does it presuppose in anyone who devotes himself to it?” (Weber, 1978b: 212) That said, and as I will explore further via the work of Wolfgang Schluchter in the subsequent section, Weber presents a range of important concepts in his relatively short address.

According to Weber, the three chief qualities that one should possess for the practice of politics are: *passion*, a sense of *responsibility*, and *judgment*. Weber elaborates on each of these qualities in turn. Passion, writes Weber, is not so important as is realistic passion. As Weber explains:

I mean *realistic* passion - a passionate commitment to a realistic cause, to the god or demon in whose domain it lies. I do not mean 'passion' in the sense of that state of mind which my late friend Georg Simmel used to call 'sterile excitement' – a state which is characteristic of a certain kind of intellectual, especially of Russian intellectuals (though not perhaps all of them!), and which now plays such a large part amongst our own intellectuals in this carnival which is dignified with the proud name of a 'revolution.' (Weber, 1978b: 212)

Passion alone, contends Weber, a politician does not make. Even a realistic passion to a cause must, argues Weber, be tempered with the all-important sense of responsibility to the said cause, and the sound and careful judgment to be able to contemplate potential courses of action with an inner calm and composure. Weber describes the use of good judgment in politics as the ability to *detach* from the emotional ties to causes, people and things. Lack of detachment, argues Weber, condemns an actor to political impotence. (Weber, 1978b: 213)

With this rough sketch of the qualities a politician should possess, Weber goes on to question under what *ethic* should politics proceed. While we shall, through an exploration of Schluchter's Weber, consider these ethics in the context of a proto-political-philosophy, here we will begin with their basic enunciation. As politics is, according to Weber, the practice of power, power being the imposition of a person's will on the behaviour of another and conflict being the social relations in which such imposition is resisted, politics for Weber can be understood as constituted through power and conflict. It is in this context that it is useful to briefly return to the important concept of *Auslese*. As noted above, selection for Weber plays a key role in both social and political relations. In this way, one can start to identify the contours of a distinction, perhaps even a 'contingently ontological' one, between political and social conflict. Specifically,

in the context of Weber's definition of power and the selection of and struggle for the means to exercise it:

...politics becomes the struggle for the means to impose one's will in a political community over the resistance of others. It therefore demands that individual political actors or groups engage in a constant and relentless struggle, whether they are seeking only to realize prestige for themselves or ultimate convictions. But, beyond this, the state and the political community are defined by the struggle over the means of power, not because politics is merely about power and not fundamental values but precisely the opposite. Weber insists that there is no value that has not been at one time or another the object of the state. It would follow, then, that there is no value that has not been the object of struggle for political power within and between states. So politics, as a struggle for power to capture the means belonging to the state, does not repel the pursuit of fundamental political commitments – as one might expect in a definition that focuses on means not ends – but rather becomes something of a vortex, pulling such commitments towards its centre. (Breiner, 2004: 295)

It is in the context of this understanding of politics as irresolvable struggle, that Weber asks: under what political ethic should political conflicts be played out? Weber considers this question in terms of the opposing ethics of *conviction* (also translated as *intention*) and *responsibility*.

While Weber concedes that neither ethic technically implies the opposite of the other, he does contend that there remains a firm antithesis between them. As Weber clarifies:

Not that an ethic of intention is the same as irresponsibility or an ethic of responsibility the same as indifference to intentions. Naturally, there is no question of either of these two things. But there is a profound antithesis between actions governed by the ethics of intention, or to put it in religious language 'The Christian acts rightly and leaves the outcome to God', and actions governed by the ethics of responsibility, where one is answerable for the (foreseeable) *consequences* of one's actions. (Weber, 1978b: 217)

While clearly pregnant with both a practical secularism and another latent critique of a revolutionary idealist reading of Marx, Weber remains somewhat ambivalent around the ideal ethos for a vibrant political community. As Weber warns:

The man who is concerned for the welfare of his soul and the salvation of the souls of others does not seek these aims along the path of politics. Politics has quite different goals, which can only be achieved by force. The genius, or demon, of politics lives in a state of inner tension with the God of love, even with the Christian God as the Church depicts Him, and this tension may at any time erupt into irresolvable conflict. (Weber, 1978b: 223)

In a portrait of politics that one might dare to call *agonistic*, Weber thus describes political

conflict in terms of a perpetual friction between morality and the practical pursuit of power, in which only the application of force can properly decide, if not resolve, its perennial tensions.

*On the Political (Again) – Weber as Political Philosopher*

Despite the pivotal importance politics and ‘the political’ played in Weber’s work and life, the mainstream construction of Weber as a founding father of modern sociology has, by and large, confined his explicitly political musings to the periphery of his legacy. This is, as discussed earlier in the chapter, partially in line with the canonicalization and myth building of Weber - under which narrative the tension between Weber’s ‘passionate politics’ and ‘disciplined social science’ and between politics as a vocation and science as a vocation has been elevated to the status of near *ideal type*. That said, although it is an element of the mainstream study of Weber which has, by and large, survived the ‘de-Parsonsing’ or ‘freeing’ of Weber, other contemporary scholars have more recently returned to Weber’s explicitly political musings as potentially of central importance to Weber’s intellectual contributions.

Wolfgang Schluchter is one such scholar. Challenging much of the dominant framing of Weber’s work, Schluchter (re)considers both Weber’s seminal texts and several less well-known correspondences and writings to explore what he describes as an unrecognized *political-philosophical* dimension in Weber. (Schluchter, 1996: 8) Of course, Schluchter admits, this is not the same as suggesting Weber *was* a political philosopher. Certainly, as a matter of historical record, Weber never presented himself as a philosopher, as Schluchter recounts:

Even during the time in which he intensively took up the methodological question so of the social sciences and studied modern logicians, he repeatedly emphasized that he studied logic not for its own sake, but only to test the utility of the insights of modern logicians, especially Rickert, for solutions [to] the problems of his own discipline. He conceived of himself more as a patient who was conscious of his symptoms than as a physician who knew how to cure them... ..He described the illness; he also named the remedies that had already failed or that, being mere narcotics, would ultimately fail. (44)

Instead, what Schluchter offers is an account of Weber, *his* Weber, in which the often under-considered political-philosophical dimensions are brought to the fore “...in addition to rational insight and rational conviction.” (45) Weber’s writings “...also give expression to a philosophical existence.” (45) Making use of this account, we return to the distinction between *gesinnungsethik* (ethic of conviction or intention) and *verantwortungsethik* (ethic of responsibility) and explore Schluchter’s outline of a typology of ethics encompassing them both.

In some of his early analysis of *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik*, Schluchter framed a preliminary typology in a way that highlighted the idea of progressive development over time. This, according to Schluchter, had the effect of over-emphasizing a temporal or historical development from ‘simple’ pre-ethical positions to more ‘complex’ ethics of conviction and responsibility. (Schluchter, 1981: 62) Schluchter illustrated this first typology, in terms of three key distinguishing features of each ethical stance: basis of evaluation, object of evaluation, and the type of resulting conscience. So, for example, pre-ethical evaluations (‘superstition’ or magic-based systems), according to this typology, or distinguishable by the fact that they take, as both the basis of their evaluation and the object of their evaluation, a conception of outside forces working in retribution against particular ‘wrong’ actions. This is a non-ethical system precisely because it does not produce a type of conscience, instead instilling a pragmatic regime of avoidance – for example, it is not a matter of conscience as to whether one lets one’s children play by the river unattended; one does not let children play unattended by the river lest an angry river spirit take them and drown them. In contrast, an ethic of conviction (*gesinnungsethik*) takes as its basis of evaluation the ethical principles being adhered to, and its object of evaluation the intentions

underlying those principles. As such, it produces a conscience which Schluchter describes as autonomous-rigid – an internalized conscience that defines right and wrong according to a rigid structure of whether principles are or are not adhered to. Children might or might not be allowed to play unattended by the river based on the principle being applied. Were the principle that children should be allowed autonomy to grow and learn without direct supervision, then allowing them to play by the river unattended would be ethically justifiable in so far as it followed that principle. Schluchter illustrates this first attempt to lay out a comparative typology of Weberian ethics in terms of a table - reproduced as figure 2.1 below:

**Figure 2.1**

<b>Characteristics / Type</b>	<b>Basis of Evaluation</b>	<b>Object of Evaluation</b>	<b>Type of conscience</b>
Pre-Ethical Evaluation (Magic)	Consequences of actions as retribution		na
Law Ethic	norms	consequences or intention of actions	heteronomous
<i>Gesinnungsethik</i> (Ethic of Conviction)	principles	intent of conduct ('conviction')	autonomous-rigid
<i>Verantwortungsethik</i> (Ethic of Responsibility)	reflexive principle	consequences of conduct	autonomous-flexible

This early typology however, with its heavy reliance on Weber's cross-cultural analysis and assumption of progressive developmental trajectories, was, according to Schluchter, not entirely accurate. Indeed, Schluchter notes in his later work that this early view was partially tied to a tendency for an ethic of conviction to be used as a polemic foil against which a more 'advanced' ethic of responsibility can be positively contrasted. Even Weber, argues Schluchter, occasionally

falls prey to this reduction:

Admittedly, even Weber did not always resist the tendency to oversimplify the distinction for polemical purposes. Especially in those passages in “Politics as Vocation” where he took a political stance on the situation of Germany after the November Revolution of 1918, he tended – as Guenther Roth has pointed out – to “equate enmity to capitalism with the incapability to bear the ethical irrationality of the world” and to “force Christian pacifists and socialist revolutionaries... under the same rubric,” that of adherence to an ethic of conviction. The political devaluation that goes with this classification is obvious. (Schluchter, 1996: 49)

This however, argues Schluchter, is not an accurate account of the distinctions between *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik*. He argues that Weber’s distinction between these two ethical positions needs to be understood in the context of his broader understanding of values and the practical limits of ethical positions. Especially in the context of politics, Schluchter argues that none of Weber’s ethical positions can be understood as offering “...unequivocal directives for solving practical problems.” (49). According to Schluchter:

As soon as we take a closer look at Weber’s texts however, we immediately realize that matters can not be that simple, for he himself emphasized that the ethic of conviction must not be equated with irresponsibility nor the ethic of responsibility with mere *realpolitik*. A proper demarcation of the two ethics obviously rests on a specification of the *kind* of responsibility connected with them, that is, on the answer to the question *to whom* and *for what* one is responsible. (49)

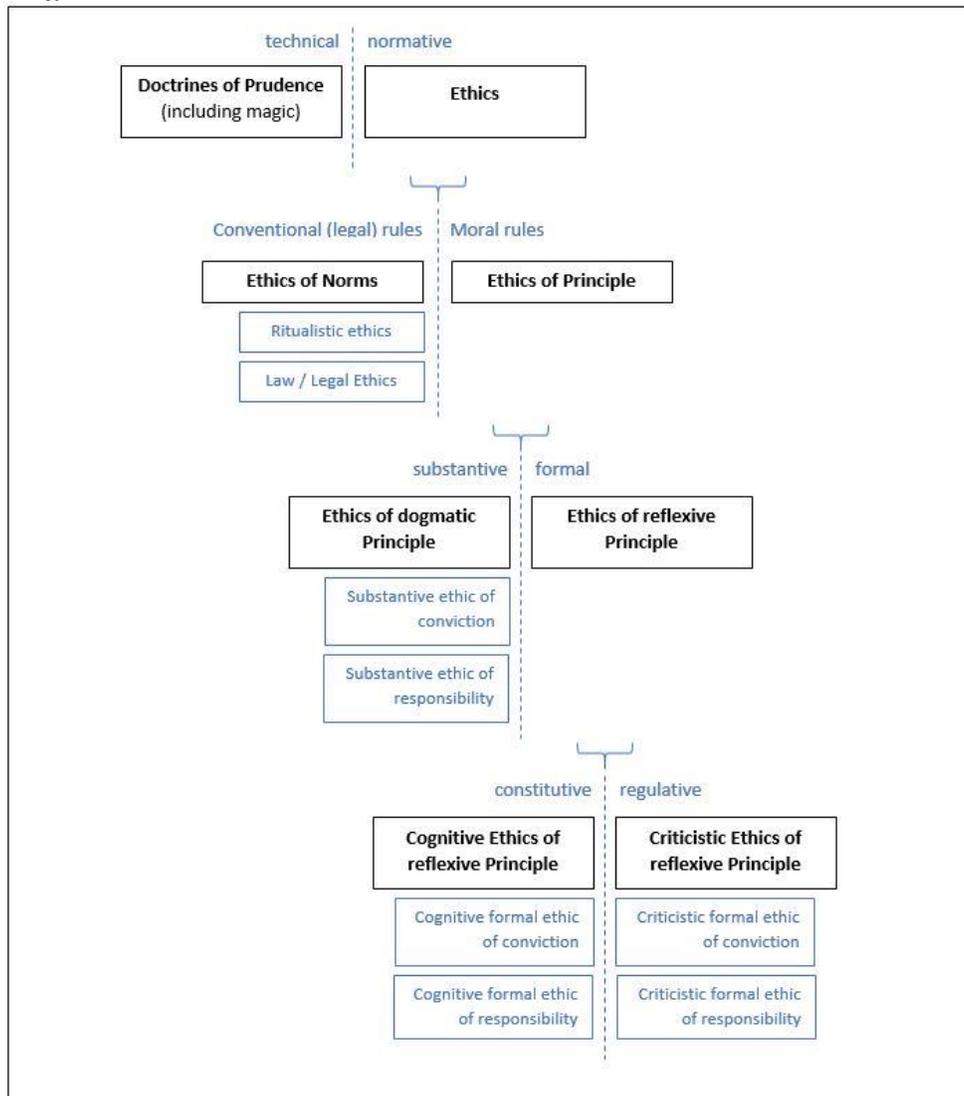
It is in this context that Schluchter raises, albeit somewhat briefly, the spectre of Weber’s own philosophical standpoint – a position Weber once described in terms of adherence to the idea of *value collision*. Diametrically opposed to any sort of crass relativism, Schluchter argues that Weber’s notion of value collision rests on the understanding that “...ethical values are not the only ones that carry claims of validity.” (49) For Weber, not completely unlike Schmitt, different spheres of human endeavor and thought generate and acknowledge different systems of values, potentially valid in their own context. As Schluchter emphasizes:

This is especially true for political problems, where ethical and cultural values often compete. In certain circumstances, cultural values can even be realized only by those who take ethical ‘guilt’ upon themselves. (49)

Armed with this understanding, Schluchter contends that a proper understanding of the

distinctions between *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik* can be developed by expanding and complicating the typology of ethics found across Weber's political and religious sociological writings. Correcting his earlier illustration, Schluchter posits a more nuanced typology (100) illustrated<sup>10</sup> below:

**Figure 2.2**



<sup>10</sup> While the content of this typology is reproduced directly from Schluchter's work, its visual representation has been modified for clarity.

As evident in this figure, there are four primary distinctions that structure this second attempt at a typology of Weberian ethics – *technical vs. normative, conventional vs. moral, substantive vs. formal*, and *constitutive vs. regulative*. Let us briefly consider each in turn.

The first distinction in the typology, which Schluchter draws from Weber’s extensive sociological study of religion, is between ethics, which are *normative* in character, and other ‘doctrines of prudence’ which posit outside forces (spirits, magic, or pro-active divinities) as responsible for punishing specific transgressions – that is, which are *technical* in nature. As noted above, in this sense “...a magical ‘ethic’ is not an ethic in strict sense of the word. It lacks a clear distinction between a technical and a normative rule.” (70) Somewhat analogous to Weber’s distinctions between value rational and instrumental rational social action, Schluchter contends that ‘doctrines of prudence’ represent a pre-ethical orientation in so far as they rely on subjective (generally superstitious) means-end relationships. While seeking to minimize an overarching developmental perspective in this updated typology, Schluchter none the less concludes that:

Regardless of how tortuous the actual historical paths were, one generalization can be made: Only with the transition from taboos to religious laws, from coercion and bribery to worship and service to the divine, from a fraternization guaranteed by taboos to one guaranteed by one’s “conscience,” was the equation of useful versus harmful with good versus evil rejected and faith in the power of demons and gods and in their mediators made relatively independent of their contributions to the (material) success of the faithful. (70)

In this sense, the first ‘true’ distinction between types of ethics proper appears in the form of a contrast between *conventional* and *moral* ethics. In this second key distinction, the key contrast is between external and internal guarantees. Whereas conventional ethics operate by amalgamating moral and legal imperatives – what Schluchter describes as the ‘elevation of laws into sacred laws’ (71), moral ethics depend on “cultural prescriptions subdivided into the spheres of outer and inner freedom, legality, and morality.” (71) In so doing, the distinctions rendered

under moral ethical stances move away from obedience and open a space for the emergence of the concept of conviction – and therefore all ethics of principle.

Expanding the category of ethics of principle, Schluchter proposes two sub-categories: ethics of dogmatic principle and reflexive principle. This brings us to the third key distinction underpinning Schluchter's proposed typology - the contrast between *substantive* and *formal* ethics. Based in part on what Schluchter describes as Weber's "scattered remarks on Kant's ethics" (73), this distinction relates to the level of abstraction of the ethical principles at play. While substantive ethics can be theoretically deduced and thus empirically grounded (76), formal ethical principles are those which can "...examine the rational character, and thus the general lawfulness, of maxims and rules that are held by individuals to be morally valid." (76) Thus, while both 'rational,' the formal ethical principle attempts to move beyond its culturally embedded character and implies a 'sphere' of abstracted moral positions "...in which the 'culturalism' of this concrete morality is reflexively broken." (78) Here the distinction is understood in terms of 'revealed or rationally deduced substantive norms' and 'universalizing principles.' (77) Whereas ethics of dogmatic principle – including both a substantive ethic of responsibility and conviction – are based on "...a sphere of concrete morality that still remains embedded in its specific social and cultural milieu..."(77), ethics of reflexive principle are conceptually built on a universalized principles, or internally consistent value axioms, which seek to step out of their historical and cultural contexts to be able to provide a basis for the consideration of actions or rules held by others. That said, this is not to suggest any degree of cultural relativism – a position Weber very explicitly rejected and reviled – but rather, as Schluchter argues, a level of awareness of historical and cultural contingency which renders mutable what might otherwise be immutable ethical convictions, and seeks more abstracted

principles upon which a range of more embedded positions can be *judged* or *justified*.

The ideas of judgment (in the sense of criticism) and justification lead to the final core distinction in Schluchter's posited typology: the contrast between *constitutive* and *regulative* ethics of reflexive principle. On the side of *constitutive*, there are cognitive formal ethics of responsibility and conviction, while on the side of *regulative* there are criticistic formal ethics of both responsibility and conviction. This final distinction relates to the character and application of the universalized principles characteristic of formal ethical positions. Specifically, the distinction relates to the status of the universalized principle as either a principle of justification or a principle of critical examination. As opposed to an ethical position which holds rationality or reason preeminent above all other considerations, Schluchter suggests that one of the unique features of Weber's preferred criticistic formal ethics is the notion that rationally deduced universalistic principles, while important in being able to engage with and criticize other ethical positions, cannot be rigidly interpreted as a way to determine the full validity of opposing views. This is a particularly important distinction for a comprehensive understanding of Weber's conceptions of *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik* argues Schluchter, as "one of the indispensable elements of Weber's position is the assertion that a convictional value can be criticized but not justified by reason." (93)

Taken together, Schluchter's typology of ethics offers considerable additional depth to Weber's contrast between the respective ethics of responsibility and conviction. Both, following Schluchter's typology, can be understood in terms of formal and criticistic ethics of principle – distinguishable from an array of other *substantive* and *constitutive* permutations. In both cases, this serves to emphasize what we earlier noted as Weber's commitment to *value collision* – a conception of values, in some ways compatible with a contemporary agonistic perspective, that

rejects the very possibility of the rational justification of one over another. While the initial contrast between idealism and pragmatism remains, Schluchter's careful contextualization of *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik* within a broader typology of ethics allows us to observe other, equally if not more interesting, characteristics. It also provides a far more nuanced understanding of Weber's preferred 'political ethic of responsibility' as Schluchter succinctly summarizes:

Whoever seeks to satisfy – without self-deception – the law according to which they engage in action must have knowledge of their own “ultimate interiorly ‘consistent’ value axioms” and of their consequences. This demands, using the term from Nietzsche, “intellectual honesty.” It also demands, however, the readiness for real dialogue, and indispensable preliminary stage to real confrontation. Weber repeatedly emphasizes that ideals can only prove themselves in struggle with other ideals or perish if lacking the strength to prevail. However, before they can pass the test in real life, ideals must survive the relativizing effects of value discussions. Only in this way can they be capable of arousing conviction (*uberzeugungsfahig*). Whereas in Kant, everyone can, in principle if not in fact, always take the general point of view, Weber's approach necessarily demands a formal critique of conviction in the framework of a value discussion. The institution of such discussions is – in addition to a theory of personality – at the centre of his own standpoint in ethics. (92)

Once again, this account of Weber suggests an orientation to ongoing conflict at the level of value judgements and ethics, which strongly resonate with the underlying principles of contemporary perspectives oriented around a (re)turn to an ethos of political agon. While certainly not positioning Weber as an agonal thinker per se, Schluchter's careful integration of Weber's political and ethical insights within the broader context of Weber's more well known social insights, offers, at the minimum, an interesting sympathetic conceptual vocabulary upon which contemporary theorists, interested in an agonistic account of politics or democracy, could draw upon.

### *Between Weber and Schmitt – Friends, Enemies, Values and Vocations*

If we conclude our exploration of Weber with the clear concession that he does not, per se, present us with either a vision of *the political* or *the social* that one can rightly call agonistic;

we must, as we consider the value of the conceptual vocabulary he does offer, also remind ourselves that Schmitt was no more an agonistic theorist in his own right. Indeed, it is only through an explicitly selective reading of Schmitt that Chantal Mouffe has been able to build her radical vision of agonal democracy. Therefore, in a similar vein, through what I have described as creative adaptation, we can consider the ways in which certain Weberian insights might help supplement and support a more thorough account of agonal democratic politics. Specifically, we can compare certain theoretical pillars in Weber and Schmitt, and explore the ways that supplementing elements of Schmitt's core understandings with some 'new' conceptual vocabulary harvested from Weber offers new opportunities to develop a more robust understanding of the social conditions of possibility for any democratic ethos based on political agon.

The first comparison worth making between Schmitt and Weber is regarding their fundamental conceptualization of *the political*. As discussed in Chapter One (1), Schmitt's understanding of the political is, fundamentally, one based on the centrality of conflict.

Explicitly, Schmitt contends that:

The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping. (Schmitt, 2007, 29)

One of his most famous intellectual contributions, and the one at the core of the contemporary use and rehabilitation of his work by agonal theorists, Schmitt's assertion that the true ontological nature of the political can only be understood via the antithetical distinction of *friend* and *enemy* inextricably entwines all things 'political' with conflict, and ultimately the threat of *war*.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, but perhaps not as much as one might intuit, Weber's understanding of the

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<sup>11</sup> As discussed in Chapter One (1), Schmitt's conceptualization of the political depends on the existence of discrete 'nation-like' entities and the constant ultimate threat of violent conflict between such collectivities.

‘essence’ of the political relates to the use of, and struggle for, power. As discussed above, Weber’s understandings of *Kampf* (conflict), *Konkurrenz* (competition), and *Auslese* (selection) underpin his conceptualization of *politics* and *the political*, as well as the characteristics he posits a strong politician should possess. For Weber, politics “...becomes the struggle for the means to impose one’s will in a political community over the resistance of others...” (Breiner, 2004: 295) and as such “...demands that individual political actors or groups engage in a constant and relentless struggle.” (295) This remains true, according to Weber, regardless of whether one genuinely acts according to one’s convictions, or one aims only to instrumentally enhance one’s own standing, power, wealth or prestige. In this way, and without narrowing his understanding to a binary opposition between friend and enemy, Weber offers a conceptualization of the political inherently defined through irresolvable conflict.

This brings us to the second important comparison between Weber and Schmitt, the degree to which politics and the political are understood as purely pragmatic or even *amoral* spheres of human thought and action. For Schmitt, it is necessary to understand the political as being born of the ultimate relation to conflict – that between the friend and enemy. This core antithetical relation, the ability to define and distinguish between political *friends* and political *enemies*, as well as the practical power to compel the collective ‘we’ to mobilize and do violence against the collective ‘them,’ represents the ultimate core logic of the political. For Schmitt, the insertion of any other logic, understood through different core antithetical binary distinctions, only serves to obscure, obstruct or pervert the political. Take, for example, Schmitt’s musings on the integration of moral considerations, the distinction between *good* and *evil*, into politics. As discussed in Chapter One (1), Schmitt contends that:

by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categorizations and is forced to make him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed. (Schmitt, 2007: 36)

Indeed, Schmitt goes further, contending that there can be no possible justification for the ultimate end of politics – the violent confrontation of inter-collectivity war – outside of purely political grounds. Framing it in a seductively sympathetic manner, Schmitt argues that there can exist, by definition, no rational purpose, norm, social ideal, nor legal authority which can “justify men killing each other” (49) except the real and practical danger represented by a true enemy – therefore a purely political rationale. In contrast, Weber’s conceptualization of the political simultaneously acknowledges it as a distinctive sphere where participants constantly struggle to impose their will over others, and as a space in which various ethics can be imagined, compared, and followed. In this way, as we have explored throughout this chapter, Weber offers a portrait of the political in terms of a perpetual friction between morality and the practical pursuit of power. On the one hand, he warns that:

The man who is concerned for the welfare of his soul and the salvation of the souls of others does not seek these aims along the path of politics. Politics has quite different goals, which can only be achieved by force. (Weber, 1978b: 223)

Yet on the other hand, and very much contra Schmitt’s perspective, Weber offers us a not only a vision of political ethics, but a stance on the best ethical position from which to engage in such inherently fraught political contest.

Through Schluchter’s exploration and elaboration of Weber’s explicit and implied perspectives on ethical positions applicable to political action, the third and perhaps most important distinction between Weber and Schmitt takes shape. If the first contrast between Schmitt and Weber is in the way both define politics vis-à-vis conflict, and the second the space they make for normative action outside of purely instrumental or pragmatic *realpolitik*, then the third contrast must be marked between Weber’s consideration of *gesinnungsethik* (ethic of conviction or intention) and *verantwortungsethik* (ethic of responsibility) as two *criticistic ethics*

*of reflexive principle*, and the complete absence of any possible political ethics in Schmitt.

Whereas through Schmitt, Mouffe inherits a view of politics in which political actors take purely pragmatic decisions justifiable only within the internal logic of politics as conflict between friend and enemy, Weber, and more specifically Schluchter's reading of Weber, offers an understanding of the political as irreducible struggle to instill one's will on others, but which can, and should, still be moderated by particular ethical stances applicable to the political sphere – the characteristics underpinning which can be selected in those seeking to pursue politics as a vocation. Providing more depth than typically associated with *gesinnungsethik* and *verantwortungsethik*, Schluchter's Weber provides a well-developed category of political ethics which demands simultaneously a commitment to rationally deduced moral principles abstracted beyond one's practical position or interests, and a reflexive acknowledgement that such value positions can only ever serve as a point of relational critique, and not justification for one set of values over another.

### Chapter 3

#### *Unfamiliar Territory: Looking Beyond the Canon to the Social Conditions of Possibility for a Radical Democracy Premised on Political Agon*

Remaining committed to our two starting propositions that: 1) agonal democratic theorists broadly, and Chantal Mouffe specifically, share with a critical sociology the normative emancipatory aim of producing scholarship which can contribute to the overturning of existing systems of inequality and domination, and 2) that despite the typically problematic treatment of the social by theorists in this area, the exploration of agonal democracy in political theory contains significant normative and analytic capacities worth exploring; this chapter continues with the objective of challenging the logic of determination present in this subset of political theory under which the social is essentially determined by the political. Through the creative adaptation of selected classical sociological insights, the present analysis remains focused on expanding the nascent conceptualizations of the social underpinning this proposed agonal (re)turn, and asking a key sociological question: what are the underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon? Having shown, in the previous chapter, how one might leverage some of the classical sociological and political insights of Max Weber to nuance a more narrow account of ‘the political’ in order to (re)open a conceptual space within a ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy, we are left now with the question of from where to offer this proposed more robust conception of ‘the social’ compatible with, and even sympathetic to, such an account.

Though Weber offers both a view of ‘the social’ replete the potentially productive

character of social conflict, as well as an alternative account of ‘the political’ inherently defined by and through conflict, and, in this way, ‘opens up’ the conceptual landscape surrounding agonal democratic theory to a deeper understanding of the social; we have not, as-of-yet, succeeded in (re)introducing such an understanding. The degree to which Weber’s insights alone do not fully satisfy, is, to some extent, a feature of the deep divide between his sociological and political-philosophical works - a division which is in part a reflection of Weber’s own professional-ethical standpoints, as well as one which has been exaggerated and extended through his post-war uptake and legacy across western anglophone academia. Weber’s many seminal insights into the nature of the social remain systematically distanced from his important, though less renown, works on the nature of politics and political ethics. However, as noted at the end of the previous chapter, Weber, and more specifically Wolfgang Schlucter’s reading of Weber, does offer a great deal in terms of expanding the conceptual landscape associated with radical agonal democratic theory. From Schlucter’s account of Weber we can derive an understanding of the political which remains premised on irreducible struggle to instill one’s will on others, but which can, and should, still be moderated by ethical stances applicable to the political sphere from outside and beyond it. It is a vision of the political which simultaneously resonates with Carl Schmitt’s friend/enemy characterization, upon which Mouffe builds her radical account of agonal democracy, while challenging the notion that values and ethics originating outside the political sphere need be viewed as anathema. It simultaneously supports a core understanding of the political as irreducibly characterized by and through conflict, while explicitly acknowledging the distinctive but not necessarily completely unrelated character of conflict in the social.

It is here that our third chapter begins, having introduced, through Weber, some level of

conceptual possibility for an account of the social both compatible with Schmitt's understanding of the political and sympathetic to Mouffe's objectives in adapting it; we turn our attention to finding the conceptual vocabulary through which to (re)introduce a viable notion of the social into the body of agonal democratic theory. In order to do this, we find ourselves leaving the core of classical western sociological canon and moving further to its periphery. Specifically, I propose to consider the classical insights of Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel. Sociologists and social thinkers of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tönnies and Simmel are both interesting figures in classical sociology who occupy somewhat ambiguous positions in the contemporary western sociological imagination. Simultaneously part of, and on the periphery of the so-called 'founding fathers' of sociology, both Tönnies and Simmel enjoy positions in what one might call the second or third tiers of the 'pantheon' of classical sociological theory as it has been constructed and maintained in the mainstream of anglo-western sociology. While both thinkers have received some degree of renewed attention amongst contemporary English speaking scholars, their work has not yet ascended in the mainstream of western sociology to the degree that the work of, for example, their mutual acquaintance Max Weber has enjoyed. Overlapping near-contemporaries of both Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, Tönnies' and Simmel's works both offer alternative, though complimentary, insights to those so far explored.

Like Weber, both Tönnies and Simmel contributed to the birth of what would become the German sociological tradition – and their work reflected both the exciting intellectual and political age in which they were born into, and the deep anxieties preceding the rise of the Nationalist Socialist Party and Nazism.

This having been said, I do not propose to consider Tönnies and Simmel in equal measure. Somewhat counterintuitively vis-à-vis their respective levels of modern uptake in

contemporary western social thought, a strong emphasis will be put on the exploration and (re)consideration of the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. While this is by no means to debate the significance of Simmel's seminal insights, nor take away from their renaissance<sup>12</sup>, for which there is no real parallel for Tönnies, in contemporary sociology; the primacy herein accorded to Tönnies is neither arbitrary nor without historical precedent. Indeed, from a historical perspective, Tönnies' influence during his career – both discursive and institutional – significantly surpassed that of Simmel's, and arguably, that of Max Weber. Although both his discursive and institutional influence was significantly, and intentionally, reduced following his excommunication from German academia at the end of his career for his outspoken refusal to bend his work to serve the Nazis agenda; to this day it is Tönnies, and not Simmel (nor even Weber), who is credited as the father of German Sociology. If Carl Schmitt is understood as a figure whose academic work was, for a time, unduly advantaged by prestige and academic standing gifted to him for his loyalty to the National Socialist Party, Ferdinand Tönnies can be understood as one of those from which those 'gifts' were forcibly taken and redistributed. Additionally, beyond their historical intersections, there is a substantive though generally overlooked philosophical connection between Tönnies and Schmitt – specifically in terms of their contrasting relationships to, interpretations of, and intellectual commitments to the political theory of Thomas Hobbes. Both were, and continue to be, acknowledged as substantive Hobbesian scholars<sup>13</sup>. In this way, Tönnies not only offers additional insight into the social

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<sup>12</sup>Unlike Tönnies, Simmel's work has experienced somewhat of a contemporary renaissance amongst anglophone western sociologists. Still not considered on par with what became the canonical figures of his time (Durkheim and Weber, chiefly), his varied insights into modern society – on topics ranging from fashion to religion, from the mechanics of monetary economies to the ambiguous nature of distance and proximity in social relations – have garnered wide consideration. (Frisby 1985, 1992a, 1992b, 2002, Witz 2001, Deflem 2003, Dodd 2008, Kemple 2009, Cooper 2010, Vandenberghe 2010, Horgan 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Although Schmitt's connections with and work on Thomas Hobbes is commonly noted, the degree to which Tönnies was a renown scholar of Hobbes, or to which Hobbes work influenced Tönnies' sociological works, remains relatively underexplored amongst western sociologists. That said, while not a dominant theme in the

dimensions of conflict not considered by Schmitt, his work provides an alternative trajectory from a comparable starting point.

With this in mind, this chapter is organized in terms of five (5) interrelated tasks. First, we begin by exploring the unique and particular historical context in which Ferdinand Tönnies both rose to pre-eminence and was later reduced to relative obscurity. Second, the chapter considers Tönnies' philosophical underpinnings, specifically his relationship to the famous and foundational work of Thomas Hobbes - to whose writings he dedicated a significant portion of his career. How Tönnies understood Hobbes, and the degree to which his own work remained influenced by Hobbes will be compared and contrasted to that of Carl Schmitt's, who also famously contributed to Hobbesian scholarship in Germany. Third, this chapter will move to consider some of the key sociological insights from Tönnies most seminal work – *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. This examination will begin with an exploration of the traditional interpretation of Tönnies among western anglophone sociologists, but it will not end with such a view. Instead, I propose an alternative lens through which to (re)consider some of the key conceptual artifacts Tönnies introduces. Specifically, reading Tönnies' seminal *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in terms of a shared underlying normative commitment in common with Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan – certain of Tönnies key conceptual artifacts and insights can be considered from a new angle.

As its fourth task, the chapter will consider the opportunities and inherent limits present in the insights and conceptualizations borrowed from Tönnies. Seeking to move beyond some of these limitations, this chapter will introduce a few key complimentary insights from the work of

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sociological understanding of Tönnies among English speaking western sociologists, some recent work has sought to bring to light both Tönnies' contributions to Hobbesian scholarship and the degree to which both drew on – or rejected – core elements of Hobbes political theory. (Mastnak, 2015; Wickham, 2014; Filippov, 2013; Bond 2011(a), 2011(b), Bertman, 1999; Thomsen, 1997)

Georg Simmel – bringing them into conversation with those of Tönnies. Here, Simmel’s emphasis on the complexity of human sociation, as well as the liminal and ambiguous character of most social relationships will be briefly explored. More specifically, his famous, though short, ruminations on *the stranger* as key figure in modern society, as well as his more abstract observations regarding *the productive role of conflict* within the social. Finally, this chapter will conclude by imaging the conceptual possibilities opened by deploying some of Simmel’s key conceptualizations to theoretically ‘nudge’ both Tönnies and Schmitt – and consider the implications for understanding both the political and the social dimensions of a radical democratic theory premised on the ideal of political agon if one moves from *core antithetical binary distinctions* towards *trinodal spectrums of oppositional difference*.

#### *Discursive vs Institutional Foundations*

With these five-fold objectives in mind, before moving to this chapter’s first formal task - exploring Ferdinand Tönnies as peripheral ‘founder’ of sociology in terms of the unique and particular historical context in which he lived and wrote - it is valuable to pause and consider precisely what is meant when we speak of notions like ‘founders’ in a field or discipline. Of course, we begin by acknowledging the historically-, culturally-, geographically- and/or linguistically-contingent nature of such monikers. As noted above, while Simmel has gained significant status in the so-called canon of contemporary western anglophone sociology, it is Tönnies who remains more celebrated in his native Germany. Yet beyond the various contingencies that clearly caveat any such notion, there also remains other core difference in the way disciplines broadly, and sociology specifically, identify and even partially deify their so-

called founders. This difference revolves around both the distinction between *discursive* and *institutional* founding status, as well as the relative importance a given discipline places on each.

As Peter Baehr explains:

“Discursive” founders, it transpires, are often imagined to lay the tracks of traditions. Their importance is held to derive more from the stock of ideas they have provided for sociology than from any organizational contributions to it they have made. This distinguishes them from “institutional” founders – our second category – which refers to people whose significance lies in the fact that they established some artefact or institution demonstrably related to the sociological enterprise: for instance, a sociology journal, an academic society or association, a university department. (Baehr, 2016: 6)

These two different dimensions or ways in which an author can be seen as having ‘founder’ status, are not, Baehr argues, treated equally. While it can be easier to validate, through historical artifact, institutional contributions understood to be founding activities – such as starting a journal, establishing a programme, or building a school/faculty – it is the harder to pin down act of discursive founding that Baehr posits is held in higher regard within sociology.

Specifically, Baehr invites us to:

...recognize that in sociology, it is discourse, general theory, above all, which appears to make a founder iconic. Albion Small was a founder of a university department, a journal, and a school – but few would accord him the founding status of Marx and Weber, even though the direct institutional contribution of Marx to sociology was zero, and, as we have already noted, of Weber was minimal. (8)

In this way, we can understand that, despite the huge institutional impacts Tönnies may have made during his career, his relatively more modest discursive echoes have pushed him farther afield in the hierarchy of classical sociology vis-à-vis Simmel.

That said, it should also be noted that Baehr offers his readers a bit of caution with regards to the idea of founding discourse. Although he illustrates that sociology – as a contemporary discipline and institution – tends to privilege those seen as having laid the tracks for whole spheres of study, he also cautions us not to take too literally the notion of the ‘founding of a discourse.’

Specifically, he warns:

In sum, “founders of discursivity” is a misnomer. Discursivity cannot be founded since it is inherently an interaction, not a deed of the founding figure. One can produce a body of work that becomes the focus for a discourse but one cannot found a discourse (work + interpretation) itself since discourses entail what happens to a work where it is identified as significant. (20)

To this I would add that, as such, discursive ‘founding’ is therefore inextricably tied to the social and political climate of the time in which a body of work is written – in as much as the identification of a body of work as ‘significant’ is neither objective nor ahistorical. While significant ideas can inspire discourses despite an absence of institutional impact, the availability, contextualization, and ultimately probability of being identified as significant is also a deeply contingent process.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the peripheral statuses of Simmel and Tönnies amongst contemporary sociological classics, one can clearly draw connections to Baehr’s claim of the relative weighting of discursive vs institutional founding. Whereas Simmel achieved very minimal institutional impacts over the course of his career, and indeed did not even primarily identify himself with sociology as a discipline, the later discursive uptake of his writings have positioned him much closer to the centre of the contemporary sociological canon. In contrast, Tönnies, whose writings were once considered the very centre of all sociological work in Germany, and in spite of his varied and significant institutional legacy in Germany, has not – to date - inspired the same degree of discursive interest amongst western anglophone sociologists. Though we can agree with Baehr that this is, factually speaking, a result of the relative significance placed on each’s

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<sup>14</sup> Here I would respectfully point out that Baehr misses some of the implications of his own insights. In several places in his book, he spends energy ‘fending off’ perceived feminist and post-colonial critiques of the canon which emphasize those not privileged enough to be considered at the time they wrote. Instead, I would argue that Baehr’s own reflections on discursive founding offers a better path to understanding. Had, at the time, certain female or non-European authored works enjoyed the same level of legitimacy of say the work of Karl Marx, many ideas from such works might well have been qualified as ‘significant’ and therefore been the focus of extensive discourses. It is not, in my view, either revisionist nor an attack on the status of existing classics, to acknowledge the variously contingent nature of the ‘significant’ moniker at the core of so-called discursive founding.

contributions – we would be wise to also consider the extent to which the Nazis’ initial excitement towards a crass reading of Tönnies’ work, as well as his subsequent purposeful and meticulous expulsion from German academia for rejecting their advances at the end of his career, may have also played a lasting role in the uptake of his ideas in the decades since.

### *Historical Context – The Rise and Fall of Ferdinand Tönnies*

Ferdinand Tönnies was born (roughly) on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1855<sup>15</sup> on his parents’ farm in the parish of Oldenswort, in the district of Eiderstedt, which lay under the duchy of Schleswig-Holstein. (Mitzman, 1973: 41) Tönnies father’s family was of Frisian origin, while his mother’s family, whose surname was Mau, were from East Holstein. While his father was a very successful cattle farmer, his mother came from a family of Protestant ministers and scholars. (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971: xv) Tönnies spoke little of his childhood, and what little descriptions there are of his youth primarily note two important landmarks: when his father retired and moved the family to the small (but somewhat famous) town of Husum, and of his friendship with poet Theodor Woldsens Storm. (Mitzman, 1973: 42) Already renowned when he befriended a young and impressionable Tönnies, Theodor Storm would go on to be considered one of the most important literary figures in Germany’s realist art movement. The famous poet was so impressed with Tönnies, that he asked the boy to help review proofs of a poetry anthology he was preparing for publication – an honour not lost on the young Tönnies. (43) The brief, but likely formative, association between a young Tönnies and Storm is of note here in so

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<sup>15</sup> There is some uncertainty and inconsistency as to the identification of the year of Tönnies birth. While some texts note it definitively as 1855 (Mitzman, 1973: 41), others note it as being between 1855 and 1859 (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971: xiv). As it is not material to the work at hand, it is here noted simply in the interest of historical accuracy. Interestingly, there is no such confusion regarding the day or month of Tönnies birth.

far as the realism the poet would become renowned for emphasized mundane or banal experiences and imagery over romanticized visions of ‘great’ moments or events. The early influence of this artistic commitment is of potential note given both Tönnies’ focus on everyday life and sociation in his writings, as well as his later rejection of the Nazis’ perverse romanticization of the German *volk* and their attempts to read such into his work. Tönnies family’s wealth enabled him to continue his studies as a young man at a range of Universities, as was the custom of the day, in Jena, Bonn, Leipzig, Berlin and Tuebingen. Interestingly, and no doubt true of Weber, Simmel and Schmitt as well, Tönnies noted of his early education an emphasis on what we have, in previous chapters, spoken of in terms of antithetical binary oppositions. As Mitzman notes:

From the few things he [Tönnies] says about his education, it is apparent he was taught early to think in terms of conceptual opposites (e.g., such notes as “Understanding distinguishes, draws limits. Reason sees the unity in things”), and that he was early familiar and impressed by Plato’s doctrine of ideas. (41)

During this period Tönnies also completed his mandatory military service. Like Weber, Tönnies found little delight in military discipline or routine, and was discharged in the summer of 1875 on account of being deemed too physically weak for field duty. (Mitzman, 1973: 44) Throughout his education Tönnies pursued a range of academic interests including philosophy, statistics, archaeology, classical languages, and history, culminating with a doctorate from the University of Tuebingen in classical philosophy in 1877 at the age of (approximately) twenty-two. (Cahnman and Heberle, 1971: xv)

Tönnies proceeded to pursue a career in academia, and began teaching at the University in Leipzig. This period was one of depression and sickness for Tönnies, and, some argue in correlate, a period in which Tönnies also was tempted by romantic works which “...condemned modern society and counseled a return to feudalism.” (Sample, 1987: 65) While still somewhat

debated, evidence points to this infatuation with extremely nostalgic and anti-liberal perspectives as having been distinctively temporary. Tönnies went on to assert throughout his life, with a few exceptions, a fierce commitment to a socialist and progressive informed hopefulness. (65) After his time in Leipzig, Tönnies achieved a post as assistant professor of ethics at the Christian-Albrechts University of Kiel in 1881. However, the intellectual and practical atmosphere in the Prussian University did not suite the young Tönnies. Describing the Prussian system as authoritarian, repulsive, and hopeless, Tönnies "...abandoned the lectern to write and travel while living off of his inheritance." (66) It was during this period, 1880 to 1887, mostly following his departure from the University of Kiel, that Tönnies wrote his most seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* – originally published in 1887. (Jacoby, 1955: 148) While Tönnies would go on to publish extensively in the field of sociology over his career and life<sup>16</sup>, it was *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* which propelled Tönnies to the peaks of status and reputation in German academia. The book was extremely well received in Germany, with numerous reprinting and new editions, and was eventually translated to English as 'Community and Society' in 1957. Somewhat ironically, it was also this seminal work that later drew the interest and attention of the Nazis. Interested in both a conservative/nostalgic reading of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* as well as in the status and credibility the pre-eminent sociologist might have been able to offer the party – Tönnies' was approached by members of Hitler's inner circle as a potential ally. Tönnies vehemently rejected these advances, characterizing the Nazis'

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<sup>16</sup> Tönnies published extensively in sociology throughout his career, mostly in German, with a few being later translated to English, French and Spanish. Key publications in German include - Schiller als Zeitbürger und Politiker, Buchverlag der "Hilfe" (Berlin, Germany), 1905; Das Wesen der Soziologie, Zahn & Jaensch (Dresden, Germany), 1907; Weltkrieg und Völkerrecht, S. Fischer (Berlin, Germany), 1917; Die Entwicklung der Socialen Frage Bis zum Weltkriege, W. de Gruyter & Co. (Berlin, Germany), 1919; Der Zarismus und Seine Bundesgenossen 1914: Neue Beiträge zur Keirgsschuldfrage, Deutsche verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte (Berlin, Germany), 1922; Soziologische Studien und Kritiken, G. Fischer (Jena, Germany), 1925; and Das Eigentum, W. Braumüller (Wien, Germany), 1926.

reading of his seminal work as gross misinterpretation. A principled stand that would ultimately cost him all he had attained.

Following the publication of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies' career in German academia was substantively secured. It was during this period that Tönnies was in closest contact with both Max Weber and Georg Simmel, and when his reputation and status as a – if not *the* – preeminent German sociologist of his day was solidified. Alongside his rising discursive importance, Tönnies' also made substantial institutional contributions to a fledgling German Sociology - helping found the German Sociological Society – over which he presided as President for some 22 years. (148). Interestingly, and not generally assigned significant importance amongst contemporary western sociologists, Tönnies' was also, throughout his career, an accomplished and renown scholar and historian of English political thinker and philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Even as his reputation as a sociologist was growing in Germany, he had a parallel but distinctive reputation amongst English scholars at the time based on his writings on and translations of Hobbes. Tönnies began his studies of Hobbes as a student of Friedrich Paulsen as early as 1875. He did extensive archival and historical research into Hobbes throughout his career, and later, was heavily involved in the founding of the Hobbes Society, and its local chapter Kiel Hobbes-Gesellschaft. (Mastnak, 2015: 975) Tönnies' published one of the first 'modern' and critical editions, with the reintroduction of previously excluded passages, of works two key works by Hobbes: *The Elements of Law* (with new materials found in his archival work) and *Behemoth*.<sup>17</sup> The degree to which these two dimensions of Tönnies' academic career –

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<sup>17</sup> In the introduction to the second edition of Tönnies' edited version of Hobbes' *Behemoth* in 1969, M.M. Goldsmith notes that despite a few errors in translation that had been noted since the first publication in 1889, even 80 years later Tönnies' edition remains “the closest one we have to a critical text” and that, above all, “against the flaws must be set Tönnies' work in restoring the deleted passages.” (Hobbes, 1969(a): viii)

sociologist and Hobbesian scholar – are interconnected is interpreted very differently depending on the perspective from which he is being considered. For the most part, at least as a quasi-canonical figure in western anglophone sociology, the implications Tönnies’ role not just as a scholar of Hobbes, but as “the leading figure in Hobbes studies in his come country and internationally” (Mastnak, 2015: 968) is either ignored, or relegated to realm of curiosities, footnotes and asides<sup>18</sup>. This is, I contend alongside some Hobbesian scholars<sup>19</sup>, a mistake. Understanding the relationship between Tönnies’ sociology and his understanding of Hobbes political theory offers unique opportunities, both in terms of how one reads some of his seminal sociological contributions, and how such contributions could be creatively adapted in the context of explicitly political projects. That said, before exploring the connections between his Hobbesian scholarship and his sociology, a few words on the end of Tönnies’ career are required.

Despite, or perhaps partially because of, his preeminent standing in German and international academic circles, the twilight of Tönnies career and life, like many others of his day, fell under the long shadow of the National Socialist Party as the Nazis finally overtook Germany. While, as a young man, Tönnies was not always immune to the pervasive antisemitism of his time, he quickly grew to recognize the great dangers pregnant in texts and positions linking racist perspectives, crass readings of Darwinian theory, and distortions of statistical data, and a twisted interpretation of the relationship between psychological and physiological elements

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<sup>18</sup> This is important because the degree to which Hobbes influenced Tönnies is not so much a secret, as something which was noted and set aside in his post-war uptake amongst English speakers in the west. The depth of the connection is quite explicitly discussed in the introduction to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Tönnies’ published version of Hobbes’ Behemoth circa 1969 – but was not successful in bringing such a connection to the fore of mainstream western reading of Tönnies’ sociology.

<sup>19</sup> Certain sociologists, political theorists and other scholars of both Tönnies and Hobbes have made an argument that Hobbes has a greater role to play in the understanding of certain seminal sociological thinkers like Tönnies, and through him Parsons, (Mastnak, 2015; Filippov 2013), as well as more broadly that Hobbes, in his own right, has something to offer contemporary sociology (Wikham, 2014; Bond 2011(a), 2011(b)).

of human life – imposing a vulgar deterministic view of body and mind that would ultimately lead into the worst parts of the eugenics movement. (Cahnman, 1973: 284) This early concern had long crystalized into opposition by the time the economic, national and perhaps even existential chaos that gripped Germany and other parts of Europe following the end of the first world war. Despite having, much like Weber, long kept formal political party membership and involvement carefully divided from his academic life; in the summer of 1932 as the National Socialist Party continued to grow, Tönnies joined the opposing Socialdemocratic Party. (285) On July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1932 - two days before a federal election held following the premature dissolution of the *Reichstag* – Tönnies published an open letter in *Schleswig-Holsteinische Volkszeitung*, a local social-democratic newspaper. Abandoning entirely any previous attempt to separate direct political involvement from scholarly critique, the letter, entitled ‘An Open letter to my compatriots at the Northern frontier’ directly and clearly implored Germans of Schelswig-Holstein to reject Hitler and the National Socialist Party. Speaking directly of the dangers of both Hitler and his Party, Tönnies wrote:

He is a man distinguished by unclear enthusiastic thinking, based on *ignorance of reality*, a man who in his feeble mind imagines he can solve problems some of which the best minds of the nation have worked on for centuries, on many of them certainly during the last hundred years; it is a party whose final goal could be nothing but *an irreparable disruption of all social conditions*. (286)

The National Socialist Party was soundly defeated in Schelswig-Holstein in the subsequent election, however, although Hitler and the National Socialist Party technically lost the election, the strong showing of the National Socialist Party across most of Germany provided the foothold which they ultimately leveraged to gain power. Yet even after the Nazis gained and began to consolidate power, Tönnies continued to openly oppose them. This had real and material consequences for Tönnies, as E.G. Jacoby describes:

It was a period of harvest for the acknowledged “elder sociologist” of Germany, of a ripe fruition

of the ideas he had tended and fought for over many years. But he also saw a sudden end put to a vigorous development in social research and sociological teaching at German universities by the advent of Hitler's gang, and when he died he was as alone as he had been solitary in the early days of his scholarship. (Jacoby, 1955:148)

The contrast with Schmitt and other sympathisers, collaborators and opportunists is hard to overstate. Very much contra Schmitt – who, as discussed in Chapter one, chose to align himself with the Nazis party either genuinely or for convenience - Tönnies explicitly rejected and opposed the rise of the National Socialist Party in Germany, even well after they began to consolidate and solidify their power. A prominent figure and public intellectual by the time the Nazis began to consolidate power, Tönnies both rebuffed advances for his support and openly opposed the new regime.

Ultimately, Tönnies' refusal to align with the new political climate ultimately cost him his position, his pension, and, at least for a time, his position in the academic pantheon. What is particularly interesting to note about this, is the fact that, on the surface, Tönnies' most influential work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* as well as his scholarship on Hobbes, was seen by many in the Nazis party as naturally aligned with their views. As Samples explains:

National Socialism advanced the "folk community" (Volksgemeinschaft) as a political goal. For the Nazis, all Germans belonged to a tight-knit community of blood that precluded all divisions and conflict in society. Tönnies work was misused to support this idea, and inevitably, the Nazis sought the blessing of the "the philosopher of community." Seven months after Hitler came to power, a fervent party member, Ernst Wolfst, visited Tönnies praising him as the intellectual forefather of the new fascist state. Tönnies harshly rejected the interpretation and later judged the whole affair a bitter joke. (Samples, 1987: 68)

Tönnies lost his professorship, including all pension and support, in 1933 amid wide spread 'purges' within the university in Kiel and Germany more broadly – a systematic program that would later be described as an effort toward "the elimination of all racially alien and politically unacceptable elements" (Mastnak, 2015: 977) within the university. Tönnies died three years later of pneumonia in 1936.

*Tönnies – Sociologist & Hobbesian or Hobbesian Sociologist?*

As noted above, concurrent to Tönnies' ascension as the founding father of German sociology, he was, in Germany and beyond, recognized as one of the preeminent historians and scholars of fifteenth century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Through his early mentorship under Friedrich Paulsen, Tönnies turned away from the more *en vogue* Emanuel Kant and began a life long study of, and appreciation for, the political thought of Hobbes. Before Tönnies, the Christian-Albrechts University in Kiel where he spent the majority of his career had a nearly two-hundred-year reputation as an institution known for its refutation of Hobbes – who at times was read as both politically controversial and potentially heretical. By the end of Tönnies career, it had been transformed into the centre of Hobbesian scholarship in Germany and beyond. (968) Among his more noteworthy accomplishments, Tönnies travelled to Britain where he spent years doing research on Hobbes via the Devonshire family archives in the British Museum and Oxford College – through which he both discovered two previously unpublished manuscripts of Hobbes: *The Elements of Law Natural and Political*, as well as the *Short Tract* (what was believed to be an early version of *Behemoth*). (Filippov, 2013; Mastnak, 2015) More broadly, Tönnies brought to bear on Hobbes the full weight of his training in 'the science of textual criticism.' Classically trained vis-à-vis the German tradition text-critical research of ancient and medieval works, Tönnies was one of the first to apply these techniques to more modern texts. (Mastnak, 2015: 971)

Tönnies contributions to Hobbesian scholarship are difficult to overstate. Both in terms of his interpretations of Hobbes' writings and his impact on the organized study of Hobbes in Germany – what we have discussed above in terms of Baehr's notions of institutional and discursive founding – the centrality of Tönnies work amongst those who studied Hobbes at the

time, and for years to follow, is without question. Tönnies introduced a wealth of new historical, biographical and textual insights into both academic and public discourses on Hobbes – he even spoke to a broader German audience of the day on the then-new medium of radio. (974) He organized conferences and symposiums – including a congress in September of 1929 coinciding with the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hobbes’ death. He built international networks amongst Hobbesian scholars including an international association – *Societas Hobbesiana* (Hobbes Society), for which he served as President. Tönnies also helped found the local chapter of *Societas Hobbesiana*, the Hobbes Society in Kiel or the Hobbes-Gesellschaft. (975)

All this having been said, the question remains: what does Tönnies’ work on Hobbes offer us in terms of the task at hand? A foray into Tönnies relationship to Hobbes is, much like the selection of Tönnies himself, neither accidental nor arbitrary. Tönnies’ Hobbesian influences are of interest to us in the context adapting and deploying some of his insights on the nature of the social vis a vis Mouffe’s ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy for two primary reasons: 1) considering Tönnies’ understanding of Hobbes helps contextualize the starting point from which he wrote *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, and 2) comparing and contrasting how Tönnies understood Hobbes, and in particular *Leviathan*, to how Schmitt would later interpret Hobbes offers us a common point from which to map the divergent trajectories of these two very different theorists.

Even for those largely unfamiliar with the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, most intuition would align his famously dark depiction of humanity’s natural state as being more closely connected with Carl Schmitt’s politics as violence than Ferdinand Tönnies’ subtle distinctions between social solidarity under conditions of community and society. And yet, as is oft the case, such intuitions might lead one astray. Despite the outward appearance of alignment,

many argue that Schmitt must critique, and even refute, Hobbes in order to forward his own political theology as laid out in *The Concept of the Political*. By contrast, though Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* could appear at odds with Hobbes' contractually pragmatic proposition of State as necessary compromise, a closer reading reveals a far less antagonistic conceptual relationship. Let us briefly consider some of similarities and differences in how both theorists approached Hobbes' most famous postulations as well as their implications for more contemporary theories of the political and the social. To be sure, both Tönnies and Schmitt have in common a critical orientation towards the liberal democratic order most scholars identify as the natural outcome of Hobbes' account of *Leviathan*. Yet while Schmitt decries liberal democracy in the pursuit of nearly-explicit fascist or totalitarian political organization, Tönnies' discomfort with the limits of a liberal *modus vivendi*<sup>20</sup> propelled him towards democratic socialist and communist ideals<sup>21</sup>. Although, while the former was infamous for his polemical zeal in forwarding his vision of the political, the latter's normative commitments tended to be more muted in his academic writings. That said, despite initial appearances, it is Hobbes' influence on Tönnies, much more so than on Schmitt, which offers us an important alternative way to read the former's seminal work.

Tönnies was, as discussed above, an expert on the philosophical writings of Hobbes.

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<sup>20</sup> I use the latin *modus vivendi* or mode of living in the same sense in which John Rawls deploys it to describe the merely practical compromises in a pluralist society juxtaposed to a deeper committed overlapping consensus of shared values. Without in any way meaning to align Tönnies with Rawls, the term none the less captures the former's discomfort with the limits of liberal democratic society under conditions of early capitalism as he experience them at the beginning of the twentieth century.

<sup>21</sup> Tönnies' political orientations here, and specifically his relationship with Marx, are complex and evolved over the course of his career. The degree to which Tönnies was variously inspired by and critical of Marx and the various tenants of capitalism, socialism and communism changed over the course of his career. While Tönnies is clearly very much indebted to Marx in his seminal description of *gesellschaft* (society), his more aspirational exploration of *gemeinschaft* (community) moves distances itself from a classically Marxist interpretation or approach. Elements of this relationship are considered further below in the chapter.

Indeed, in comparison to Schmitt, there is little doubt that Tönnies was the greater Hobbesian scholar. In quantity and quality of his contributions, in equal measure discursively and institutionally, Tönnies' familiarity with, analysis of, and recognition as an expert of Hobbes was greater than that of Schmitt. That said, in the context of our exploration, and potential creative adaptation, of Tönnies' seminal sociological writings, one might wonder: what is the significance of this Hobbesian scholarship? My answer here, is that in understanding Tönnies' work on and relationship to Hobbes' political project, one is presented with both a vital point of comparison vis a vis Schmitt, and, more importantly, with a means to reconsider the impetus behind Tönnies' seminal *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Specifically, in understanding how Tönnies' read and understood Hobbes' *Leviathan*, one can re-examine the core sociological considerations in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in a fresh light. Somewhat contrary to the dominant reading of sociological considerations in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, which characterize his work in terms of a comparison between mechanical and organic solidarity in rural and urban settings at times limited by an apparent nostalgia for the smaller scale communities of the past; I would propose that this seminal work can also be considered in terms of a parallel project to *Leviathan*. From this perspective, one can approach Tönnies' explorations of different forms and functions of social solidarity as simultaneously complimentary and evolutionary to the those found in Hobbes' more explicitly political writings. Tönnies did in fact explicitly note that his writings comparing community and society started with Hobbes. As Mastnak points out:

Tönnies is perhaps better known as a founder of sociology than as a pioneer of Hobbes studies. But in his intellectual formation and career, the two academic pursuits were intimately linked. Tönnies' study of Hobbes informed his articulation of the emerging science of sociology. That, in fact, was how Tönnies saw it. 'My starting point was Hobbes', he said, speaking about *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, his first—and most influential—sociological work. (Mastnak, 2015: 969)

From this perspective, one can read Tönnies and Hobbes as having a shared common objective in

their respective opuses – to ascertain how human beings, inherently conflict prone and egocentric, could best organize themselves into a viable and sustainable ordered society.

(Filippov, 2013: 115)

This alternative reading, premised on the idea that Tönnies was, in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, continuing a project in some ways similar to that undertaken in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, depends on a particular understanding of Hobbes' famous depiction of the state of nature, as well as the political organization he posits necessary to tame it. For Tönnies, these were what classical sociology would term *ideal types* – neither historically accurate portraits, nor fully realizable pragmatic schematics. The gap in Hobbes, according to Tönnies, had to do less with how he imagined the state of nature – often a point of tension among critics of Hobbes – but more in how he posited the various ways functional 'society' could be arranged. The *modus vivendi* set forth in *Leviathan* focused almost exclusively on the need to build political amity – as opposed to considering bonds of familiarity or friendship. In ways that are, at least in part, notably similar to the project at hand, Tönnies believed *Leviathan* to have been limited by its failure to consider elements outside the purely 'political' dimensions of a well ordered society.

As Alexander Fillipov notes:

According to Tönnies, Hobbes, while constructing his society (without using the actual term) and his state, refrained from all the natural and original bonds which tie people together in families and friendships, from all the instincts of sociality (*social Instinkten*). They were of no importance for his theory, being too weak to hold great societies together against individuals who are isolated, egocentric and virtually hostile to each other. (116)

From this perspective, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* can read in terms of not only a contribution to the conversation begun in *Leviathan* – but also an attempt to introduce a more nuanced understanding of the social into a work famously focused on the political. While Hobbes offered a single ideal type of political association as an answer to a state of nature famously solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short, Tönnies conceptualized two ideal types of social

organization and considered the relative merits, strengths, and challenges of the bonds of social solidarity produced and maintained under each. In *Gesellschaft* (society) Tönnies' constructs an ideal type of sociation which, in line with Hobbes social contract, is free from "the natural and original bonds which tie people together in families and friendships." (116) However, he also posits an alternative ideal type - *Gemeinschaft* (community) – into which was poured all these hitherto unconsidered original bonds. In this way, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* follows Hobbes in constructing pure concepts, or ideal types, of human sociation – but places the natural and original bonds between humans within the notion of community. (116-117)

According to this alternative reading, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* can be seen as an attempt to introduce explicitly social elements – specifically concept of *social solidarity*<sup>22</sup> – into an much older project, greatly admired but potentially limited by its exclusively 'political' orientation.

### *Solitary, Poor, Nasty, Brutish and Schmitt*

While the scope and depth of influence the writings of Thomas Hobbes may have had

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<sup>22</sup>It is difficult to invoke the idea of 'social solidarity' without recalling the work of another preeminent sociologist of the day: Emile Durkheim. Durkheim's (now canonical) *De la Division du Travail Social* (The Division of Labour in Society) was first published in 1893, some six years after Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Society) which was first published in 1887. That said, it was not until the printing of the second edition of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* that Tönnies work was recognized as seminal in Germany and beyond, nearly two decades after *De la Division du Travail Social*. As will be discussed further below in this chapter, Durkheim's concepts of *mechanical and organic solidarity* bear unmistakable similarities to how Tönnies deploys the notions of organic and mechanical forms of affirmative social relations. Although it could appear, in an initial pass, that the two theorists are speaking of essentially the same thing – only with the descriptive and normative implications of their terminologies inverted – there remain much deeper distinctions between the two perspectives. None the less, the two theorists were aware of each other's work – both discursive and institutional – a young Durkheim published a critical review of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* which led to an exchange of views between the two in a series of reviews and responses between 1883 and 1889. This exchange, and the similarities and differences in how Durkheim and Tönnies viewed mechanical and organic social solidarity/affirmative relations more broadly are both considered further below in this chapter.

Ferdinand Tönnies might seem counterintuitive from the perspective of his sociology, the same cannot be said of Carl Schmitt. While in many ways less accomplished as a Hobbesian scholar – the explicit echoes of Hobbes are far more obvious in Schmitt’s writings. The two were, it must be admitted, aligned in a common preoccupation “...with the fear of chaos and the concern with physical safety and public order.” (Thomsen, 1997: 10) Indeed, as Jacob Thomsen argues:

Perhaps more than any other political thinker since Hobbes, Schmitt can be identified with this concern for public order at the expense of individual freedom. Like Hobbes, Schmitt stressed the centrality of violence in the human experience and he associated sovereignty with ‘power being exercised on behalf of groups locked in conflict.’ (10)

Yet appearances can be deceiving, and the degree to which Schmitt can be understood as a Hobbesian in his own writings remains under debate. Some, including Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1989), contend that Schmitt was, at best, only loosely committed to Hobbes as both subject and inspiration – and that his own writings run rough shod over the classical political philosophy to which he pays outward tribute. While the historical debate itself may be immaterial to the project at hand, a closer review of Schmitt’s understanding, critiques, and application of the core insights found in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* vis-à-vis Tönnies does, as previously noted, offer a way to begin to map the two theorists’ divergent trajectories.

Without question, Schmitt, like Tönnies, both admired and was critical of Hobbes. Though not a life-long scholar of Hobbes, Schmitt’s interest certainly wasn’t fleeting. He delivered lectures on Hobbes in the early 1930s, and even then, his interest in Hobbes was already well known – in part through his correspondences with Leo Strauss. (9) Hobbes is deployed - briefly but effectively - in several places in Schmitt’s *Der Begriff des Politischen* (*Concept of the Political*) originally published in 1932. His most notable contribution to Hobbesian scholarship proper took the form of his publication of *Der Leviathan* in 1938, in which he collected and combined his lectures on Hobbes into one treatise. Institutionally,

Schmitt was also acknowledged, though this acknowledgement is, taken in historical context, difficult to fully access given its entanglement with the fierce politics and in-fighting that defined German academia under the Nazis regime. He was, for example, invited to speak alongside Paul Ritterbusch at a congress in 1938 celebrating the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Hobbes' birth – organized by Tönnies' friend and co-founding member of the Hobbes-Gesellschaft: Cay von Brockdorff. There, he and Ritterbusch were acknowledged as the leading figures in a new wave of Hobbesian scholarship, one which was most notable for its alignment with Nazis doctrine and its break from the politically undesirable previous wave – which Tönnies was credited as founding., this may not have been a straightforward acknowledgement of either of the men's Hobbesian scholarship. Indeed, Ritterbusch, while the more prominent Nazis at the time, was not Schmitt's equal as scholar or intellectual. Nor were the two allies, belonging to different factions within the Nazis political landscape. As the Rector of Kiel University, Ritterbusch had actually been the one to purge Tönnies from his tenured position. Schmitt ultimately declined to speak at the conference but remained listed alongside Ritterbusch as 'equals' in founding the emergent new wave of *Hobbesforschung*. (Mastnak, 2015: 976-977) Yet as Mastnak suggests:

In the way he [von Brockdorff] conducted the congress and reported on it I am inclined to see an act of resistance. By honouring Hobbes, he was playing a game of politics. At the centre of that game was neither direct critique of the third phase of Hobbes studies nor definition of the relationship between the third and second phase of *Hobbesforschung* in Germany. Rather, von Brockdorff set out, I believe, to manipulate the relations between the two men he named as representatives of the third phase of German Hobbes studies. Made of Ritterbusch and Schmitt, two men who, von Brockdorff well knew, were neither allies nor friends, the third phase could only implode. (979)

Regardless of the instability of his institutional impacts, Schmitt's discursive echoes remain.

Many to this day admire and draw upon Schmitt's particular understandings and critiques of

Hobbes, as well as the understandings of state and politics he deployed Hobbes to support. This

is of course evidenced, among many other possible examples, by Chantal Mouffe's own adaptation of Schmitt around which our current endeavour orbits. But what then are Schmitt's core insights into Hobbes, and how does his understanding differ from that of Tönnies?

One of the key differences between the two theorists' approach to Hobbes, was how they viewed the texts themselves. Specifically, with regards to *Leviathan*, Schmitt was far more interested in mythology and symbolism than Tönnies' classically trained textual analysis approach allowed. As Mastnak argues:

Schmitt focused on Leviathan as a mythical figure and 'political symbol.' Myth played hardly any role in Tönnies' interpretation of Hobbes' political theory. Discussing the relation between Hobbes' Leviathan and Behemoth, for example, Tönnies briefly referred to 'the state as one monster, revolution as they other.' He commented on Hobbes' 'comparison of the state with a biblical myth monster,' but only to remark that it was 'a kind of poetical intuition one could hardly expect from a sober thinker.' (986)

Myth, and the use of the biblical references to both Leviathan and Behemoth, were, unsurprisingly, far more important to Schmitt – who at times identified himself as a political theologian. In fact, the subtitle to his 1938 *Der Leviathan* translates to 'the significance and failure of a political symbol.' (Habermas, 1989: 130) Hobbes, Schmitt argues, erred in as much as he failed to fully understand the various meanings ascribed to the biblical symbols he deployed. Leviathan – which in the Old Testament refers to a great sea beast who rises from the depths and overcomes Behemoth the parallel land power – was a poor symbolic choice to associate with the State according to Schmitt, in part because of how those stories were classically read and understood. With a charmingly politically expedient anti-Semitic flare, Schmitt contends:

For in the centuries that followed, the substance of the modern state, as represented by this image, was misunderstood as something abnormal and contrary to nature: 'The image was not adequate to the system of thought with which it was linked... The traditional Jewish exegesis rebounded against the Leviathan of Hobbes.' (130)

In the context of this criticism of Hobbes' choices in symbolic representation, Jürgen Habermas

argues that Schmitt also projects back upon Hobbes his own ontological understandings of the political as first laid out in *Political Theology* in 1922. That the state – Leviathan – not only must come to power through conflict – the defeat of Behemoth – but also “...so it is only in suppressing revolutionary opposition that the state can assert itself as a sovereign power.” (130)

The other major difference between how Schmitt and Tönnies understood Hobbes has to do with how each understood the famous propositions concerning the state of nature. As discussed above, for Tönnies, the state of nature was a conceptual tool against which to build an ideal type of association through which to examine the building blocks of political or social solidarity. In contrast, Schmitt believed Hobbes erred in juxtaposing the state of nature with a political state – instead as we have discussed at length conjoining the two into an ontological account of the political as defined by and through constant enmity. As Mastnak observes:

For Hobbes and Tönnies, the *status naturalis* was not political; for Schmitt it was. But Schmitt did not simply restore ‘the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature [...] to honor.’ He had redefined the concept. For Schmitt, the state of nature meant a ‘state of war among groups’ – not among individuals. Such was the malaise that Liberalism had brought upon the modern world. Schmitt’s solution for that malaise was the ‘total state.’ (Mastnak, 2015: 988)

In this way, Schmitt simultaneously rejected and expanded Hobbes’s notion of the *status naturalis* or state of nature. No longer concerned with the terms of a social contract that could subordinate and overcome the imagined pre-societal state of violence, Schmitt’s concept of the political becomes premised on an ongoing and irresolvable state of nature. For him, unlike both Hobbes and Tönnies life with leviathan remains poor, nasty, brutish and potentially short. Schmitt decried the spaces Hobbes left open for private opinions and (arguably) liberal democracy, instead insisting that the only way to protect societies from the constant risk of violent dissolution was his own conception of a totalizing (totalitarian) state which broaches no diversity or dissent within its polis.

## *Community and Association*

Having explored the important role Hobbesian scholarship played in Tönnies' intellectual life, as well as the parallel with Schmitt, we turn our attention to Tönnies' work proper. Specifically, to his most famous work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Although now translated as Community and Society, early editions of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* were also translated into English as *Community and Association*.<sup>23</sup> This is of note in so far as it helps remind us of the dual meaning of the English term 'society' – at once reference to the totality of a given social collective, inclusive of its economy, politics, norms and values, as well as to a particular grouping or association of individuals formed around a shared purpose: i.e. the Society for the Preservation of Great American Songbooks, or the Canadian Sociology Association. For Tönnies, as we will explore, the German term *gesellschaft* contains fragments of both meanings. As discussed above, I am proposing that one can read *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* not only as a work of pure and applied sociology, but also as a text intended to supplement and support the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes – specifically with regards to the nature of a 'stable' social contract. By no means a radical reinterpretation, I do contend that (re)considering Tönnies through this different lens helps shift some of the traditional focus and emphasis from its historical descriptive dimensions to its more critical implications. That said, before considering this alternate accentuation of Tönnies' famous text, it is worth beginning with an overview of its traditional interpretation.

As noted above, Tönnies first published *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1887 at the age of (approximately) 32, but the work wouldn't become renowned until its second edition was

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<sup>23</sup> An example of this is Charles P. Loomis' early English translation of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* entitled Community and Association, first edition published by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London in 1955. That said, subsequent reprintings of Loomis' translation have 'corrected' the translation of *gesellschaft* from 'association' to 'community.'

printed in 1912. Yet, while its initial reception might not have been as impressive as it would later become, it was by no means ignored. The work was widely read and considered by Tönnies' peers – both in Germany and internationally – and while it was not immediately canonized, it was recognized as important quite early on. In what is likely the review by the most famous, in retrospect, of Tönnies' contemporaries internationally, the first edition of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* was reviewed by a young and upcoming French sociologist in the *Revue Philosophique* in 1889. Although critical of elements of the work, the reviewer was also suitably impressed. Of what would become one of German sociology's foundational texts, Emile Durkheim wrote:

Although this work, in the first place, is a social-scientific study, views of a very diverse nature are intimately mingled in it. At the same time, one will find therein a complete sociology and a similarly complete philosophy and psychology. The author is inspired, alternately or simultaneously, by Schopenhauer, Karl Marx, Kant, Sumner Maine and the theorists of evolution.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, such an eclectic synthesis renders the reading of this book very laborious, and that's a pity: because one can discover interesting ideas in it which we will try to disentangle. (Cahnman, 1973: 240)

In what we can agree is one of the most 'traditional' or at least oldest summaries of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Durkheim described Tönnies' primary scholarly objective in terms of: a study of two forms of group-formation, to characterize both their forms, and determine their mutual relationships. (241) While early, this characterization of Tönnies' project remains more or less consistent, up to and including its early reception after its translation to English. In a not wholly dissimilar manner, Talcott Parsons described Tönnies' exploration of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in terms of an analysis of "...positive types of social relationship, that is, modes in

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<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that here, in Durkheim's 1889 review of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the same year Tönnies published a critical edition of *Behemoth* with previously missing sections re-inserted to significant acclaim, Thomas Hobbes is not mentioned as one of the core theoretical foundations upon which Tönnies builds. This may have had to do with the degree to which Durkheim would have been aware of Tönnies work as a Hobbesian scholar – at reputation that was mostly based in England initially – but also might be connected to Durkheim's broader ambitions to clearly delineate sociology as a distinctive academic field.

which individuals are bound together.” (140) Deploying Tönnies as means of further exploring and to some extent expanding Weber’s theory of social action, Parson’s goes on to summarize Tönnies’ conceptualizations of community and association/society, contending that:

For Tönnies, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are ideal types of concrete relationship. His scheme is in this sense a classification. Its importance here lies in its stating and classifying facts in such a way as to bring out with especial clarity what are for the present analytic purposes highly significant points. Above all it shows the limitations of the understanding of complexes of action in terms of the immediate ends and situation of each particular act taken alone. (149)

Of course, it is important to note that Parson’s engagement with Tönnies’ work was not one of pure intellectual curiosity, or dedicated study of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Instead, Parson’s ‘*Note on Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*’ which appeared in Werner Cahnman’s 1973 collection of essays and newly translated original documents - *Ferdinand Tönnies: A New Evaluation* – was a reprinted section of Parson’s work building his own theory of social action in his 1968 book *The Structure of Social Action*.<sup>25</sup>

Accepting, for the moment, the traditional reading of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* as the sociological exploration of ideal types of social organization, let us explore Tönnies’ overarching description of these two core concepts. *Gemeinschaft*, according to Tönnies, is characterized by a genuine sympathy and understanding which binds together human beings as members of a totality (Tönnies, 2002: 47). It is a dominant characteristic of smaller rural lifestyles, and to some degree is predicated on, or at least facilitated by, these smaller collectivities organized around kinship ties. As he notes:

The real foundation of unity, and consequently the possibility of *Gemeinschaft*, in first place is closeness of blood relationships and mixture of blood; secondly, physical proximity; and, finally, for human beings, intellectual proximity. In this gradation, therefore, are to be found the sources

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<sup>25</sup> This is an important point in so far as Parson would later be subject to significant criticism for his ‘overly pragmatic’ presentation and interpretation of Weber’s work. Indeed, contemporary Weberians, as discussed in previous chapters, spent considerable effort in what they described as the ‘de-Parsonizing’ of Weber’s English translated work. This is not to suggest that Parson’s reading of Tönnies is inaccurate, but rather to acknowledge that Parson’s was likely more interested in how a particular reading of Tönnies could support his project, than on what Tönnies himself might have intended.

of all kinds of understanding. (Tönnies, 2002: 48)

To this notion of understanding and genuine sympathy, Tönnies adds a particular orientation to and understanding of property. According to Tönnies, “[l]ife of the *Gemeinschaft* is mutual possession and enjoyment and possession of enjoyment of common goods.” (Tönnies, 2002: 50) Here the rules of barter and exchange are foundational, and life is organized around necessary, as opposed to dispensable, goods. *Gemeinschaft* is thus characterized as the natural and ideal form of sociation, one founded on a unity of members through true bonds of social solidarity.

In contradistinction to the natural, genuine, and implicitly socialist association of *Gemeinschaft*, Tönnies posits the association of *Gesellschaft*. While these two forms of association may superficially appear similar, Tönnies suggests that they are different to the point of being nearly antithetical. Specifically, he contends that *Gesellschaft*:

“[...] superficially resembles the *Gemeinschaft* in so far as the individuals live and dwell together peacefully. However, in the *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in the *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors.” (Tönnies, 2002: 65)

Whereas the totality of the *Gemeinschaft* is built on understanding, genuine sympathy and the mutual enjoyment of property, *Gesellschaft* is focused on what Tönnies describes as the fiction of objective value. Tönnies argues that one of the greatest challenges that faces the *Gesellschaft* is how to create the objective quality of ‘value’ in the infinite diversity of property. Worth, as the measure of property in *Gemeinschaft*, is, according to Tönnies, a “quality which is perceived by the real individual.” (Tönnies, 2002: 67) Worth is therefore subjective, and thus cannot be generalized into an objective standard. Instead, Tönnies argues, the collectivity of the *Gesellschaft* creates a fictional being, a generalized individual, whose task it becomes to represent a generalizable and objective worth. As worth cannot be objective, Tönnies describes

this generalized quality as value.<sup>26</sup>

In order for the concept of a generalized objective value to function, the hypothetical being's analysis of worth must be accepted by all in the collectivity. This, for Tönnies, is the acceptance of a single artificial<sup>27</sup> will by the totality of the *Gesellschaft*. As he describes it:

In order that the judgment may even with this qualification become objective and universally valid, it must appear as a judgment passed by "each and every one." Hence, each and every one must have this single will; in other words, the will of exchange becomes universal, i.e., each and every one becomes a participant in the single act and he confirms it; thus it becomes an absolute public act. (Tönnies, 2002: 67)

It is in this way that the individuals who make up the membership of the *Gesellschaft* subjugate themselves to the latter's artificial will, initially to affirm a conception of objective value necessary for an exchange economy, then later to recognize it as the originator of a postulated set of natural laws and conventions. According to Tönnies, the more individuals accept this will of the *Gesellschaft*, the more the famous contention of Adam Smith, that every man becomes in some measure a merchant, becomes a reality (Tönnies, 2002: 76). As Tönnies notes:

In *Gesellschaft* every person strives for that which is to his advantage and he affirms the actions of others only in so far as and as long as they can further his interest. Before and outside of convention and also before and outside of each special contract, the relation of all to all may therefore be conceived as potential hostility or latent war. (Tönnies, 2002: 77)

Thus, with the generalized 'will of exchange', individuals in relations of *Gesellschaft* become

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<sup>26</sup> For Tönnies, the broader distinction between 'worth' under *Gemeinschaft* and 'value' under *Gesellschaft* is further underpinned by a strong affinity with Marx's surplus theory of value. The artificial 'value' assigned by the generalized will of *Gesellschaft* is, for Tönnies, defined through a directly Marxist understanding of labour. Although Tönnies' includes a number of caveats with regards to how commodities are exchanged and the degree to which 'agents of commerce' can affect markets, he still concludes that under conditions of *Gesellschaft* "...the value of each category of commodities and consequently of every possible quantity thereof is determined by the average labour power required in the *Gesellschaft* for their production." (Tönnies, 2002: 97) The degree to which Tönnies is indebted to Marx, the maturity of his early reading of *Das Kapital*, and his later critiques of Marx are briefly considered further below.

<sup>27</sup> According to Tönnies, the transition from 'worth' under conditions of *Gemeinschaft* to 'value' under conditions of *Gesellschaft* depends on a sort of artificial collective perspective (or *will*) that determines an abstracted standard upon which a common value can be based. This use of the concept of a collective 'artificial will' needs to be understood in the context of much more detailed distinction Tönnies makes with regards to two forms of human will - *natural* and *rational*. How Tönnies describes these two different forms of human will, and their alignment with *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* respectively will be considered in greater detail below.

more and more instrumental and self-interested, and therefore fundamentally disconnected from and adversarial towards, those around them.

### *Worth, Value and the Influence of Marx*

In order to fully understand Tönnies' overarching description of life under conditions of *Gesellschaft*, it becomes necessary to briefly consider the degree to which his, explicitly sociological, account was influenced by political-economy, and its greatest simultaneous critic and contributor – Karl Marx. In the original forward to *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in 1887, Tönnies not only cited and praised Marx as the "... the most remarkable and profound social philosopher... with regards to that vantage which is most important to me (economic)" (Bond, 2013: 137) he did so at a time when openly engaging with Marxist writing and ideas could have been dangerous. At the time a young and relatively unknown Tönnies was drafting what would become his most famous treatise, Marx was living in exile and Germany was passing laws aimed at suppressing 'dangerous' socialist ideas and groups. As Niall Bond points out, in this way Tönnies open use and explicit citation of Marx needs to be understood in its proper historical context. The invocation of Marx in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* meant Tönnies was:

...courageous enough to quote him [Marx] notwithstanding the application of the anti-socialist law (*Gesetz gegen die gemeingefährlichen Bestrebungen der Sozialdemokratie*) adopted by the Reichstag on 19 October 1878, which prohibited social democratic agitation and banned the SPD. (140)

Indeed, Tönnies was "...among the earliest academics to make Marx unapologetically citeable as a source in established academia..." (137) Although his views, over the course of his career and life, evolved away from Marx in several important ways, Tönnies remained both intellectually indebted and personally inspired by Marx.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> While Tönnies was living in London with family and doing archival research on Hobbes at the British Library, he was said to have observed Marx working nearby. The two did not, however, become acquainted as Tönnies' uncle –

Very much in line with many contemporary scholars of Marx, Tönnies was far more interested in Marx's careful analysis of capitalism than his preliminary musings on communism. Indeed, Tönnies' use of Marx in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* is quite uneven – with no references to the 'father of communism' in his description of life under the communal conditions of *Gemeinschaft*, but, at times, a near line by line consideration of key concepts from *Das Kapital* in his reflections on life under *Gesellschaft*. As Bond aptly summarizes:

Marx is not to be found among the authors cited in Tönnies' theory of community, which was impacted more by Engels' understanding of primitive communism... ..By contrast, in Tönnies' theory of society or *Gesellschaft* – that is, §19 through §40 of the first book of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Marx dominates. Tönnies describes society as a state of latent negativity with each member acting for himself. The only motive for doing anything for anyone else in society is to obtain the equivalent at the very least (§19). §20 reproduces much of [the] first section of the first chapter of Marx's *Capital*, affirming that the value of goods as an objective quality is based upon a necessary quantity of work, the time required for their manufacture. (141)

That having been said, it would be an error to characterize Tönnies in terms of a follower of Marx. Despite the clear intellectual debt a young Tönnies owed Marx, he did not embrace all of Marx's propositions or predictions.<sup>29</sup> Tönnies deployed a number of Marx's key observations but also adapted them to his purposes. More than this, Tönnies also rejected and even inverted some of Marx's foundational assumptions. Most importantly for our own understanding of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, is Tönnies dissatisfaction with, and challenge to, Marx's conceptualization of historical materialism – and the *genus* of determinism it prescribed.

At the core of Tönnies challenge to the way Marx deploys historical materialism, is a distinction between what he describes as a material theory of history and philosophical

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with whom he was staying - forbade him from falling in "...with the dangerous company of Karl Marx." (138) Later in his career, Tönnies did form a professional friendship with Friedrich Engels – whom he both visited and corresponded with.

<sup>29</sup> Tönnies would eventually publish a short critical intellectual biography of Marx in 1920 entitled *Karl Marx, Leben und Lehre (His Life and Teachings)*. In it, Tönnies both re-articulated differences present in his adaption of Marx in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, but also expanded on what he himself acknowledged had been his earlier and incomplete understanding and interpretation of *Das Kapital*.

materialism. (Cahman, 1973: 221) Tönnies argues that what this approach amounts to is "...a realistic, or anthropological, view of man as a being that exists and perpetuates himself and is engaged in the business of making a living." (221) He concedes that, as per Marx, these natural-biological requirements and the core socio-economic processes needed to meet them are, relative to others, mostly independent variables. Similarly, Tönnies agrees that there exists another strata of more dependent variables – legal, political or ideological – what Marx constituted as the superstructure. However, as Cahman succinctly explains:

...Tönnies pleads (Marx, *Leben und Lehre*, p. 141) that the oft-quoted Marxian statement that man's existence determines his consciousness ought to be modified in the sense that man's existential situation merely conditions his consciousness in a more effective and immediate manner than is the case the other way around. Consequently, Tönnies' formula is both more comprehensive and more cautious than the formula ascribed to Marx. (222)

For Tönnies, a material-centric understanding of history is simply the continuation of, and ongoing contribution to, a scientific approach to understanding the past. It is an essential part of any scientific approach to knowledge, but not a new panacea for understanding the world's ills.

As Tönnies himself explains:

The main point is history is viewed anthropologically and that anthropology is approached without supranatural and theological prejudices. From this point of departure, the tremendous importance for social relations of the tools and instruments of work (but also armaments!) is obvious; likewise, the importance of scientific and technological thought and knowledge, whose purpose it is to perfect tools and instruments, for the development of social relations. The development of social relations, then, is relatively independent of legal conditions and political forms while legal conditions and political forms, in turn, are to a high degree dependent on social relations and pushed, infringed upon, at times even shattered by them. In this sense, the socio-economic theory of history is in harmony with the totality of prehistorical and historical investigations in the nineteenth century, with the studies of the evolution from stone age to bronze age to iron age, from societies of hunters to those centred around agriculture and the crafts; with the increased weight that is put nowadays upon the causes and effects of the economic condition of a population, the state of the public finances and of foreign trade, and their importance for the understanding of political, military, and spiritual transformations.<sup>30</sup> (226)

For Tönnies, the calculating and generalized will that emerges under conditions of modern

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<sup>30</sup> Reprinted from Ferdinand Tönnies, "*Entwicklung der Soziologie in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert*," in: SStuKr II, pages 76-80.

‘society’ comes before, both logically and historically, the development of particular types of trade and finally capitalism. (220) It is for this reason that, for Tönnies, the essential distinction in characteristics between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is not simply about *use value* and *exchange value* – though that distinction is noted – but instead about the underpinning difference between spontaneous/integral (or natural) will under conditions of *Gemeinschaft*, and calculating (or rational) will which comes to dominate under conditions of *Gesellschaft*.

### *Natural Will as opposed to Rational Will*

As noted above in excerpts from Durkheim’s (less than entirely kind) first review of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies’ work seems to alternate between sociology, psychology and philosophy, and (at least according to Durkheim) renders the book, at times, somewhat difficult to follow. Without necessarily conceding entirely to a young Durkheim’s pointed first impressions, it is worth noting that in the second section of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* Tönnies’ wanders quite a distance from what most would consider traditionally ‘sociological’ considerations, and lays out what feels more like a mix of psychological, philosophical, and at times even ontological musings on the essential forms of human thinking, acting, and being.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, Tönnies dedicates nearly a quarter of his seminal study of community and society to distinguishing between two different forms of human thinking – natural will (alternatively referred to as spontaneous or integral will) and rational will (also described as calculating will).

Tönnies begins this examination with important caveats around the distinctions and sub-distinctions he details. At core, he argues, the will encompasses both ‘the will which includes

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted here that while Tönnies doesn’t frame his discussion in as careful sociological terms as Max Weber, there are clear and obvious parallels between the former’s archetypal *natural* and *rational* wills and the latter’s seminal typology of *affective*, *traditional* and *rational* (value and instrumental) motivations to social action.

thinking' and 'the thinking which encompasses the will.' (Tönnies, 2002: 103) These two elements, and all sub-distinctions within them, must, according to Tönnies, be understood in terms of a united whole – with discrete elements distinguishable analytically but not practically.<sup>32</sup> Such a unity, Tönnies argues, must be “in the first case [natural will] be understood as a real or natural one; [and] in the second case [rational will] as a conceptual or artificial one.” (103) He goes on to make clear that, despite his use of analytic distinctions that focus on thinking as discrete from acting, the two must be understood as, again, part of a unified whole. From Tönnies, thinking and the mind are to the brain what movement is to the muscles. That said, the distinction between natural or spontaneous will (*Wesenwille*) and rational or calculating will (*Kürwille*) - and the correct interpretation thereof – is, for Tönnies, “...essential to the subject of [his] treatise.” (103)

Tönnies summarizes the analogous relationship between *Wesenwille* and *Kürwille* in terms of the same organic vs mechanical distinction he deploys more broadly vis a vis *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. As he explains:

An AGGREGATE or form of the rational will is related to an aggregate of the natural will in the same manner as an artificial tool or machine built for definite ends or purposes compares with the organic systems and the various organs of the animal body... ..Tools and organs have this in common in that they both contain and represent accumulated labour or energy which gives definite ness as well as augmentation to the total energy of their respective owners... ..The two, however, different in their origin and in their qualities. An organ comes into existence by itself, through repetition of the same activity by the whole organism or by an already existing organ; this additional and specific energy is developed to a greater or lesser degree of perfection. A tool is made by the human hand which takes an extraneous substance and gives it unity and form according to the idea of the end or purpose which it is expected to serve in accordance with the will of its creator.” (135)

*Wesenwille* (natural will) is for Tönnies the organic and naturally occurring form of human

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<sup>32</sup> There is an interesting parallel here with the opening sections of Georg Simmel's essay on association – wherein he makes a similar, though broader, set of caveats about the importance of not mistaking analytical distinctions for practical or 'real' divisions.

thinking that emerges from the evolution of traditional human sociation and being. In contrast, *Kürwille* (or rational/calculating will) is an artificial type of human thinking that is brought into being through an (over)emphasis on means/ends calculations and the (often false) assumption that outcomes can be shaped by intentions. *Wesenwille* is characterized in terms of four elements: *liking*, *remembering*, *habit*, and *feeling*; whereas *Kürwille* is composed of the three interrelated thought-activities of: *deliberation*, *discrimination*, and *conception/judgement*. It is worth considering each element in turn.

*Liking*, for Tönnies, refers to the mental acknowledgement of the inborn pleasure associated with certain objects/actions. As with all the elements, Tönnies contends that liking is defined simultaneously through affirmation and negation. That is to say that it is concurrently the move towards pleasure and the move away from pleasures antithesis. According to Tönnies, pleasure – as identified under the liking element of natural will originates with notions of survival, ease of labour, and reproduction/procreation. Distinguished from this first form – liking – is the second element: habit. *Habit*, for Tönnies, is the “...will or lust resulting from experience.” (110) Experiences or outcomes that might be contemplated with initial indifference or unpleasantness can and do become pleasant through experiential association with other pleasant outcomes. Closely associated with this second element, is the third element of remembering/memory. If habit is the mental process of developing liking based on experience, then *memory* is the capacity to store and reproduce experientially informed liking over time. Taken together, these three first elements of *Wesenwille* offer a pictured focused on instinct (related to inherent liking), habit, and actions explicitly motivated by past experience (related to memory). The fourth element, feeling, ties these three elements together while concurrently attaching recognizable (and somewhat nostalgic) human attributes to each of the three other

characteristics. Tönnies argues that the elements feelings captures the variable of ‘human excitement’ to the equation. He argues that core feelings can be associated to each of the other elements of natural will: “...passion is based on liking, courage on habit, and genius on memory.” (117) Taken together, these elements provide a view of Tönnies’ *Wesenwille* as being the inherent or genuine thinking-activities of humanity – as well as the origin of what would come to be seen as ethical virtues.<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, Tönnies describes *Kürwille* (rational or calculating will) in terms of deliberation, discrimination, and conception/judgement. *Deliberation* is understood in terms of a decision point when “...two inherently hostile ideas meet each other.” (121) This opposition is, according to Tönnies, the binary opposition between *pleasure* and *displeasure*. As Tönnies summarizes:

Deliberation as will is directed toward that which is painful, that which is not wanted per se, but only thereby to get that pleasure which results from it and which is actually and primarily desired. (121)

The antithesis here is of principle importance for Tönnies, who emphasizes that it is through the relationship between thinking and acting that *means/ends* calculation emerges. Interestingly, and in a way not mirrored in other famous considerations of *means* and *ends*, Tönnies suggests that at a core level *ends* can be equated with pleasure and means with pain. *Means* are undertaken only in so far as they work towards ends – were *means* pleasurable in the sense Tönnies uses the term,

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<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to observe that the second edition of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* includes a note referencing Hobbes and more directly pointing out that the feelings identified – passion, courage and genius – (which are remarkably close to Hobbes’ cardinal virtues) only become virtues in so far as they serve others. However, that having been said, Tönnies immediately goes on to quote Hobbes with reference to the fact that social virtues are definitionally first individual virtues – that is to say they serve individuals before and more than a collective. Specifically Tönnies quotes Hobbes (De Homine, Ch. XIII, 9) in saying “The three cardinal virtues, courage, cleverness, and temperance, are not virtues of the citizens, they are general virtues of man, because they are useful not alone to the commonwealth, but also to such individuals as possess them. Just as the commonwealth can maintain itself only through the courage, cleverness, and temperance of its citizens, it may also be destroyed by the courage, cleverness, and temperance of its enemies.” This short, but fascinating, link between *Wesenwille* and the cardinal virtues of a social collective offers an interesting link between Tönnies’ ideal types of social organization and Hobbes’ ideal type of political collective.

they would themselves be *ends*.

The second element of *Kürwille* is *discrimination*. According to Tönnies, discrimination is the part of the rational will which choose between and gives definitive hierarchy to competing ends – ends having already through deliberation been identified as on the pleasure side of the pleasure/displeasure dichotomy. This is, for Tönnies, will as “decision,” as he explains:

It [discrimination] has at its disposition only a homogenous and indifferent quantity of possibilities and decides, in every given instance, to realize as much of it as is necessary to bring about an imagined result. (122)

Alongside deliberation and discrimination, Tönnies adds the third element of conception (or judgement). Unlike the other two, conception is not tied as directly to action or outcome. It is a ‘binding judgement’ which “...develops out of the complexity and variability of experience, simple and constant categories to which various phenomenon can be related...” (122)

Thus, Tönnies offers us a tripartite understanding of *Kürwille* (or rational will) constituted through the thinking acts of deliberation, discrimination and conception – the interrelationship between which he sums up as follows:

In deliberation, action and idea are one. Discrimination is related thereto as a general principle to which many special purposes are subordinated. Finally, conception itself does not determine the realization of by action, and conceives of it only as a consequence of its realization in thought itself. To understand deliberation, it is essential to study the end, aim or purpose; to understand discrimination, where end or purpose is presupposed, it is essential to investigate the reasons; to understand conception, we have to find the principles according to which it is constructed. (123)

### *Genuine and Artificial – Social Solidarity under Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*

Notwithstanding a young Durkheim’s pointed critique of Tönnies’ foray into the philosophical, there is, I would contend, more method than madness in Tönnies’ careful consideration of different forms of human will. Indeed, while a significant aside in the context of reading *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, the near ontological account of human nature not only

grounds key distinctions between the two forms of sociation Tönnies explores, but also their underpinning conceptions of social solidarity. Key to this distinction are the dominant forms of human sociation and the bonds that bind members together under conditions of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Here, as discussed above, Tönnies suggests that while these bonds are natural, organic and genuine under conditions of *Gemeinschaft*, they are mechanical and artificial under conditions of *Gesellschaft*. Specifically, Tönnies' compares notions of *kinship*, *neighborhood*, and *friendship* in relation to *Gemeinschaft*, as compared to their negation under *Gesellschaft* and the mechanical substitutes of *contractual* and *market relations* which serve to bind its members. In this regard, Tönnies' point is not subtle – social solidarity is genuine, real and strong under conditions of *Gemeinschaft*, and it is artificial, mechanical and weak (possibly even illusionary) under conditions of *Gesellschaft*. As he explains, people under each form of sociation are fundamentally oriented towards each other differently:

[In] the *Gemeinschaft* they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors, whereas in the *Gesellschaft* they are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors. In the *Gesellschaft*, as contrasted with the *Gemeinschaft*, we find no actions that can be derived from an a priori and necessary unity; no actions, therefore, which manifest the will and the spirit of the unity even if performed by the individual; no actions which, in so far as they are performed by the individual, take place on behalf of those united with him. In *Gesellschaft* such actions do not exist. On the contrary, here everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. (65)

It is only through artificial bonds – like legally backed promises of contracts – that individuals under *Gesellschaft* find themselves connected to others. In this sense, *Gesellschaft* is artificial in a number of senses. First, it is the negation of the genuine, real and natural bonds found under *Gemeinschaft*. Second, it is the establishment of each individual as isolated and in direct competition with each other – again something Tönnies see's as artificial, the product of capitalist market forces and relations. Third, the *Gesellschaft* functions through the enactment and acceptance of an artificial 'unity' or personification of collective valuation that, as discussed

above, replaces the genuine conception of worth. The essential character of the relational bonds (social solidarity) that coalesce the *Gesellschaft* are relations of domination built on the atomization of its individual members under artificial principles of capitalist individualism and market drive autonomy. As Tönnies summarizes:

The merchants and capitalists (the owners of money which can be increased by double exchange) are the natural masters and rulers of the *Gesellschaft*. The *Gesellschaft* exists for their sake. It is their tool. All noncapitalists within the *Gesellschaft* are either themselves like inanimate tools – that is, the perfect concept of slavery – or they are legally nonentities, i.e., they are considered incapable of free will and consequently incapable of action under the existing system of contracts...

... According to the conception of natural law characteristic of *Gesellschaft* all human beings as rational persons and free agents are, a priori, equal. Everybody represents and possesses a certain power and freedom and his sphere of rational will. Everybody can kill his fellow men, if he deems it wise. Everybody can appropriate and use derelicts and defend them against attack. Everyone can, if he has material and tools, produce new things and acquire ownership in them by his own labour. And, thus, everybody can transform his activity into a commodity to sell. He can also make the object of a promise, i.e., a contract. (83-84)

In contrast to the artificial/mechanical, and anemic, social solidarity characteristic of *Gesellschaft* of the time (although eerily contemporaneous with our own), Tönnies juxtaposes a characterization of social cohesion under (concurrently past and imagined) conditions of *Gemeinschaft*.

Social solidarity under conditions of true community, or in Tönnies parlance, the organic character of genuine unity of *Gemeinschaft* can be understood in terms of three distinct subtypes: *gemeinschaft* of blood (kinship), *gemeinschaft* of place (neighborhood), and *gemeinschaft* of the mind (friendship). These genuine, and for Tönnies natural, social bonds represent – together – the foundations of social solidarity under *Gemeinschaft*. The three – kinship, neighborhood, and friendship – are also interrelated. According to Tönnies, kinship as embodied through the family is strongest and most natural of the organic bonds. It is centered in the hearth and common home, it is the sharing of possessions, and intimacy in life of proximity, but it is not limited to such physicality – “...where it is strong and alive in the closest and most intimate

relationship, it can live on itself, thrive in memory alone, and overcome any distance...” (43)

Alongside kinship, Tönnies also describes neighborhood – the comparable unity born of living together in the relative physical proximity of the rural village or town. Communal fields, shared spaces, the need to rely and depend on one another extend the unity of blood into the unity of place. Interestingly, the third dimension of natural/organic solidarity under *Gemeinschaft* is distinguishable from the first two in so far as it relates to a proximity of thinking as opposed to a physical lived proximity. Friendship, for Tönnies is understood in terms of closeness of intellectual attitudes – including a shared faith or belief structure. Though more abstract than the other two – Tönnies’ argues that the same basic characteristics stand. These bonds “...must be made and maintained through easy and frequent meetings, usually to take place in a town.” (43)

They are, of the three natural social bonds under *Gemeinschaft*, “...the least organic and intrinsically necessary...” (44) Yet for Tönnies, they remain part of the tripartite composition of the unity of genuine community – family, neighbor, friend or comrade.

*Through the eyes of Leviathan: Nostalgia, Dialectics, and Durkheim*

Tönnies’ account of the ‘genuine’ and ‘organic’ social bonds and connections under conditions of *Gemeinschaft*, as opposed to the ‘artificial’ and ‘mechanical’ bonds under conditions of *Gesellschaft* can be – and often is – read in terms of a historicized account. In this reading, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* becomes a romantic and nostalgic appeal to an imagined past where alienating market forces had not yet degraded the inherent nobility and unity of the German *volk*. Indeed, as discussed above, soon after the ascension of the Nationalist Socialist Party, Ernst Wolfsgast (one of Hitler’s zealots) approached Tönnies and praised his work as foundational to the Nazis’ plan to return Germany to its imagined past glory. (Samples, 1987: 68)

There are however several reasons not to interpret Tönnies work in this way, not least of which being Tönnies' complete rejection of the Nazis interpretation of his work, and the heavy price he paid for it.

As proposed above, I contend that a more interesting way to approach *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* is in terms of a parallel with Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Specifically, an attempt by Tönnies to expand – via a more fulsome sociological analysis – the exploration of underlying conditions of possibility for a stable political order. This both resonates with Tönnies as an avid and accomplished Hobbesian scholar, and in with the political turmoil of his time. From this perspective, Tönnies work becomes less about a historicized comparison about the evolution of associations in Germany at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and more about the articulation of different forms of social bonds that can underpin stable and peaceful human collectivities. In this reading, *Gesellschaft* can be understood as a parallel type of social-contract based society assumed by Hobbes as being necessary to escape the state of nature, while *Gemeinschaft* describes an alternative – and better – form of human association Tönnies' believes is absent from Hobbes' consideration. In short, from this reading, Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* can be re-considered in terms of an attempt to complicate the social dimensions of Hobbes' *Leviathan* – positing that there is an alternative, more organic and natural, form of social solidarity that can found a stable political order than the only one conceived by Hobbes. Re-considering *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in this way relies on three key points: 1) a rejection of a nostalgic reading and focus on *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* as ideal types, 2) an understanding of Tönnies as a dialectic thinker, and 3) an understanding of Tönnies' distinction between organic and mechanical 'affirmative social relations.'

In considering these three necessary positions, we turn to yet another famous

contemporary of Tönnies – Émile Durkheim; a contrast with whom serves to elaborate each point. Durkheim, like Tönnies, was working hard to establish sociology as a discipline in France while in parallel to Tönnies' and Weber's efforts in Germany. Though not unknown to one another, the two did not correspond in depth – with most of their interactions revolving around an early review of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* by Durkheim, and Tönnies' response a few years later. Of course, Durkheim would go on, both in terms of discursive and institutional founding, to become one of the founding 'fathers' of sociology writ large, whereas Tönnies' legacy has largely been limited to Germany. However, the two thinkers have been discussed together at times – largely due to the similarities in their uses of the terms 'organic' and 'mechanical' to describe social relations/solidarity in their respective seminal works. Specifically, some have suggested that Durkheim and Tönnies essentially described the same typology of social solidarity/relations – organic/genuine as opposed to mechanical/artificial – only that they each took an inverse view. This however, as Werner Cahnman points out in his introductory remarks to a reprinting of the Durkheim's review of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* and Tönnies' lengthy response, misses the fundamental differences of "...both the point of departure of the two celebrated sociologists and the image of society at which they arrive..." (Cahnman, 1973: 239)

Without a lengthy aside into Durkheim's famous analysis of social solidarity, let us consider briefly how Tönnies' views diverge – even granting the apparent conceptual inversion. For Durkheim, mechanical solidarity is an anthropologically/historically (at least in his early writings) form of social cohesion premised on strong social roles and restraints. In contrast, as examined above, the affirmative social relations under conditions of *Gemeinschaft* are internally driven – being very directly linked to Tönnies' conception of natural will. The differences

between Durkheim's notion of more modern organic solidarity and Tönnies' description of artificial social bonds under conditions of *Gesellschaft* are even more striking. While for Durkheim, organic solidarity is "...an evolutionary sequence to 'mechanical solidarity,' marking the triumph of liberty over coercion..." (240), for Tönnies the essential character of real social bonds under *Gesellschaft* is their absence – with social cohesion being premised on the artificial stand-ins of market and contractual relations. Nor do these conceptions align in opposite couplings – with both Durkheim's and Tönnies' stronger and weaker conceptualizations of social solidarity remaining premised on fundamentally different foundations.

More broadly, while a younger Durkheim was pursuing a sociological investigation aligned with anthropological methods of the day, Tönnies approached *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* in terms of a 'pure' sociology that could subsequently be 'applied.' As Cahnman notes:

In Tönnies' scheme, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, as pure concepts ever-present ingredients in any society although in "applied" sociology there is a tendency for *Gesellschaft*-like features to increase with the passage of time. (240)

Analyzing Durkheim's early review of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Cahnman further argues that while Durkheim clearly realized that Tönnies approached his work as a dialectician – that is to say that both opposing conceptions would be held within their opposites – he did not identify the strand of what can now be characterized as phenomenology – Tönnies' point of departure being the "contradictory intentionalities of the mind." (248) Not only do elements of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* exist in contradicting tension in any unity, they are not conceived of in terms of simple hypothetical conditions that can be inductively confirmed or discredited. Instead, Cahnman argues, "...for Tönnies, it is a concept that elucidates reality, but cannot be verified or modified by it." (248)

Taken together, one can read Tönnies in terms of a dialectic account in pure sociology of two competing ideal types of human sociation premises on two divergent and contradictory – but still concurrent – forms of human will. Far from a nostalgic contribution to German romanticism, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, from this perspective, offers an exploration of potential social conditions of possibility for stable socio-political orders – which both acknowledges the weakening of genuine solidarity under conditions of early capitalism and reintroduces the possibility of stronger ties in different settings. From this perspective, Tönnies adds to Hobbes’s project by exploring the implications of the social contractual foundations of Leviathan while offering an alternative possibility for those necessary social bonds.

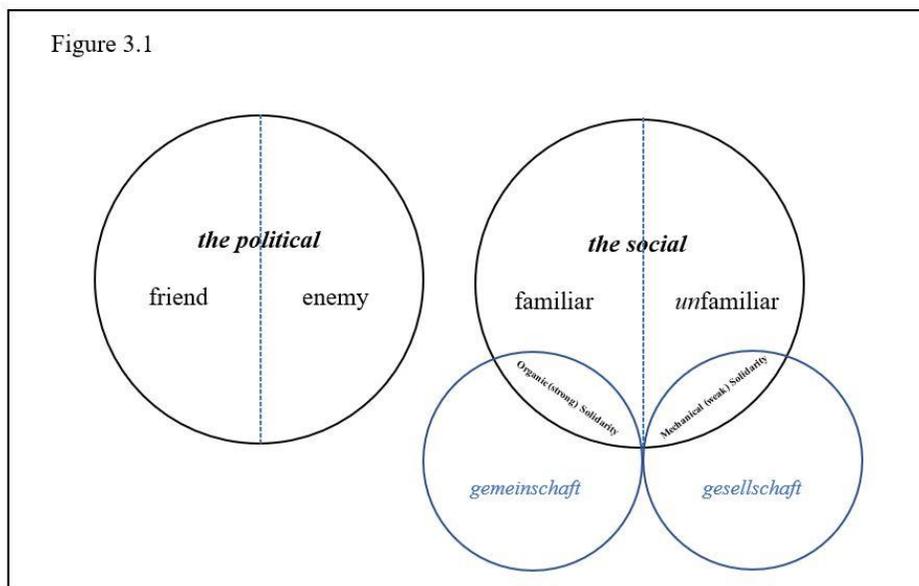
#### *Social Conflict and the limits of Tönnies*

While Tönnies’ insights on the relationship between social solidarity and forms of sociation are clearly relevant to our contemporary question with regards to the social conditions of possibility for an agonal democratic order, so too are his thoughts on contest and conflict within the social body. For Tönnies, social conflict is by and large a negative, destructive, force; he explicitly rejects the idea that there could be any room for true conflict within a healthy social body. Indeed, he conceives of social conflict as the antithesis of association, and therefore of successful human society; conflict within the social is understood as an “unnatural and diseased state” (Tönnies, 2002: 48). All conflict, however, is not created equal. Tönnies distinguishes between social conflict based on 'hostile passions,' which spring from the loosening or rupture of natural ties, and social conflict “[...] which is based upon strangeness, misunderstanding, and distrust.” (Tönnies, 2002: 48) The former, argues Tönnies, tends to be intense but brief, while the latter is typically chronic. For Tönnies, a healthy social body must be organized in a way to mitigate, and ideally completely avoid, acute conflict - notably of the chronic kind.

Here again it is worth recalling Tönnies' relationship to Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Tönnies ultimately views conflict within the social body as destructive – a defining element present in the state of nature which must be managed and overcome for society/state to be successful, stable, and sustainable. Whereas Hobbes' political philosophy proposed the famous social contract under which a pragmatic compromise is reached based on political amity and mutual benefit; Tönnies explores two opposing ideal types of social organization that might form the social underpinning of such a pragmatic political order. While *Gesellschaft* allows humans to live together in relative peace, through *Gemeinschaft* Tönnies explores a competing ideal type of social organization where the 'natural bonds' between people – kinship and familiarity – are allowed to flourish. As discussed above, in this way, one can read Tönnies as attempting to introduce a spectrum of social foundations – as represented through the binary opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – underpinning the kind of pragmatic socio-political compromise Hobbes is theorizing in *Leviathan*. Yet in all three pure conceptualizations – *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft*, or society as assumed under Hobbes' *Leviathan* – conflict remains a primarily destructive impulse, anathema to social order, stability and society. For Tönnies, as much as for Hobbes, social order takes as its primary role the need to mitigate the violent conflict that defines pre-societal humanity.

However, leaving aside the underlying understanding of conflict as necessarily destructive for the moment, we can still adapt from Tönnies a core conception of the social in which the range of possible social relations and types of solidarity are predicated, to some degree, on its core organization. Without fully necessarily embracing Tönnies' description of urban life under early capitalism, we can concede that contemporary western society is organized in a manner more akin to conditions of *Gesellschaft* than *Gemeinschaft*, and that, as such,

predisposes itself to certain patterns of social solidarity, conflict, and, most importantly, core social relations. In the final section of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies considers what he suggests is a key distinction “dealing with one’s relation to one’s fellow beings.” (Tönnies, 2002: 237) Tönnies contends that modern human sociation is premised in an important way on relations of *familiarity* and *estrangement*, a point implied throughout his comparison of community and association. While under the tight knit conditions of *Gemeinschaft* it might be the distinction between *we* and *they* might be relatively stable; under conditions of *Gesellschaft*, the lines between ally, competitor, and opponent are not always as clear. Though Tönnies makes no move to explicitly provide an ontological account of ‘the social’ through a formal binary opposition between familiarity and estrangement, the implied spectrum between familiar and estranged/unfamiliar represents an interesting perspective through which to consider the core distinction rendered within the social. Such a view of the core antithetical distinction underpinning *the social*, alongside Mouffe’s/Schmitt’s understanding of *the political*, is illustrated immediately below:



Although, as illustrated above, Tönnies offers us a rather compatible vision of the social to consider alongside the concept of the political that Mouffe depends on as the starting point for her agonal democratic project, this potential parallel conceptualization, if based solely on Tönnies' work, carry with it certain assumptions significantly at odds with some of the foundational concepts Mouffe and other agonal theorists depend upon – and therefore is ultimately insufficient to the task at hand. However, given the importance that the distinctions between friend, enemy, and adversary plays in Mouffe's account of an agonal democratic order, the social distinction between familiar and unfamiliar, and the potential spectrum of social relations which might flow from such, seem worthy of further consideration.

Though Tönnies' insights on sociation and solidarity can - especially from the perspective of a *Leviathan*-esque exploration of ideal types of social stability - be adapted to begin to form the foundation of a more robust look at the social conditions of possibility for agonal democracy, there remains some substantive work of creative adaptation to be done. Specifically, both the implied spectrum of relations surrounding a core dichotomy within the social between the familiar and strange, as well as the application of such a notion to a conceptual framework that allows certain forms of conflict, be they political or social, to be productive in character – requires what I will refer to as a gentle conceptual *nudge*. Indeed, not only does any defining distinction between familiarity/estrangement as a core antithetical distinction rendered within the social remain deeply nascent in Tönnies' work, his overall characterization of conflict – be it explosive or chronic – as inherently antisocial, substantively limits the reach of such a conceptualization. Without adaptation, Tönnies obvious insights would still leave us with a vision of the social which takes as its objective 'stability' – more problematically, a view of stability to privileges the mitigation or complete elimination of conflict. Such a vision would

seem to have limited potential to be put into meaningful conversation with Mouffe's deployment of Schmitt's concept of the political – as defined by and through genuine but productive conflict.

Unwilling to discard the valuable insights one can garner from Tönnies, this chapter takes it as its fourth task to provide the proposed conceptual nudge through a controlled collision with a select few alternative social insights from another of Weber's, Tönnies', and Schmitt's near-contemporaries: *Georg Simmel*. Though our engagement with Simmel will be relatively modest, this is, as noted at the onset of the chapter, by no means to minimize the historical or contemporary importance of his contributions. Indeed, Simmel's short but comprehensive consideration of the social, conflict, as well as his evocative theorization of the stranger, in the context of modern urban sociation, have become invaluable to many modern sociologists and social thinkers. Like Tönnies, though to a lesser degree, Simmel's work has occupied a relatively ambiguous space with regards to the classics. (Deflem, 2003: 68) Somewhat the opposite of Tönnies, Simmel's semi-founder status is premised much more on notions of discursive founding as opposed to instructional founding. The result, as Baehr remarks regarding the relative valuation of discursive vs institutional founding in sociology predict (Baehr, 2016: 8), is that Simmel's status amongst Anglo-western sociologists is, for the most part, higher than that of Tönnies. Yet, despite being much better represented in recent sociological scholarship, Simmel, like Tönnies, remains a perennial not-quite-canonical figure. Notwithstanding, he offers a wealth of insights uniquely suited to the questions at hand.

### *George Simmel*

Somewhat of a portent of how the legacy of this diverse thinker would come to be streamlined as one of the key inspirations behind the contemporary sub-field of urban sociology, George Simmel was born on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1858 in his parents home located at the corner of

Leipzigerstrasse and Friedrichstrasse – an intersection that “was later to epitomize metropolitan Berlin at the turn of the century.” (Frisby, 2002: 21) Yet despite Simmel’s contemporary status as – first and foremost – a sociologist, his short but prodigious intellectual career saw him dabble in a wide range of fields, and he also (and sometimes equally) recognized as an aesthete<sup>34</sup>, essayist, psychologist, and philosopher. (22) Yet despite having published some 25 books and over 300 other articles, reviews, and notes – Simmel never achieved significant institutional acknowledgement. The degree to which (at least in his early years) these challenges related to Simmel’s particular and atypically diverse approach to research and intellectual interests, or more to deep currents of antisemitism that would fester from nascent to catastrophic throughout his lifetime, remains difficult to discern. What can be confirmed is that Simmel’s relationship to and acknowledgment from established academic institutions never matched his intellectual contributions. His first attempt at a dissertation - entitled ‘Psychological and Ethnographic Studies Music’ - was unceremoniously rejected by his committee in 1880, wherein one committee member noted they would be doing the budding academic a ‘great service’ if they did not encourage him any further in this research direction. Simmel subsequently gained his doctorate for far more traditionally philosophical oriented essay on Kant in 1881, and was granted habilitation<sup>35</sup> in January of 1885. (23)

Simmel’s early publications and teaching records demonstrate an initial focus on philosophy and specifically the – then quite timely – interest in Darwinism. Between 1886 and

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<sup>34</sup> One of Simmel’s most notable contributions here – while somewhat obscure from a sociological perspective - was research he published near the end of his life entitled ‘Rembrandt: An essay in the Philosophy of Art.’

<sup>35</sup> Habilitation, in this context, refers to one of the processes by which doctoral degrees and teaching qualifications were conferred in Germany at the time. As part of the habilitation process, Simmel submitted additional research on Kant and was required to give a public lecture – after which he was granted a *privatdozent* (adjunct professorship) at the University of Berlin, which he held until 1901. (Frisby, 2002: 23)

1889, Simmel taught seminars at the University of Berlin on ‘The Philosophical Consequences of Darwinism’ and in 1895 he published an essay entitled ‘On the Relations between the Doctrine of Selection and Epistemology.’ (24) Simmel’s other interests included work on Herbert Spencer, an ongoing adjacent fascination with psychology, as well as extensive research and writing on the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In terms of direct contributions to sociology proper (still an emerging discipline at the time which had not yet solidified consistent credibility amongst more established academics) Simmel published numerous explicitly sociological articles between 1890 and 1910 – including (at least) nine translated contributions to the (then new) American Journal of Sociology. That said, in addition to the large volume of articles and essays Simmel published throughout this period, his key sociological contributions are generally acknowledged to include his books *Über Sociale Differenzierung* (On Social Differentiation) in 1890, *Soziologie*<sup>36</sup> (Sociology : inquiries into the construction of social forms) in 1908, and *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (Fundamental Questions of Sociology) in 1917.

Despite his relentless and prolific intellectual production and strong reputation for rigorous approach to his research, Simmel’s career did not progress quickly or particularly well. In 1908, following the publication of *Soziologie*, Simmel was considered for the position of second chair in philosophy at Heidelberg University. His prospects for this prestigious appointment seemed initially strong, with faculty<sup>37</sup> involved in the potential appointment concluding that:

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<sup>36</sup> Though Simmel’s contributions to Sociology would – long after his death – gain considerable standing, the reception of his work at the time was mixed. One of the most ‘important’ reviewers of his book noted that while the book contained many ‘psychological comments of great sensitivity’ its opening chapter on methodology in the social sciences did not seem the strongest one in the book. (Frisby, 2002: 29) The reviewer was Ferdinand Tönnies.

<sup>37</sup> Among those who strongly supported Simmel for the appointment at Heidelberg University was none other than Max Weber – who “...lamented that Simmel ‘remains deprived of the official recognition that would come from conferring the rank of Ordinarius which he more than deserved well over a decade and a half ago.’” (Frisby, 2002: 32)

In his fiftieth year, and in the middle generation of contemporary academic teachers of philosophy Simmel is decidedly the most unique figure. One cannot locate him in any of the general currents; he has always gone his own way... There is no doubt the Simmel, with his extensive and many-sided knowledge and with his penetrating intellectual energy, if anyone were capable of doing so, could raise sociology from the state of empirical data collection and general reflections to the rank of a genuine philosophical discipline. If he can be secured for Heidelberg, then the social sciences as a whole and in all their branches ... .. would find such a comprehensive representation as exists nowhere else. (31)

Sadly, but 1908, antisemitism – long simmering below the surface of German society – had become far more explicit and institutionally supported. In contrast to the support Simmel received from within the academy, in a report to the minister of education, university officials described Simmel as “an Israelite through and through, in his external appearance, in his bearing and in his mode of thought.” (31) It was not until 1914, at the age of fifty-six, that Simmel finally achieved a full university appointment as chair of philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. He would die some 4 years later at the age of sixty.

### *Conflict, Familiarity and Estrangement – Simmel on ‘the social’*

In many ways, Simmel’s work represents some of the most comprehensive and focused considerations of conflict in society of its day. Taking a fundamentally different position on conflict than those postulated by either Tönnies, Schmitt, or Hobbes – who all, albeit in radically different ways, understand conflict as anathema to stability<sup>38</sup> - Simmel contends that conflict, in its various forms, represents a crucial element of all human sociation. Simmel argues that rather

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<sup>38</sup> While this fact should be clear with regards to Tönnies, it might cause a moment of hesitation with regards to Schmitt. After all, Schmitt’s concept of the political is itself fraught with conflict. That said, it is important to recall that while Schmitt characterizes the political in terms of the distinction between friend and enemy, he asserts that it is only through the total state – an unapologetic vision of totalitarianism – that the state can hope to survive the ravages of conflict which he sees as otherwise inevitable. For Schmitt conflict is eternal, but a destructive force to be forever controlled, protected against, and ultimately feared by those who would have ‘order.’

than understanding conflict as an obstacle to, or negation of, social unity, it instead must be understood as both *proceeding* and *being operative within* every moment of such a unity (Simmel, 1955: 15). The tendency to understand conflict in terms of its socially destructive character, according to Simmel, stems from the way in which it is analytically abstracted from the totality of social forces at play. Conflict, Simmel grants, does not by itself produce what we could consider a viable social structure – however, neither does any other abstracted element of human sociation. As Simmel notes:

In this respect, conflict thus is hardly different from any other form of relation which sociology abstracts out of the complexity of actual life. Neither love nor the division of labor, neither party affiliation nor superordination of subordination is likely by itself alone to produce or permanently sustain an actual group. (Simmel, 1955: 21)

Indeed, Simmel asks whether this tendency to abstract what we perceive to be elements of heterogeneous bonds which form complex social relations might not in fact be more characteristic of the limits of our analytic capabilities than of the relations themselves. Perhaps, posits Simmel, these complex relations are homogeneous in character, “but our minds cannot grasp their homogeneity.” (Simmel, 1955: 21) These complex social relations, according to Simmel, are mirrored by psychological phenomena within individuals. Complex emotional responses, experienced as homogeneous, are none the less, *post factum*, understood in terms of a multiplicity of oppositional forces. However, this, Simmel suggests, may have less to do with the fact that actual elements of a series are being unpacked, than with the fact that “...the calculating intellect often lacks a paradigm for this unity and must construe it as the result of several elements.” (Simmel, 1955: 22)

This leads Simmel to contend that it is this lack of a paradigm able to grasp complex unities, which leads sociologists (among others) to consider social interactions in term of various interplays of (so-called) converging and diverging currents. (Simmel, 1955: 23) That is,

according to Simmel:

...the structure [of a group] may be *sui generis*, its motivation and form being wholly self-consistent, and only in order to be able to describe and understand it, do we put it together, *post factum*, out of two tendencies, one monistic, the other antagonistic. Or else, these two do in fact exist, but only, as it were, *before* the relation itself originated. In the relation itself, they have fused into an organic unity in which neither makes itself felt with its own, isolated power. (Simmel, 1955: 23)

Simmel's point is not that these opposing social currents do not ever exist side by side in real social settings, on the contrary, he concedes that they do. Instead, Simmel argues is that what is important to recognize is that in numerous cases when such elements are analytically separated to fit neatly into either monistic or antagonistic categories, what is being done may be less akin to separating discrete phenomena mixed together, and more akin to dissecting a living totality into arbitrarily cut out segments. According to Simmel, in either case, the analytic division of elements from a whole risks misunderstanding or essentializing their relations to the totality.

Another cause for the misrepresentation of antagonism and discord as a purely destructive force is, according to Simmel, the two-fold understanding of social 'unity.' As Simmel contends:

There is a misunderstanding according to which one of these two kinds of interaction [monistic and antagonistic] tears down what the other builds up, and what is eventually left standing is the result of the subtraction of the two (while in reality it must rather be designated as the result of their addition). (Simmel, 1955: 16)

This is because the dominant understanding of social unity constitutes it as "the consensus and concord of interacting individuals, as against their discords, separations, and disharmonies."

(Simmel, 1955: 17) As Simmel points out, this however, is but one of two possible understandings of unity. The second conception of unity is one in which unity designates the total group-synthesis of its components or the ultimate wholeness of a group. (Simmel, 1955: 17) The totality of the 'wholeness' of a group, argues Simmel, is necessarily constituted by both

unitary and dualistic relations. So, then, Simmel points out, unity refers both to the total wholeness of a group, and to “functional components considered *specifically* unitary.” (Simmel, 1955: 17) This latter use of the term, according to Simmel, serves to obscure the former, and broader, sense of unity. According to Simmel, several forms of conflict actually presuppose and depend upon a preexisting unity and social order, and do not posit its destruction. Simmel notes that several forms of conflict are actually characterized by a mutual acceptance of the rules and limits of said conflict by the conflicting parties themselves. Legal conflict and what Simmel calls *Kampfspiel* (antagonistic games) are prime examples. (Simmel, 1955: 38)

Simmel goes on to consider several other forms of social conflict, and the various ways in which their antagonistic elements presuppose and build upon elements of unity. Most ‘radical’ of these, Simmel argues, is the sociological phenomenon of jealousy. As Simmel explains:

Jealousy can combine the most passionate hatred with the continuation of the most passionate love, and the lingering of the most intimate unity with the destruction of both parties – for, the jealous individual destroys the relation just as much as that relation invites him to destroy his partner. (Simmel, 1955: 55)

For Simmel, jealousy, *Kampfspiel*, and legal conflict all help to illustrate that what are commonly understood as conflicts are not pure antagonisms; they represent various social relations in which elements of antagonism and unity are interdependent, and only, at best, analytically separable.

While in many ways less developed than his work on conflict, Simmel's now seminal ruminations on the social form of the stranger also offers an important catalyst for our proposed deployment of some of Tönnies key sociological insights. To be sure, Simmel's brief but discursively foundational notion of social strangership is a marked contrast to the conventional meaning that Tönnies ascribes to the term. Whereas for Tönnies the quality of strangeness or estrangement is presented in contradistinction to its oppositional parallel - familiarity, Simmel contends that the social position of ‘the stranger’ is better defined by and through a thicker

exploration of its liminality and hybridity. For Simmel, the stranger represents a position between the familiar and the alien. As he notes:

In the case of the stranger, the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relation is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near. (Simmel, 1971: 143)

In this way, far from being the simple opposite of familiarity, the stranger, according to Simmel, represents the hybrid social form through which sameness and difference coexist. The social form of the stranger, for Simmel, represents the ‘inorganic appending’ of an organic member of the group. (Simmel, 1971: 145) The stranger is the historical form required for sociation beyond familiarity.

Of course, for Simmel, the concept of the stranger was limited to a fascinating, but discrete, liminal social position within a particular historical context. Yet despite the relatively brief consideration Simmel offers on the stranger, it has inspired a wealth of analysis and theory. In this way, in order to understand the full scope of Simmel’s conceptualization of the stranger – and its discursive echoes – it becomes necessary to move beyond what Simmel himself wrote. Building on Simmel’s original postulation, contemporary sociologists and social theorists have dramatically expanded the scope and depth of the original concept ‘the stranger’ as a social type, exploring in detail the notion of the ‘strangership’ as one of the defining forms of sociation in modern societies. Strangership shifts focus from social form to social relation. “Where the study of strangers focuses on specific traits of individuals and groups, the concept of strangership focuses instead on the characteristics of relationships between strangers.” (Horgan, 2012: 607) Not only are the social relations of strangership understood as pervasive in a contemporary context, they are posited as at least “partially constitutive of social order – especially in cities.” (Horgan, 2012: 613) Let us briefly consider this contemporary expansion of Simmel’s stranger

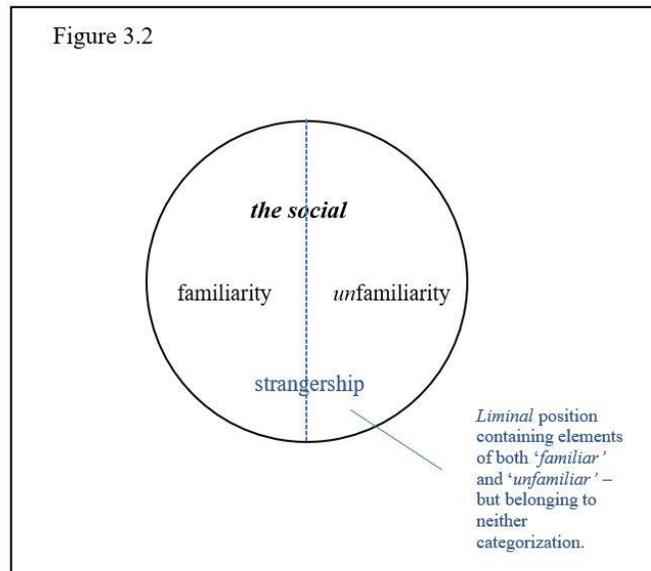
as the social relation of strangership.

Drawing together insights from several seminal contemporary considerations of the stranger (e.g. Collins 2004, Alexander 2004, Fine 2010), Critical sociologist and Simmelian scholar Mervyn Horgan proposes three core conditions of possibility necessary for the emergence and/or presence of the social relation of strangership: *copresence*, *mutual agreement about social distance*, and *mobility*. (Horgan, 2012: 614-615) The first and most basic requirement for strangership is copresence. Understood as both spatial and temporal, copresence is set out as encountering and approaching in the context of a proximity in time and space, "...it involves at least two persons in the same place at the same time." (Horgan, 2012: 614) The second condition of possibility for strangership is a mutual agreement about the relevant social distance. This second requirement speaks to the inherent mutuality of all social relations – in the classical sense. For a relation of strangership to emerge or remain present "...those in relations of strangership have an implied mutual understanding of the nature and degree of social distance by which the relationship ought to be characterized." (Horgan 2012: 616) Though not necessarily symmetrical, the second basic requirement for strangership is basic shared understanding of terms of the relation. The third basic condition of possibility for strangership is mobility. One of the core characteristics of Simmel's original account of the stranger, physical mobility – the movement of peoples across borders and through communities – has remained a central theme in discussions of the stranger. Expanding this idea, Horgan argues that the social relation of strangership needs to be considered not only as constituted through traditional notions of mobility, but also via the possibilities of *social* and *symbolic* mobility. Social mobility speaks to the (relatively) modern fluidity and interaction between various social positions (e.g. economic, ethnic, or professional), bringing individuals and groups previously strongly segregated into

previously improbable proximity. Symbolic mobility relates to notions of recognition and status, suggesting that access to symbolic resources or radical transformations in contexts can contribute to relations of strangership even in the context of an otherwise stable understanding of the local. (Horgan, 2012: 617)

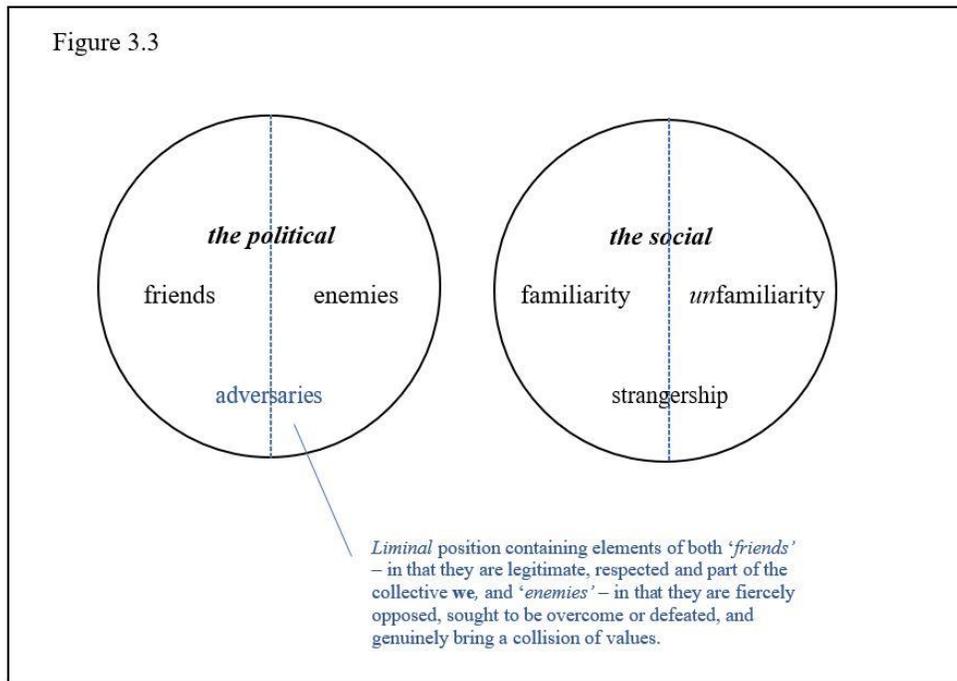
### *What Simmel offers Tönnies*

Drawing on Simmel, as well as some of his contemporary interpreters, we find ourselves with a nuanced conceptualization of conflict in society – not always as an antithetical force to unity, but as a complex play of social relations and positions defined and modified through notions of material and symbolic proximity, distance and understanding. How then might this perspective adjust the key insights drawn from Tönnies? Whereas we are aiming to adapt from Tönnies a core conception of the social according to which social relations and types of solidarity are predicated, to a significant degree, on its core organization; Simmel offers a careful consideration of the role for socially productive conflict and a conceptualization of the stranger as a social position, or in its more contemporary interpretation a social relation, defined not vis a vis a binary opposition, but indeed constituted precisely through a hybrid and liminal position betwixt and between the foundational *we* and *they*. Taken together, we can import into Tönnies view of the social two main additions: **1)** the notion that conflict, acute or chronic, need not always be anathema to social stability or unity, and **2)** that the social might be better framed not in terms of a binary opposition but in terms of a field of tensions anchored in a conceptualization of not only a core antithetical distinction but also an ever present liminal co-constituted middle node, as illustrated in figure 3.2 immediately below:



Key here is the notion that strangership is introduced as a *liminal* point concurrently between, outside of, and incorporating elements of both the antithetical positions in the core binary opposition. In this way, injecting a conceptual vocabulary based on Simmel’s figure of the stranger not only serves to nudge our core depiction of a complimentary account of *the social* to partner with the concept of the political underpinning Mouffe’s work, it also provides another way to consider the essential transfiguration – from enemy to adversary – upon which Mouffe’s normative project depends. Here, as illustrated below, the concept of liminality offers a way to reconsider the adversary not in terms of a transformation of the enemy, but as a liminal figure - concurrently between, outside of, and incorporating elements of both the antithetical positions in Schmitt’s core binary opposition:

Figure 3.3



This all having been said, it is important to note here that I am not contending that these elements exist in Tönnies' work as it is written, neither explicitly nor even in a nascent form. Both the conceptualization as conflict as potentially productive, and the shift from a binary to tripartite set of core distinctions introduce perspectives Tönnies' did not embrace, or at least, did not clearly articulate in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Very much in parallel to the larger project to introduce new landmarks into the conceptual geography of agonal democratic theory, to Mouffe's selective appropriation of Schmitt's concept of the political, or even Tönnies' reconsideration of Hobbes' core question of social stability through a lens that prioritized familial bonds, this shift doubtless represents a change to the letter and spirit of the work as presented.

And yet, neither of the two elements derived from Simmel – *conflict as productive* and a *tripartite rather than binary set of core distinctions* - necessitates a substantive reordering of the

picture of the social Tönnies' offers us. Far from destabilizing the foundations of Tönnies' impressive exploration of the roles social organization play on producing and maintaining different forms of social solidarity, I would contend that this proposed conceptual *nudge* adapts and adjusts the edges of that work rendering them more compatible with contemporary perspectives to which, I remain convinced, Tönnies' still has much to offer.

## Chapter 4

### **On the Utility of Abstracting an Ethos of Social Agon: Thinking Agonal Democracy Beyond the Political**

As discussed at the onset of this project, the small, but prominent, subset of contemporary political theory concerned with the conceptual re-prioritization of the political ideal of *agon* in democratic theory – what we have described as agonal democratic theory - offers a fascinating challenge to what has become the dominant focus of mainstream work on democracy with principles of deliberation, compromise, or consensus. These theorists, though diverse in the particulars of their radical visions for a (re)new(ed) democratic order, share as a core principle that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate genuine conflict from the realm of politics. That said, and as briefly noted in chapter 1, these theorists also share a belief that in order to look beyond the contemporary democratic imaginary, radical democratic theory must re-center its efforts around the concept of the political itself – a move that has been described (often critically) as a shift toward “a philosophy of politics whose fundamental task is, in the first instance, to isolate and capture the very essence of political being.” (McNay, 2014: 2)

Though inherently sympathetic to the critical and normative underpinnings of this radical agonal (re)turn, as I have argued throughout this project, the emphasis on capturing an ontological account, however contingent and qualified, of the political appears to have produced as a by-product a withdrawal from a nuanced understanding of the social which ranges from substantial to complete. While some critics of this subset of political theory have rejected this

attempt to consider the ‘essence’ of the political altogether, I argue that one need not abandon this radical contingent-ontological turn altogether. Instead, I contend that one can bolster such theoretical approaches through engagement with classical sociological accounts of the social in order to inject into these socio-anemic accounts a complimentary understanding of the social. Indeed, at the very core of this project is the contention that by challenging the dominant logic of determination in most agonistic theory - under which the social is essentially reduced to an aftereffect of the political – one can recover and expand some of the nascent conceptualizations of the social subsumed within, and underpinning these radical democratic visions. By injecting into agonal democratic theory selected sociological insights from classical theory as alternative theoretical pillars, we are able to begin to ask a distinctive, hitherto ignored, and deeply important sociological question. Namely: what are the underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon?

To this end, in chapter 1, we considered the ways in which the analytic and philosophical foundations of Chantal Mouffe’s radical democratic theory – taken as emblematic of the field – predisposed Mouffe’s agonal account towards a devaluing, ignoring, and reducing of *the social* to the merest sediment of previous political contest. In chapters 2 and 3, we explored a selection of classical sociological thinkers – Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, & Georg Simmel - in order to identify, consider and adapt some of their key insights with regards to the political and social as potential alternative foundations for the social dimensions of a radical democratic vision. However, in attempting to consider an account of radical/agonal democracy that takes more seriously the position and importance of ‘the social’ – I have, to this point, focused on the creative adaptation of classical sociological insights meant to offer a fresh conceptual terrain upon which to build an (albeit contingent) ontological account ‘the social’ to compliment and

parallel Mouffe's 'purely political' account of 'the political.' The result is that, to this point and very much like Mouffe and other agonal theorists, this project has offered relatively little consideration of the so-called 'ontic' dimension of the political – what Mouffe calls *politics*, nor, if it is to be more robustly considered, the social – what we can describe as *sociation*.<sup>39</sup>

As explored in Chapter 1, Mouffe draws on Heidegger's distinction between *dasein-ontological* or essence of being and *dasein-ontical* or existence of being (Heidegger 1962: 32) in order to explain what she sees as a fundamental distinction between the political and politics. Though not identical to the Heideggerian formulation, Mouffe's adaptation of the ontological/ontic dichotomy permits her a way of focusing on what she believes is the key to fully understanding and theorizing a new and radical vision for modern democracy. While politics refers to the 'ontic', the political refers to the 'ontological.' That said, despite the use of Heideggerian terminology, Mouffe's account of the character of the political suggests neither the eternity nor the immutability of a classical ontological claim. Indeed, reading her ontic/ontological distinction through the lens of her previous work with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, I concluded that Mouffe's deployment of these categories could only be understood in terms of a relatively high degree of historical contingency. (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000) This contingent ontic/ontological distinction allows Mouffe to set aside the important but messy character of lived politics and focus nearly exclusively on the 'essence' of the political and the various conceptions and misconceptions she argues have led political theorists astray. Though others use different terminologies, Mouffe is not alone in this focus on essence over practice. Indeed, this 'philosophical turn' is common among most if not all agonal theorists. (Connolly, 1991 & 1995; Honig 1993 & 2009; Tully, 1995 & 2006; and Hatab, 2002)

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<sup>39</sup> Add short description of where we borrow the term sociation from – SIMMEL – and how we are mirroring the distinction between the political & politics with the social & sociation. Sociation = social action for Habermas ...

I have argued from the onset of this project that any viable conceptualization of ‘the political’ must be considered alongside a complimentary account of the social. While I am not unsympathetic to the move to consider ‘the political’ – or a complimentary consideration of ‘the social’ - in terms of a contingent-ontological account; this does not mean that the exploration of ontological accounts of either the political or the social (no matter how contingent) are not potentially problematic or fraught. The risk of either essentialism or, at the extreme, a sort of transcendental determinism that obscures or negates the lived experiences of real people must be avoided if there is any chance of meeting the shared normative commitments of both the radical democratic turn we are exploring, and critical theory more broadly. Although Mouffe explicitly notes the equal importance of the ontic and ontological, her work on agonal democracy focuses near entirely on the latter. This opens Mouffe, and many other agonal theorists, to substantive critique. Specifically, the critique goes, such a philosophical emphasis leads inevitably to a neglect – benign or otherwise – of the very lived experiences of inequality, exploitation, disenfranchisement, domination, and even resistance, with which radical agonistic theorists are, from a normative perspective, trying to address. Furthermore, it may inadvertently contribute to the common tendency to ignore or diminish everything outside a narrow construction of ‘the political’; including, more specifically, to obscure, reduce or ignore the necessary underpinning societal conditions of possibility for agonal democracy in terms of both their *ontological* (the social) and *ontic* (sociation) dimensions.

Aiming to both mitigate this risk and introduce an alternative conceptual vernacular through the creative adaption of certain key social thinkers; in this chapter we turn our attention to a fourth and final philosopher, political theorist and sociologist – Jürgen Habermas. Challenging the dominant traditional reading of Habermas’ account of deliberative democracy as

exclusively focused on consensus, as well as Mouffe's and other agonal theorists' often less than amiable engagements with it; I propose that, very much in line with the insights garnered from Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Georg Simmel, Habermas may offer agonal theorists several complementary conceptual tools that have, to date, been underestimated or ignored. This is, of course, by no means to ignore the very real distinctions between radical/agonal democratic theories and Habermas' procedural account of deliberative democracy, nor the very real antagonisms between Habermas and the likes of Schmidt, upon whose work Mouffe builds so much. However, I do contend that Habermas' work can be read through the lens of a nascent agonistic sensibility, which, while by no means rendering it part of the agonal democratic tradition per se, does open up the hitherto underexplored possibility of a more productive engagement across what have traditionally been seen as diametrically opposing perspectives. Specifically, I contend that Habermas' work offers Mouffe and other agonal democratic theorists both 1) an example of a theoretical account of democracy and justice that more successfully balances the ontic and ontological dimensions, and 2) an account of the social conditions of possibility for a theory of deliberative democracy, upon which agonal theorists may be able to build with regards to a radical democracy premised on the ethos of political agon.

With this in mind, this chapter is organized around the goal of facilitating, and perhaps at times mediating, this proposed potential renewed exchange. Both between deliberative and agonal democratic theory broadly, and between Habermas and Mouffe more specifically. To this end, I begin by introducing Jürgen Habermas as the fourth and final sociological thinker, with an emphasis on his intellectual origins and his position vis-a-vis the discursive and institutional 'founders' discussed thus far. Here, we also find ourselves returning to our consideration of Max Weber – upon whose seminal understanding of social action Habermas builds his own critical

account of communicative social action. Habermas' Weber, as we will see, is closely linked to Schluchter's reading of the canonical figure – though perhaps with a stronger claim to the unity of Weber's overarching sociological objectives. Next, we pause from Habermas to briefly explore some of the key elements of the claim that the agonal (re)turn in political theory, with its emphasis on the ontological essence of *the political*, inherently weakens any viable consideration of the lived experiences that play out across the ontic dimensions, what Mouffe calls the messy realities, of everyday politics. To do this, I explore the recent work of Lois McNay, who levels the charge that such theorists have fallen prey to forms of 'social weightlessness' and as a result have failed to meet their own normative commitments to address the social inequality and power imbalances of the real world. Here, we consider both certain sympathies with McNay's critique – that agonal theorists may well have, to date, paid too little attention to the ontic dimensions of politics – while challenging some of her other claims. Most notably, that any exploration of the ontological distracts from or negates from the greater importance of the ontic, as well as the even more deeply troubling conflation of the ontic dimensions of *the political* (politics) and *the social*.

In the third section, we return to Habermas, this time exploring how his more ontological understanding of communicative social action provides a foundation for a more ontic-oriented, what he describes as procedural, account of deliberative democracy. Here, as noted above, I propose a fresh re-reading of Habermas' deliberative democratic musings, considered in terms of their potential synergies and sympathies with the core principles of the agonistic vision of radical democracy – and specifically Mouffe's account thereof. Taking a more agonistic, as opposed to antagonistic, approach to a dialogue between radical and discursive visions of democracy, I explore the potentials for re-imagining both theories in terms of a productive tension. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a consideration of the ways in which agonal accounts of radical

democracy that more fully balance both the ontic and the ontological dimensions of their theoretical perspectives, may not insulate them from the critique of social weightlessness, but may also provide a more fertile conceptual landscape in which to address the social conditions of possibility necessary to realize their own normative aspirations.

*Jürgen Habermas - Between Contemporary, Classical, and Canon*

I propose to introduce elements of the work of Jürgen Habermas into the discussion surrounding the social conditions of possibility that could underpin a viable agonistic vision of democracy. I do so in two distinctive, but overlapping, ways. While in chapters 2 and 3, this project sought to explore insights from classical sociological thinkers as alternative foundations for agonal theory broadly – and Chantal Mouffe’s work specifically – by way of the creative adaptation of conceptual pillars in the works of canonical and canon-adjacent perspectives of Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Georg Simmel; here we turn to the work of a more contemporary sociologist, philosopher and political theorist. And yet, while it is true that agonal theorists have, quite directly, engaged to some extent with Habermas on their own accord – specifically his responses to John Rawls and the development of a procedurally founded theory of deliberative democracy – this is not the only way in which I seek to introduce the vast and diverse insights of a thinker widely described as one of the most important philosophers of our time. Whereas, in some ways, one can view Habermas as a contemporary of agonal thinkers like Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, or even moral philosopher John Rawls – he is concurrently very much a product of the social, political and cultural circumstances that so affected the classical insights of Weber, Tönnies, Simmel and, though very differently, Schmitt. In this way, I

am proposing to introduce Habermas as a sort of liminal figure. On the one hand, Habermas represents a present day thinker who, while shaped by his early childhood experiences with the Nazi regime and Second World War, has developed political, philosophical and sociological perspectives shaped by modern developments – and has engaged in the same telltale philosophical, moral and political debates through which the radical agonistic vision of democracy was born. However, at the same time, Habermas can also be read in terms of his being the youngest of those same classical German thinkers shaped by a vibrant intellectual heritage violently interrupted – both practically and symbolically – by the unimagined horrors of the National Socialist Party rule over Germany.<sup>40</sup> In this way, in exploring and seeking to creatively adapt elements of Habermas’ seminal thought, we do so simultaneously in terms of looking for alternative foundations for agonal democracy *vis a vis* classical sociological insights from German scholars other than Carl Schmitt, and, through a purposeful re-reading and re-examining a procedural account of deliberative democracy as well its existing interpretation by agonal thinkers – proposing that the two perspectives may have more in common than has traditionally been allowed.<sup>41</sup>

### *Rise of Rationalism – Habermas’ foundational interpretation of Weber*

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<sup>40</sup> Justification – in terms of who Habermas studied with and where, whether there was (yet) a true break with the classical academic environment and thinking in which Tönnies, Weber, Simmel and Schmitt had developed.

<sup>41</sup> This is by no means to minimize the very real differences between Habermasian accounts of deliberative democracy, and radical democratic claims based on an ethos of agonism. Specifically, authors like Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly (among many others) have long lists of disagreements with Habermas’ procedural accounts and vision of ideal communication. Instead, this is to note that, despite these very real issues, one can – as will be explored later in this chapter – re-read Habermas in terms of a *nascent* agonal sensibility, and through this, expand and develop the interchange between these two adjacent responses to Rawls.

Engaging with the massive corpus of Habermas' contributions – be they to philosophy, political science, sociology, or communications studies – can be daunting. Habermas' works and evolving insights cross multiple disciplines and span more than seven decades. That said, for the purposes of this project, a selective exploration of Habermas begins, for us, with a return to Max Weber. Foundational to his seminal work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (volumes 1 & 2), Habermas' critical engagement with Weber – both in general and specifically with regards to Weber's famous typology of social action – is a necessary starting point for understanding Habermas' concept of communicative action, the central underpinning role it plays in his later work on deliberative democracy, and the potential ways it could be deployed to further expand the conceptual vistas of the agonal democratic landscape.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the collective works of Max Weber – which were left unfinished and appeared disparate at time of his death – have been read and interpreted differently over the years. While Weber's work had always been seen as relatively important in Germany, and some of his seminal insights were circulating and influencing a subset of important American academics for decades following his death, it was not until the 1950s that Weber's lasting legacy began to crystalize, with the international proliferation of his work, understood as a cohesive body. Within English speaking academia, awareness and recognition of Weber as a central sociological figure was heralded by Talcott Parsons, and as we explored previously, it is Parsons' particular reading and interpretation of Weber that dominated his early reception across Anglo-academe. The first substantial challenge to Parsons' account of Weber – which had heavily emphasized an understanding and presentation of Weber's writings in the context of a unified theoretical perspective in the 'grand theory' tradition – came through the work of Reinhard Bendix. Bendix's 1960 *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, was one of the

first significant challenges to Parsons' Weber – presenting a characterization of Weberian thought far more focused on a thematic of historical sociology.

Habermas, like Wolfgang Schluchter, rejects the more narrow readings of Weber's work and aligns more with Reinhard Bendix's 'recovery' of Weber, which sought to broaden the understanding of Weber's work across his various explorations of society, politics, religion and economics. That said, Habermas' Weber, though aligned with Bendix's and Schluchter's readings, remains distinctive. In the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas introduces Weber in terms of an overarching project exploring "...the process of disenchantment in the history of religion..." understood in terms of the "...necessary internal conditions for the appearance of Occidental rationalism." (Habermas, 1984:143) This perspective, Habermas contends, was not new, so much as a return to a previous, or even original, more holistic way of approaching Weber's writings. As Habermas explains:

Weber left his work behind in a fragmentary state; nevertheless, using his theory of rationalization as a guideline, it is possible to reconstruct his project as a whole. This was once the dominant perspective of interpretation in the largely philosophical discussions of the twenties; it was then displaced by a strictly sociological interpretation oriented to *Economy and Society*; in the most recent Weber research, it has once again come to the fore. (143)

This vision of a cohesive, though incomplete, project stretching across the body of Weber's writings must not be confused with a Parsons-like attempt to form and fit Weber's writings into a grand theoretical model. Although Habermas spends a significant amount of time engaging with Parsons in the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1987), his own understanding of Weber is far more aligned with Bendix's 'recovery' as well as other 'post-Parsons' accounts. Indeed, to a significant extent, the Weber Habermas presents and builds upon owes something to the work of Wolfgang Schluchter. Again, as we explored in Chapter 2, as a Weberian scholar, Schluchter challenged much of the dominant framing of Weber's work,

emphasizing, alongside his sociological contributions, a *political-philosophical* dimension in the corpus of that work. That said, Habermas – here writing in the 1980s – though not aligned with a Parsons reading of Weber, was also not focused on the ongoing project of ‘recovering’ Weber from the dominant Parsons-inspired interpretation. Rather, Habermas aims to use a broader reading of Weber’s overarching project as the starting point for his own distinctive understanding of society and social action. To that end, Habermas approaches Weber in terms of reconstructing what he describes as an incomplete and, at times, contradictory, but still crucial exploration of the different forms, functions and features of modern western rationality – culminating in a conception of *practical rationality*.

Approaching Weber in terms of an overarching project to understand the rise and particularities of Occidental rationalism, Habermas positions Weber in terms of both a longer tradition of examining the rationalization of societies, and a break with earlier currents of thought. Specifically, Habermas points out that:

The theory of rationalization does not belong to that speculative heritage from which sociology as a science had to free itself. As sociology developed in the wakes of the Scottish moral philosophy and early socialism, with its own lines of questioning and its own theoretical approaches, as a discipline concerned with the original and development of modern society, it found the theme of societal rationalization already at hand. This theme had been dealt with in the eighteenth century by philosophy of history and had been taken up and transformed in the nineteenth century by evolutionary theories of society. (145)

In terms of this first heritage – the philosophy of history in the eighteenth century – Habermas draws on the works of Nicolas de Condorcet to outline its core features. In this early exploration of rationalism and rationalization, philosophers like Condorcet were not so much interested in, as they were enamored with, the (re)emergent<sup>42</sup> sciences – mathematics, chemistry, biology,

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<sup>42</sup> Here I say both ‘emergent’ and ‘re-emergent’ in recognition of the fact that, outside a Eurocentric account of history, many of the scientific discoveries of the day were in fact re-discoveries – having already been made centuries prior in various parts of the Middle East and Asia, as well as in ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt prior to the dark ages.

physics, etc... Rationalization, it was argued, was part and parcel of the proliferation and supremacy of scientific thought and methodology, and Condorcet, as emblematic of his time and discipline, approached the question of rationalization of society guided by four primary assumptions/beliefs:

1. That the concept of perfection – as an aspirational ideal – can and should be shifted away from the Aristotelian understanding of telos, and reinterpreted according to the model of scientific progress – there are no inherent limits that fetter the scope of human understanding outside the resistance of nature. (146)
2. That part of the inherent resistance of nature to human understanding (scientific knowledge) finds form by way of the inherited religious, philosophical, moral and political opinions of humankind. (146)
3. Science, and specifically scientific knowledge, serves as the guidepost for the moral perfection of human beings. (147)
4. Scientific progress not only drives individual human moral progress (as noted in point four) but also society progress and the improvement of humanity of civilizational scale. (148)

This reification and near fetishization of scientific methodology and thought remained dominant until it was revisited and revised through the developmental theories of the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Here, post-Darwin, the frame shifted from the theoretical progress of science - understood to encompass the moral and social development of mankind – to the natural evolution of the species. (151) Yet still, the analytical frame remained firmly on the side of ‘science = progress,’ with little to no consideration of any potential problems or pitfalls with the mass proliferation of ‘scientific rationality’ across every dimension of human sociation. Habermas sums up this shift as follows:

They questioned neither the rationalism nor the universalism of the Enlightenment and were thus not yet sensitive to the dangers of Eurocentrism; they repeated the naturalistic fallacies of the philosophy of history, albeit less blatantly, for they at least suggested interpreting theoretical statements about evolutionary advances in the sense of value judgements about practical-moral

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<sup>43</sup> Habermas identifies Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), English philosopher, biologist, and early sociologist, as one of the exemplars of this shift. Spencer and others in this current, worked to move away from the philosophy of history position, towards a new ‘civilizational development as evolution’ perspective – deeply intertwined with the broader project of applying Darwinian insights into the emerging social sciences.

progress; on the other hand, they were more strongly oriented in a social-scientific direction and filled in the gaps left open by the philosophy of history – with its rather idealistic meant talk of historical laws – with a concept of evolution inspired by biology and having, so it seemed, the status of empirical science. (153)

Habermas's Weber begins here, as a response and challenge to the implicit fault lines in the evolutionary retelling of the philosophical equation of rationalization (science) with perfection. Specifically, Habermas argues that Weber's project was framed against four main currents in the nineteenth century developmental theory, specifically a challenge to: *evolutionary determinism*, *ethical naturalism*, *universalism*, and at its core, the uncritical understanding of *rationalism* itself.

### *Context and Character of Occidental Rationalism*

According to Habermas, there is a central thread that runs across the entirety of Weber's works - an interest in the 'universal-historical problem' of how the particular form and functions of western modern (Occidental) rationalism emerged, and why it did not – at least to the same degree and in the same historical moment – emerge elsewhere. From this perspective, Weber's diverse explorations - world religions, the economic organization of societies, typologies of social actions, and even, following Schluchter, the political-philosophical explorations of various ethical-moral orientations to value systems – all form part of a wider preoccupation and exploration of 'rationalism' as the central feature of what would come to called 'modernity.' While Habermas concedes that certain inconsistencies and tensions emerge across the various threads of Weber's work in terms of a comprehensive understanding of rationalism; he argues that one can, nevertheless, (re)construct a cohesive picture from Weber's writings. With intense analytic rigour and care, Habermas does just this – presenting an overarching view of *his*

Weber's theory of modern rationalism. Through a two-axis tripartite categorization marking *culture, society, and personality* dimensions alongside *cognitive, evaluative and expressive* elements - Habermas reconstructs, through Weber, a persuasive account of the latter's understanding of modern rationalism. This insightful interpretation of Weber as a scholar of rationalism, is summarized in the table immediately below:

**Figure 4.1 – Habermas' classification of the forms of Manifestation of Occidental Rationalism through the emergence of Modernity in Weberian thought**

	Cognitive Elements	Evaluative Elements	Expressive Elements
<b>Cultural Level</b>	Modern Natural Sciences	Rational Natural Law Protestant Ethic	Autonomous Art
<b>Societal Level</b>	Scientific enterprise (universities, academies, laboratories)	University-based jurisprudence, specialized legal training  Modern government Institutions	Religious associations  Bourgeois nuclear family
<b>Individual / Personality Level</b>	Behavioural Dispositions & Value Orientations of the <i>methodical conduct of life</i>		Behavioural Dispositions & Value Orientations of the <i>counter culture life-style</i>

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Based on Habermas' diagram "Figure 3 – Forms of Manifestation of Occidental Rationalism in the Emergence of Modernity" in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. (Habermas, 1984: 167)

Habermas, Weber's understanding of society – very much like that of Marx – comes down to an interplay between *capitalist enterprise/economics* and the organized formal structures of *the*

state.<sup>44</sup> Between and throughout them is the organizing and mediating force of the law. To this frame, Habermas adds Weber's interest in social scientific enterprise, religious associations, and the affiliated nuclear family unit, as well as, somewhat unexpectedly, the field of artistic enterprise.<sup>45</sup> Though a key part – or explanandum as Habermas describes it – of Weber's analysis, Habermas does not spend much time on Weber's central consideration of the 'society' element in the first volume of *A Theory of Communicative Action*, instead focusing on the surrounding levels of *culture* and *personality*.<sup>46</sup>

The second level of analysis of rationalization in Weber's work, according to Habermas, happens at the level of culture. It is here, Habermas argues, that we can locate Weber's interests in the growing division and independence between law and morality – what Weber describes as the autonomy of law – and the rise of a rational-legal framework of justification. Specifically, Habermas suggests that:

...Weber uses the term "rationalization" also to designate the growing autonomy of law and morality, that is, the detachment of moral-practical insights, of ethical and legal doctrines, of basic principles, of maxims and decision rules, from the world-views in which they were at first embedded. (162)

This a key point for Habermas, who points out that this insight extends beyond the notion of 'value' to the 'techniques of such realizing values.' Again, Habermas draws on Weber's less well-

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<sup>44</sup> Habermas is careful to point out that, while aligned structurally, there are important substantive differences between Weber's and Marx's understanding of society – especially vis a vis increasing rationalization. Where Marx equates rationalization with the expansion of empirical knowledge and improvements in techniques and technologies of production ultimately embodied as productive forces fettered by unequal relations of production; Weber sees state structures and capitalist enterprise as sub-systems of purposeful-rational action which serve to propagate and expand Occidental rationalism on a societal level. (Habermas, 1984: 144)

<sup>45</sup> Potentially as a result of his early association with the Frankfurt school, and specifically the work of his elder colleagues there, Habermas draws some interesting parallels with this dimension of Weber's work and the later – very focused analysis – of the likes of Theodor Adorno. (160)

<sup>46</sup> This overt focus in first volume of Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* is juxtaposed to his later emphasis in the subsequent volume; wherein he spends significant time unpacking concepts of 'society' with a strong emphasis on Parson's reading of Weber.

known discussions of art and aesthetics to demonstrate his analysis at the level of the cultural extends beyond the explicit juridical/ethical divide which most scholars of Weber focus on. Here, Habermas draws attention to Weber's investigation into autonomous art – alongside science and law – as a form of the manifestation of cultural rationalization. For Habermas, this is best summarized in terms of the exploration of the effects independent aesthetic values have on the technical mastery and production of art. Ultimately, for Habermas, Weber's analysis at the level of culture is pivotal because it grounds his own focus on *value spheres*, and the interplay across and between them. It is also through his reading of this level of Weber's analysis that Habermas introduces the three other typological elements of his reading of Weber: *cognitive*, *evaluative* and *expressive*. In summarizing *his* Weber's understanding of cultural rationalization, Habermas explains:

The cultural rationalization from which the structures of consciousness typical of modern societies emerge embraces cognitive, aesthetic-expressive, and moral-evaluative elements of all religious tradition. With science and technology, with autonomous art and the values of expressive self-presentation, with universal legal and moral representations, there emerges a differentiation of three value spheres, each of which follows its own logic. In the process, not only do the "inner logics" of the cognitive, expressive, and moral elements of culture come into consciousness but also the tension between these spheres grows along with their differentiation. (163-164)

According to Habermas, this is the starting point for Weber's diagnosis of the modern western world – the rationalization of value spheres – that is the development of values towards conscious endeavor and their sublimation by an overarching logic of *knowledge*. (164)

The third dimension of Weber's analysis, following Habermas' categorization and reading, occurs at the level of *personality*. This is where Weber explores *the methodical conduct of life* – and at the level where his seminal insights on the motivational typology of social action – *traditional*, *affective*, and *rational* – occurs. For Habermas, this is where many of the key insights of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* are foundational, providing Weber

with an understanding of “...the correlate in personality of a religiously anchored, principled, universalistic *ethic of conviction*<sup>47</sup> which had taken hold of the strata that bore capitalism.” (164)

While, as noted, for Weber, the explicit ‘explanandum’ is focused at the level of society, in Habermas’s interpretation, much of Weber’s most celebrated insights actually relate to either the more abstracted (above) level of culture, or the more practically embodied (below) level of personality. In this way, we can see that Habermas’ Weber is distinguishable from others in so far as the focus of analysis – and indeed potentially the drivers for societal rationalization – occur above and below the level of society. Perhaps more so than Weber himself, Habermas aims to demonstrate that society systems and structures that manifest occidental rationalism – scientific enterprise, formal legal education and jurisprudence, state institutions, or capitalist economic entities – are heavily conditioned and reinforced by the forces of cultural rationalization of value spheres on the one side, and the rationalization of the methodical conduct of everyday life on the other.

### *A New Type of Social Action*

Moving forward from his reading of Weber in terms of the overarching project of mapping the processes and manifestations of Occidental rationalism as a historical/progressive trajectory, Habermas identifies certain gaps in and perceived limitations of Weber’s approach to rational social action, and famously proposes an alternative typology – one centered on the character and context of *communication*. According to Habermas, Weber’s study of the

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<sup>47</sup> Weber’s notion of an ethic of conviction – in its explicitly political dimensions – following Schlucter’s reading of Weber was explored in detail in Chapter 2. Here Habermas is deploying the term more generally in terms of the underpinning values Weber relates between Protestant ethics and what became the underpinning – seemingly autonomous – value system of Capitalism.

rationalization of modern societies and their associated types of social action, while insightful in many ways, is ultimately flawed from the outset by what he describes as a prejudice in Weber's writing towards a particular and narrow understanding of action. Weber, Habermas argues, predisposes his own analysis to find *Zweckrationalitat* (instrumental or purposeful rational social action) as the most dominant form of social action precisely because of how he defines social action itself. The issue here, according to Habermas, is an understanding of social action which privileges direct interventions in the objective world. (274) By focusing on such direct interventions, Habermas argues that Weber prejudices his own findings, setting the stage for *Zweckrationalitat* – with its focus on means/ends calculations – to arise as the single most important form of modern social action. Habermas illustrates this issue through a diagram which he describes as the 'official' typology of action in Weber's work, reproduced below:

**Figure 4.2 – 'Official' Weberian Typology of Action**

Types of action in descending order of rationality	Degree of rationalization by element:			
	Means	Ends	Values	Consequences
Purposive-rational	+	+	+	+
Value-rational	+	+	+	-
Affectual	+	+	-	-
Traditional	+	-	-	-

Based on Habermas' diagram "Figure 12 –The Official Typology of Action" in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. (Habermas, 1984: 282)

Of course, Habermas is not arguing that Zweckrationalitat is the most important or normatively

desired form of social action – but that the key role it plays in terms of the rationalization of modern societies may be overstated and skewed based on how narrowly Weber is defining social action itself.

As an alternative, Habermas proposes to shift the focus from ‘direct interventions’ to communicative actions. He contends that, from a sociological point of view, this makes sense as the necessity for members of a society to coordinate and cooperate requires a certain baseline of communication. From this perspective, one can argue that any society, assuming the need for coordinated action, requires as a baseline a certain level of effective communication in order to function. (274) Based on this important shift in focus and understanding, Habermas presents an alternative typology of action, as illustrated below:

**Figure 4.3 – Habermas’ Alternative Typology of Action**

<p><b>Action Situation</b></p> <p><b>Action Orientation</b></p>	<p>Oriented to Success</p>	<p>Oriented to Reaching Understanding</p>
<p><del>Nonsocial</del></p>	<p>Instrumental action</p>	<p>---</p>
<p>Social</p>	<p>Strategic action</p>	<p>Communicative action</p>

Based on Habermas’ diagram “Figure 14 –Types of Action” in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. (Habermas, 1984: 285)

Here Habermas makes two important moves. First, he fundamentally distinguishes between actions oriented towards *success* and those oriented towards *reaching understanding*. Second, he

classifies purely instrumental actions as *non-social*. This leaves us with one non-social action (Weber's *Zweckrationalitat*) and two new types of social action: *strategic action* and *communicative action*.

According to Habermas the essential quality of *Zweckrationalitat* (instrumental action) is that 'success' is understood in terms of "...the appearance in the world of a desired state, which can, in a given situation, be causally produced through goal-oriented action or omission." (285) The effects of this action are made up of the results of this action or omission to act – both foreseen and unintended. In contrast, *strategic action* is characterized by success-oriented actions where success is defined in terms of influencing the decisions of rational opponents. As Habermas explains:

Instrumental actions can be connected with and subordinate to social interactions of a different type – for example, as the 'task elements' of social roles; *strategic actions are social by themselves*. (285 - *emphasis added*)

In contrast to these two types of action, Habermas also introduces the concept of *communicative social action* – which takes as its objective 'genuine understanding' or "...a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticisable validity claims." (75) Of note here is that Habermas is introducing a type of rational activity that is not reducible to a means/ends calculation as is the case with success-oriented actions (both social and nonsocial). Furthermore, Habermas is clear that he does not present the concept of communicative action as a purely 'analytic' category – but rather as type of 'real' and embodied social action. As he explains:

In identifying strategic action and communicative action as types, I am assuming that concrete actions can be classified from these points of view. I do not want to use the terms "strategic" and "communicative" only to designate two analytic aspects under which the same action could be described – on the one hand as a reciprocal influencing of one another by opponents acting in a purposive-rational manner and, on the other hand as a process of reaching understanding among members of a life-world. Rather, *social actions can be distinguished according to whether the participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding*.

(286 – *emphasis added*)

In a sense, Habermas is here presenting his own oppositional couplet essential to understanding social action, and by consequence, *the social*. Though not offered up, explicitly, in the same way as Mouffe or Schmitt propose that the *friend/enemy* or *friend/adversary* distinctions constitute the ontological core of *the political*; Habermas does, none the less, present a core antithetical distinction – between *strategic social action oriented towards success*, and *communicative social action oriented towards understanding* – which, for him, lies at the heart of *the social*. Moreover, as Habermas focuses not on the social, but on social action, his (somewhat) ontological account remains much more closely relatable to what we can describe as its ontic foundations. Whereas Schmitt and Mouffe begin at the level of the ontological, that is to say *the political*, and then extrapolate, to varying degrees, back towards *politics* or the ontic; Habermas offers a core dichotomy whereby all *social actions* or *sociation* – the ontic – can be categorized in terms of the mutually exclusive categorization of *strategic* or *communicative*; and only then, and much less explicitly, extrapolates towards a broader ‘essence’ of *the social*.

#### *Ontological and Ontic Dimensions in Habermas*

Despite the fact that Habermas clearly does not begin his project with the emphasis on borrowed Heideggerian upon which Mouffe depends, we can, nonetheless, examine the very different balance Habermas achieves in terms of considering the social in both its ontic and ontological dimensions. Focusing first on the parallels between Habermas’ account of the social and Mouffe’s account of the political, both ground their understandings in a core antithetical opposition. For Mouffe, the essence of the political is found in the distinction between friends and enemies – following Schmitt – and her normative project revolves around transfiguring that

core antithetical couplet into a distinction between friends and true, but respected, adversaries. For Habermas, the exploration and understanding of the social is framed in terms of a revised typology of social action – building on Weber – which centers of two mutually exclusive forms of social action – genuine communicative social action focused on reaching mutual understanding and strategy social action focused on achieving a desired outcome.

Though Mouffe is more explicit, both Habermas and Mouffe present these understandings in terms of historically contingent ontological accounts – that is to say descriptions of the essential character or ‘essence’ of the social and the political, with the important philosophical caveat that such essential characters are the outcomes of historically contingent processes, practices and power dynamics. For both, the social and the political have developed progressively over time and ultimately could be other than they are. That said, the degree to which both theorists – and more broadly the agonal school of political theory/philosophy vis a vis most sociological thinkers – consider and account for this acknowledged historical contingency varies considerably. For Mouffe, the historical contingency of the political is chiefly acknowledged in reference to her previous work – as explored in Chapter 1 – in terms of her and Laclau’s account of a post-Marxist radical left in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. For Habermas, the historical contingency of the social – and also the political – is captured in his varied explorations of progressive development of *systems* and their embedded interactions with and effects on various dimensions of *lifeworlds*.

For Habermas, the lifeworld represents the indirect context “...of what is said, discussed, [or] addressed...” (Habermas, 1987: 131) in any given situation. It is defined by and through its ‘taken for grantedness’ and is “...given to the experiencing subject as unquestionable.” (130) It is, accordingly to Habermas, akin to the idea of Durkheim’s *conscience collective* – and any

attempt to describe or analyze it, which must always be from within it, can only be accomplished in terms of reconstructions. In contrast however, Habermas describes systems/subsystems as semi-autonomous spheres which both develop in the context of lifeworlds and which can limit, constrain or change them. Habermas writes extensively on the changes brought to the lifeworld by the introduction of various logics of dominant subsystems – most notably the logic of profit under capitalism and efficiency under bureaucracy. But considered here more abstractly, the dichotomy between system and lifeworld can also be viewed as Habermas’ complex explanation of what most agonal democratic theorists’ shorthand in terms of a ‘historically contingent’ ontological account. In this way, Habermas’ critical theoretical trajectory can be read in terms of an ongoing historical, and problematic, trend:

...the systemic imperatives of autonomous subsystems penetrate into the lifeworld and, through monetization and bureaucratization, force an assimilation of communicative action to formally organized domains of action – even in areas where the action coordinating mechanism of reaching understanding is functionally necessary. (403)

This is not to say that the lifeworld and system map directly to notions of ontological and ontic, but rather that the notion of a historical contingency of any ontological account is, for Habermas, understandable – in part – through the joining of a *systems conception* and a *lifeworld conception* of society. (117)

How then to understand the ontological and ontic dimensions of Habermas’s work? For both Habermas and Mouffe – again with Mouffe being far more explicit – the historically contingent *ontological* essence of the social and the political is juxtaposed to its more embodied, experienced and messy *ontic* dimensions. Adapting the Heideggerian distinction to her own purposes, Mouffe notes that *vis a vis* the ontological essence of the political, one must always keep in mind the far ‘messier’ reality of everyday politics. Habermas, I argue, implies a similar understanding. While he rigorously outlines a new typology of social action built in the spirit of

Weber – he is clear to distinguish these ‘ideal types’ from the actual experiences in society. Unlike Mouffe however, Habermas makes this ontic/ontological distinction clear less through an explicit acknowledgement, and more through the logical implications of how he organizes his intellectual projects. In dividing his works between an exploration of these categories and ideal typologies – as for example laid out in *The Theory of Communicative Action Volumes 1 & 2* – and a more pragmatic consideration of how a society should organize itself to privilege one of those types – as, for example, his exploration of the procedural conditions of possibility for genuine communicative action in discourses on democracy and justice in *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*; Habermas not only implicitly acknowledges this ontic/ontological dichotomy, he operates between and across it.

From this perspective, one can read Habermas as providing a normative social theory that much more evenly addresses its ontic and ontological dimensions. While agonal theorists broadly, and Mouffe specifically, identify and caveat the ontic as *politics*; Habermas’ approach moves between an exploration of the essential character of the social, and a procedural account of how a society could build and maintain the conditions of possibility for a desired outcome. Habermas offers both **i)** a clearer articulation of the historically contingent nature of his ontological account of the social, and **ii)** a more robust consideration of the ontic dimensions associated with those ontological suppositions.

I contend that this particular reading of Habermas not only offers a useful way of understanding two quite different parts of his work, but also provides an interesting juxtaposition and comparison when considered alongside the dominant agnostic approach – which acknowledges but does not substantively engage with the ontic dimensions of *politics*. It is, however, important here not, as some do, to conflate the distinction between ontological/ontic

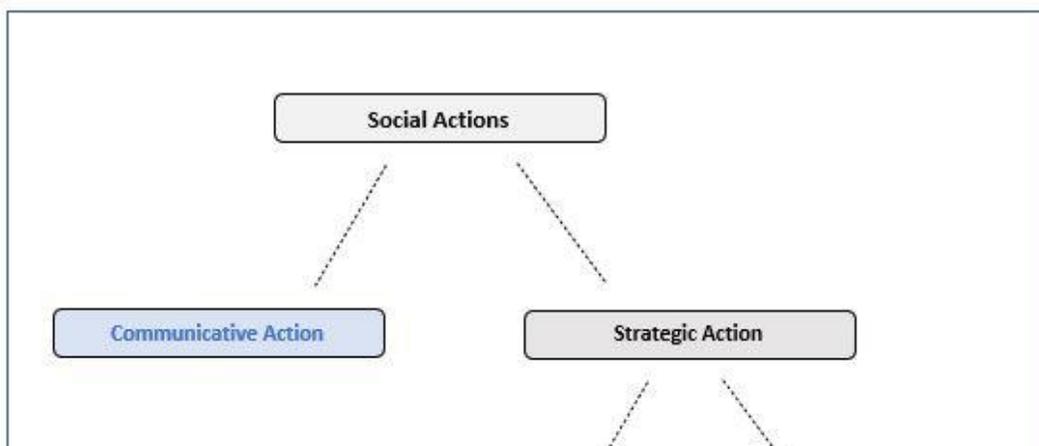
and theoretical/empirical. Habermas, for example, remains firmly rooted in a theoretical tradition. However, a theoretical approach can – and I would argue in Habermas’ case does – separately and distinctively address both ontological and ontic dimensions of a given subject. This error, I argue, is particularly prominent in certain critiques of Mouffe and the agonistic school – as we will explore through the work of Lois McNay later in this chapter.

*Strategic vs Communicative*

Let us now return to Habermas’ exploration of the social – in its more ontological dimensions - as characterized in terms of a Weber-inspired, but distinctive, typology of rational social action. Habermas continues to build on his key premise – that “...social actions can be distinguished according to whether the participants adopt either a success-oriented attitude or one oriented to reaching understanding” (286) - throughout the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*. To do this, Habermas dives deep into linguistic theory and maps a range of sub-categorizations and classifications of various linguistically mediated speech acts.<sup>48</sup> While the linguistic dimensions of Habermas’ work are not immediately relevant, it is worth noting his final mapping of linguistically mediate social actions. While retaining the core dichotomy, Habermas does expand on the sub-types of strategic (success oriented) social actions – providing a mapping wherein social action genuinely oriented to understanding is juxtaposed to a wider range of normatively less desirable types, as shown immediately below:

**Figure 4.4 – Communicative vs Strategic Social Action**

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Based on Habermas' diagram "Figure 18" in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.  
(Habermas, 1984: 333)

Of particular note here is Habermas' distinction between concealed and open strategic action, and beneath it, the acknowledgement of both conscious and unconscious deception. For Habermas, this is a key dimension of a communication centered framework, because it identifies both individually driven strategic/deceptive speech acts, as well as 'systemically distorted' speech acts. While manipulation is a somewhat obvious category to distinguish from openly strategic action, systemically distorted communication is more nuanced. For Habermas,

communication can become systemically distorted when all participants believe they are striving for genuine understanding, but "...at least one of the parties is deceiving himself about the fact that he is acting with an attitude oriented to success and is only keeping up the appearance of communicative action." (332) This is particularly important from the perspective of this project because it implies a new category of alongside the typical constructions of agreement/consensus and conflict (be it *antagonistic* or *agonistic*). By introducing systemically distorted communication as a form of unconscious concealed strategic action, Habermas implies a social and/or political category of disagreement constituted not through intentional conflict or contest, but by and through unconscious self-deception that disrupts and distorts the rational potential of genuine speech acts to generate mutual understanding. While more likely to produce something akin to antagonism (with its socially and politically destructive connotations) than agonism (premised on mutual respect and ultimately posited as productive), this third type of discord introduced by Habermas more closely resembles the notion of *diastréfo* (διαστρέφω) – distortion, perversion or contortion. In this instance, the distortion or perversion of speech acts at the expense of any possibility of mutual understanding. It is this possibility, I would argue, that leads Habermas, in his later works, to approach the question of democracy and justice from the perspective of the procedural conditions of possibility that maximize opportunities for genuine communicative action. For if, alongside intentional strategic action, one must guard against *diastréfo* - the systemic distortion of communication through unconscious deception – then the solution can no longer rest solely in an actively and consciously embraced ethos (be it social or political), but also in a procedural or situational bulwark against those contexts in which such unconscious deceptions are possible.

Again, we see here a fundamental difference between how Habermas builds his

theoretical foundations – what we could consider his ontological exploration of the social, albeit heavily caveated and contingent – and how Mouffe and other agonal theorists’ approach their consideration of the essence of the political. Habermas, while remaining at an abstracted and theoretical level in line with an ontological explanation of the social, presents his account of the core categorizations that define the social in terms of a typology of social action, which maintains, concurrently, a heavy grounding in what we could call the ontic dimensions of social – what I have previously referred to as *sociation*. Of course, Habermas does not, explicitly, couch his work in these terms. But it can be read as an alternative formation to most radical agonal democratic theorists – which more carefully balances the abstract and the grounded, or in Mouffe’s borrowed Heideggerian terminology – between the ontological and ontic dimensions of the social or political.

Why then does this matter? Why not, as Mouffe explicitly notes, simply acknowledge and set aside the messy question of the ontic (be it politics or sociation), and focus, in the first instance, on the greater question of the core ontological essence of the political or, following my own argument, the social? The risk, so some critics argue, is that such a philosophical emphasis leads inevitably to a neglect – be it benign or pernicious – of the messy, complicated, and ambiguous real experiences of inequality, exploitation, disenfranchisement, domination, and even resistance. Fettered by a desire to maintain alignment with a particular ontological account of the political, agonal theorists stand accused of ignoring or redefining anything that troubles their initial formulation. In effect, the critique goes, any real engagement with the political is subsumed within an ever-growing commitment to protect foundational ontological assumptions – ultimately sabotaging any chance of radical democratic theorists have of meeting their own ambitious normative commitments. Furthermore, I argue, it

is this over-emphasis on the ontological that may, inadvertently, contribute to the common tendency to ignore or diminish everything outside a narrow construction of ‘the political’; including, more specifically, to obscure, reduce or ignore the necessary underpinning societal conditions of possibility for agonal democracy in terms of both their *ontological* (the social) and *ontic* (sociation) dimensions.

*Misgivings about the ‘Misguided’ Search for the Political*

Despite sharing some the concerns that have been leveled against agonal democratic theorists, specifically that their approach has over-emphasized the ontological at the expense of the ontic; it is important to distinguish certain of these shared worries from the more totalizing versions of critiques of this nature. Although there remain certain similarities between the (hopefully sympathetic and constructive) critique I am forwarding throughout this project, and those who fundamentally call into question what they describe as the ‘philosophical turn’ which underpins much if not all of agonistic democratic theory – there remain important and fundamental differences as well. To this end, in the second section of this chapter I examine the charge of ‘social weightlessness’ – and the critique of radical democratic theory’s central political-philosophical character. Chief among these, is the thorough (albeit somewhat merciless) critique forwarded by Lois McNay – whose arguments we will explore as both emblematic and extremis of such critiques.

Like me, McNay – a professor of political theory at Oxford University – takes significant issue with the treatment of ‘the social’ in both Mouffe’s work specifically, and agonal theory more broadly. Building on a more general critique of a certain ‘philosophical bent’ in some

political theory, McNay argues that, though well intentioned, agonal theorists broadly – and Mouffe specifically - fail to live up to their normative critical commitments because their various starting points in some exploration of the ontological dimensions of ‘the political’ ultimately alienate their work from the real lived experiences of those struggling within or against real established systems of inequal power relations. As she contends:

At the most general level, the ontological turn represents the leftist version of the widespread preoccupation amongst democratic theorists with capturing the essence of political being, defining its sovereign and autonomous logic and, on that basis, formulating comprehensive models of democracy... . . . The problem is that radical democrats frequently fail then to make the next theoretical move, namely to think through how these ontological political dynamics are played out in the social realm and, in particular, in asymmetrical relations of power. (McNay, 2014: 11-12)

McNay goes on to argue, very much in line with the arguments forwarded herein, that this philosophically imbued agonal turn leads many radical democratic theorists in general, and Mouffe specifically, to conceptually ‘gut’ the social in their paradigms. Specifically, McNay argues that:

The problem is that insufficient thought is given to the ways in which this quasi-transcendental logic is imbricated within concrete existence and this tacitly transforms what is supposed to be a circular relationship between the social and the political realms into a conceptual hierarchy where the latter is accorded an unexplained and unjustified priority over the former. (15)

On the face of it, McNay’s critique quite similar to the one being explored here. She begins with a deep discomfort with the way in which many theorists of agonal democracy seem to concurrently establish a conceptual hierarchy in which ‘the political’ supersedes ‘the social’ and wherein the latter is collapsed into ‘the dark background of mere givenness.’ (15 – attributed to Ranciere) That said, McNay’s critique varies significantly from the one I am forwarding here both in detail and proposed solution. This comes down to two essential elements of McNay’s argument: **1)** how she considers the progressive capacities and potential of normative critical ‘theory’ vis à vis the tacit, but clear, valuation she places on the conceptual vis à vis the

embodied; and 2) how she understands the distinction between the ontological and ontic (as presupposed in much agonal democratic theory) and its relationship to how she understands the political and the social spheres. Let us consider each in turn.

*Ideal vs Actual - the Progressive Potential of 'Radical Theory'*

The first element of McNay's argument, which fundamentally diverges from the position being forwarded here, is her overall perspective on the inherent progressive capacities and potential – or lack thereof - of normative critical 'theory' generally, and the form it takes in most agonal democratic theories more specifically. For McNay, noting contemporary justice theorists like Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, the guiding principle of normative critical theory is to 'produce an account of society which aims to unmask domination' and in so doing lays bare historically obscured contradictions and draws attention to emancipatory potential.<sup>49</sup> (7)

According to McNay, recent political theory, including normative critical political theory, can be characterized by a certain philosophical turn. This turn, which she argues is a reaction and countermeasure to the dominant themes of identify politics and recognition with which political theory (especially democratic and justice theory) have been preoccupied with for several decades, aims to shift conversation away from a trajectory seen to lead invariably to moral relativism, and instead re-center political thinking on certain key philosophical/ontological

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<sup>49</sup> The original definition of 'critical theory' (*kritische theorie*) – as coined by Max Horkheimer in the now famous 1937 essay that set out the foundation of what would be called the Frankfurt School – was at once broader and narrower. At the time, the original aim of *kritische theorie* was to analyse, lay bare, and ultimately free humanity from, the myriad of structural conditions that invisibly dominated them. That said, Horkheimer's account of critical theory – generally now considered the 'united' approach of the Frankfurt School – was also considerably more narrow in terms of its philosophical and methodological commitments to Marxism. That said, the so-called unity of the Frankfurt School will be discussed later in the chapter, specifically with regards to Jürgen Habermas. While one of the original members of the Frankfurt School – Habermas' take on the normative and methodological frameworks available for critical theory differ quite markedly from those of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, or Walter Benjamin.

questions – namely the search for the essential character of the political. As McNay suggests:

Political theory nowadays has pulled away from the social sciences and has established itself as a separate, even ascendant, form of inquiry, namely a philosophy of politics whose fundamental task is, in the first instance, to isolate and capture the very essence of political being... ..It is also seen as the most compelling way of moving beyond the limiting preoccupation of a previous phase of democratic theory with pluralism and the politics of identity, issues which are often held to terminate in the dead-end of ethical relativism. (2-3)

This philosophical turn, however, brings with it certain inherent risks according to McNay. The primary risk of such theoretical engagement, for McNay, is the slip into ungrounded the pleasant fictions of ‘ideal theory’ – where abstraction becomes an obstacle to engaging with or reflecting anything relevant to real world. Ideal theory, as McNay defines it, are those theoretical positions which rely on idealizations to the exclusion or extreme marginalization of actual lived experience. (9) Interestingly, McNay is careful not to argue that agonal theorists explicitly operate in the space of ideal theory. Indeed, she meticulously notes the ways in which agonal democratic theorists distinguish themselves from such ideal theoretical perspectives. However, for McNay, it is precisely agonal theorists’ critical normative objectives – to contribute to real change in the world of today – that leaves them open to the charge of social weightlessness, the claim that the ideal is prioritized at the expense of the actual.

Though McNay positions her critique as partial and constructive, she implies a more totalizing argument against the emancipatory potential of theoretically grounded positions. Explicitly, McNay argues that problem is not necessarily a philosophical/ontological starting point, but instead that:

The ideas of emancipatory action that are derived from style of reasoning are conceptually lopsided – in so far as they fail to go beyond a persistent reiteration of supposedly essential political dynamics and consequently have little sense of how these connect to embodied social existence and to issues of oppression and disempowerment that supposedly lie at the heart of the radical democratic agenda. (12)

Yet despite the caveats, as McNay progresses in both her general critique of agonal democratic

theory, and her more directed critique of Chantal Mouffe, it becomes difficult not to interpret her position as being that *any* ontological starting point – and even, as noted above, the very deployment of the ontic/ontological distinction – inevitably leads to prioritization of the ideal (ontological) over the actual or embodied (ontic), and therefore open to the charge of social weightlessness. Indeed, the critique appears to extend beyond radical democratic theory – agonal or otherwise – to any form of ‘critical’ theory that seeks to forward normative commitments in the real world. For McNay, to the extent it is possible, it would seem that the only way to counteract the inherent limitations of theoretical grounded perspectives, would be to supplement – or as she at points implies, replace – such perspectives with a study focused on the lived experiences and embodied actions of real people surviving and thriving in a context of domination and struggle.

#### *Ontological/Ontic and Political/Social*

There is little doubt that McNay’s critique, if taken in its lighter form, raises an important question for agonal political theory, and indeed any ‘critical’ theoretical work aiming to forward emancipatory outcomes. The risk of letting philosophical or ontological frameworks overwhelm or obscure the real lived/embodied experiences of the very people whose emancipation is ostensibly being sought, remains as true a risk today as it was for Marx.<sup>50</sup> However, there is a significant difference between identifying the risk of ideal theory, and suggesting (however obliquely) that all critical theory is inherently incapable of fulfilling its emancipatory normative commitments unless it takes a methodological turn towards the embodied experiences of dominated/struggling people. This brings us to the second essential distinction between the

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<sup>50</sup> Marx famously tried to solve the critical disjuncture between what is theoretical work suggested people should believe, feel or do and what they often did or claim with his concept of false consciousness.

constructive critique of agonal democratic theory being forwarded in this project and McNay's - specifically how McNay reads Mouffe's distinction between the ontological and the ontic, the relative worth she puts on them, as well as their constitution and character in the context of agonal democracy.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, Mouffe is quite aware of the central role conceptualization plays in her work, but cautions the reader not to be misled and assume that she is unaware or disinterested in the real-world struggles against oppression. As Mouffe describes it:

Politics refers to the 'ontic' level while 'the political' has to do with the 'ontological' one. This means that the ontics has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which [political] society is instituted. (Mouffe, 2005a: 8)

In this way, Mouffe attempts to bracket the exploration of the day to day 'experience' of politics, in order to begin with the ontological exploration of the essential character or 'essence' of the political sphere. For her part, McNay has significant concerns with this bracketing on several levels. By bracketing the lived experiences and manifold practices that make up the real everyday struggles of the dominated in the context of vastly unbalanced power dynamics, McNay argues that Mouffe – and agonal theorists generally – risk becoming detached and out of touch with those experiences, ultimately becoming irrelevant to the actual participants who might forward a radical democratic agenda. However, here, we begin with McNay's reading of Mouffe's adaptation of the famous Hegelian distinction. For McNay, the issue of ontological vs ontic is not only tied to the issue of political vs social – it is one and the same. In McNay's reading of Mouffe, the ontic dimension of the political – what Mouffe calls politics – is equated to the social, or social action. Specifically, McNay proposes that:

Mouffe's agonist paradigm means that *the intrinsic connection that is held to exist between the ontological and the ontic, the political and the social, turns out in fact to be a hierarchy of the former over the latter*. The absolute priority granted to the supposedly necessary logic of the political over the inert realm of the social closes off issues of empowerment that are crucial to an emancipatory account of agency. (McNay, 2014: 25 – emphasis added)

In conflating the issue of ontic vs ontological and political vs social, McNay's critique of Mouffe's neglect of the social, itself acts to rob the social of any independent conceptual weight – beyond the embodied practices of politics under the political. While this rescues the social from the inert sediment of the political where Mouffe has exiled it, the equation of the social with the ontic dimension of the political ignores the ways in which the concept of the social extends beyond, around and outside the confines of the political – and in so doing exposes either a deep distrust in, or complete lack of awareness of, nearly the entire body of sociology as a discipline.

One of McNay's key objectives is to recover and reprioritize the messiness and complexity of embodied social action from what she sees as Mouffe's over reliance on a philosophically grounded underpinning logic of determination of *the political*. Again, in ways that, at first, seem deeply congruent with the arguments put forward here, McNay argues that agonal theorists generally, and Mouffe specifically, inadvertently obscure the importance of emotion, passion, pain and confusion that permeate the lived experience of counter-hegemonic activism. Specifically, she charges that:

Time and again, an investigation of the social conditions necessary to realize effective agonistic agency is passed over in favour of a reassertion of what is held to be the 'necessary' logic of the political. (85)

Here, I completely agree with McNay, agonal theorists generally – and Mouffe specifically – absolutely 'pass over,' reduce, or completely ignore the question of what the necessary social conditions of possibility might be for a contemporary, viable, and stable radical democratic order premised on the ethos of political agon. The difference however is in how McNay understands such overlooked social conditions, and more broadly, how she characterizes the social writ large.

Focused on recovering the ‘messy’ complexity of embodied action – McNay contends that agonal democratic theorists’ focus on the ontological question of ‘what is the political,’ blinds them to the importance of exploring the ontic dimensions of real action and activities – which she calls social. In this way, why McNay succeeds at reprioritizing the ontic dimensions of the political, she concurrently repeats Mouffe’s misstep, only in reverse. While Mouffe, it can be argued (as both McNay and I do), appears to ignore the ontic dimensions of the political once she brackets them at the onset of her account of agonal democracy, McNay cedes the ontological entirely to the abstract conception of ‘the political’ and reduces ‘the social’ to its purely ontic dimensions – which are understood as undistinguishable from *politics*. For McNay, this is not accidental – but rather an explicit attempt to refocus democratic ‘theory’ towards lived experiences. As she contends:

[In] the light of the theoretical discontinuities that mark Mouffe’s work, one might ask whether the distinction between the ontological and the ontic is in fact a helpful way of thinking through the parameters of radical democracy. For radical democrats, as we saw at the outset, the delineation of the ontological category of the political is not intended as a straightforwardly transcendental move. ***Although the realm of the political is irreducible to the ontic realm of the social***, it is also inseparable from it in so far as it is inextricably tied to the critique of domination. (95 – *emphasis added*)

For McNay, in her own account, the political represents an ontological category, while the social an ontic one. The problem here – beyond a significant deviation or misunderstanding of how Mouffe has characterized ontic vs ontological – is that this move effectively eliminates a meaningful category of the social altogether. While McNay’s view could, if taken on by her agonal theorist colleagues, help refocus work on the lived experiences and standpoints of individual embedded in democratic action – it effectively defines the social in terms of the practice of politics.

Many, especially scholars in fields like political science, may find little issue with McNay’s solution. Her critique does open a space for the exploration of embodied action and

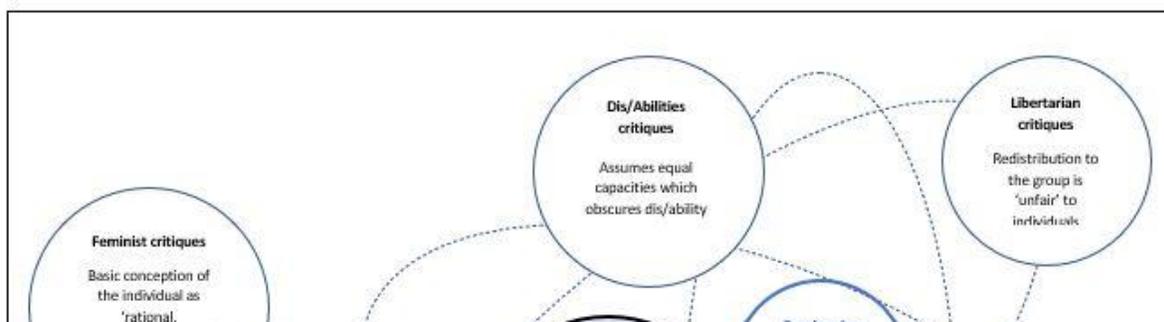
lived experiences under unequal power dynamics that most agonal theories have yet to meaningfully examine. However, from a sociological perspective, it also assumes a great deal about the depth and range of potential types of social action. How then to proceed? If we agree, as I have noted that I do, with parts of McNay's critique – mostly that there is a risk in over-prioritizing the *ontological* at the expense of the *ontic*; and if we reject, as I very much do, the notion that social can be adequately understood in terms of the ontic dimension of the political, we are left with a critical gap in need of addressing in most agonal democratic theory. Here, as before, I contend that this fascinating sub-set of political theory committed to an emancipatory radical democratic order premised on the ethos of political agon can be strengthened and improved through engagement with alternative theoretical insights that take more seriously the complexity and depth of the social.

As discussed above, I propose that Habermas' exploration of the essential composition of the social – through a typology of social action – in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, offers an example of a thoroughly theoretical approach that better balances ontological and ontic considerations. Further, in his later work on deliberative democracy, Habermas builds on *The Theory of Communicative Action*, presenting a balanced approach to democracy/justice in terms of both a more 'pure' exploration of ontological essence and a 'messier' consideration of ontic implications. Re-reading Habermas's famous response to John Rawls through his procedural account of deliberative democracy presents us with an opportunity to reconsider the classically antagonistic relationship between deliberative and agonistic democratic perspectives, and potential support the ongoing objective of addressing certain lacuna therein.

*Political Consensus: Abstract, Deliberative, or Problematic*

As discussed at the outset of this project, agonal democratic theory first emerged in the context of a response and challenge to the central and privileged position ‘consensus’ occupies in the mainstream of theories on democracy and justice. (Habermas, 1998 & 1999; Rawls, 1999 & 1996; Giddens, 2000; and Beck, 1997) More specifically, like much of the contemporary work on the social and political conditions of possibility for just society over the last half century – most agonal democratic theory is conceived in the context of the decades-long discourse orbiting the work of John Rawls. Between Rawls’ seminal *A Theory of Justice*, and his later reworking of key ideas in *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 1999 & 1996), it would not be an exaggeration to say that nearly every significant contribution to the question of how to imagine/foster a ‘just society’ did so, to some extent, in support of, or contrast to, these works. Representing this visually, one can categorize most of these works into six general categories of responses/critiques of Rawls’ core arguments: *communitarian*, *libertarian*, *deliberative*, *feminist*, *dis/ability*, and *radical democratic*. See below:

**Figure 4.5 – Rawls and Surrounding Critiques**



Of course, this is far from an exhaustive list. Within and around these categorizations, one could add a myriad of more specific, distinctive, and insightful positions. However, in general terms, the above illustrates a high-level conceptual map of the central groupings of such critiques. In terms of the radical/agonal democratic position, much like the deliberative democratic critique – which through the work of Habermas remains the most famous and well developed set of debates with Rawls’ core concepts – their challenge takes issue with the conceptions of consensus in both Rawls’ original arguments in *A Theory of Justice*, and later in his reworked conception under *Political Liberalism*.

Building on his understanding of the social in terms of the key antithetical distinction

between *strategic social action* oriented towards success, and *communicative social action* oriented towards understanding; Habermas famously challenges Rawls first on the abstracted conception of deliberation through the thought experiment of the original position under the veil of ignorance, and then on the substantive constraints imposed on real deliberation to achieve overlapping consensus under conditions of reasonable pluralism (Habermas, 1998 & 1999). For Habermas, Rawls is fundamentally wrong to consider reasoned debate, genuine understanding, and agreement in terms of a theoretical exercise. Instead, Habermas insists that – following his arguments in *The Theory of Communicative Action* – democracy and justice depend on the real, assured social and political context which promote and secure genuine communicative action while guarding against the various forms of strategic action. Furthermore, Habermas also reproaches Rawls for suggesting certain substantive limits on the topics of deliberation within a ‘well ordered’ society. Whereas Rawls believes that matters which can be imagined as the result of consensus in the original position under the veil of ignorance, Habermas argues that constraints on deliberation should be limited to its form, and not its content. The radical democratic critique, in contrast, goes further. Mouffe and other agonal democratic theorists fundamentally reject the assumption that consensus is a viable or desirable aspiration or outcome of a truly pluralistic society at all – regardless of whether it is theoretically imagined via Rawls or procedurally enabled via Habermas.

As explored in Chapter 1, Mouffe explains agonal democratic theory’s rejection of Rawls, and a myriad of other adjacent visions of justice and democracy – including Habermas’ deliberative account, in terms of an alternative ontological account of the political. Specifically, the fundamental understanding that consensus, real or abstracted, is deeply problematic in terms of either an aspirational or achievable outcome of any functional political order. Indeed, while

the degree of rejection varies across agonal theorists, for Mouffe, the goal of consensus is antithetical to the very essence of the political. That said, while Mouffe (and other agonal democratic theorists) clearly articulate their rejection of what they read as Rawls' 'ontological' orientation towards consensus as an aspiration of the political, few engage as thoroughly with Habermas' more procedural account of the necessary conditions of possibility – the rules of engagement – for a system of open discourse in which genuine understanding, and by consequence agreement, amongst participants is the objective. As discussed above, Habermas' procedural account of deliberative democracy is built on his theory of communicative action as the cornerstone of all social action. In this way, Habermas' portrayal of 'deliberative politics' is very much an extension on the key assumptions and implications brought forward by his framework for understanding social action in terms of the dichotomy between actions oriented towards success and actions oriented towards understanding. The further development of the typology of social action to juxtapose genuine communicative action to the various forms of strategic action – most notably consciously deceptive strategic action (manipulation) and unconsciously deceptive strategic action (systemically distorted communication) – ultimately underpins certain necessary assumptions and normative orientations in Habermas' understanding (implied and explicit) of democracy, conflict and *the political* itself.

A deeper exploration of the distinctions between Rawls' conceptualization and approach to consensus and the Habermasian deliberative alternative offers a further opportunity to consider – through a marked (though perhaps less so than one might expect) contrast with the radical/agonal democratic alternative – some of the key underpinning assumptions and requirements regarding the social conditions of possibility for the common objective of just and fair democratic society. To this end, let us briefly return to the core conceptualizations of John Rawls. As discussed in

Chapter 1, Rawls' huge influences on the question of how to imagine/organize a just society are centred around two seminal works: *A Theory of Justice*, and some two decades later, *Political Liberalism*. These two texts should really be read together, as bookends to the first part of an ongoing conversation that has rekindled contemporary moral philosophy's engagement with questions of the political and justice. As previously noted, Rawls and Mouffe (as well as the majority of agonal democratic theorists) share a common normative orientation towards justice. What distinguishes the positions is not the desired outcome, but instead the ontological understanding of the importance, desirability, and feasibility of consensus within the various positions. However, the radical democratic positions share with Rawls another interesting characteristic. In very much the same way as Mouffe, Rawls attempts to bracket the practical/embodied issue of politics, in favour of a theoretical investigation centred on *the political*. Though not explicitly discussed as the distinction between ontological and ontic – as Mouffe describes it – Rawls is quite clear that his work is not meant to answer all relevant political questions. As he notes in his famous response to Habermas:

Of the two main differences between Habermas's position and mine, the first is that his is comprehensive while mine is *an account of the political and is limited to that*. The first difference is the more fundamental as it sets the stage for and frames the second. This concerns the contrasts between our devices of representation, as I call them: his is the ideal discourse situation as part of his theory of communicative action, and mine is the original position. These have different aims and roles, as well as distinctive features serving different purposes (Rawls, 1996: 373 – *emphasis added*)

The 'original position' to which Rawls refers above was at the center of his original conceptual framework in a *Theory of Justice*. Built in the tradition of social contract theorists like Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes<sup>51</sup> - Rawls' first attempt to articulate his own 'purely

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<sup>51</sup> Here it is interesting to note that, much like Ferdinand Tönnies, Rawls can be seen to be continuing the classical social contract project begun by theorists like Hobbes. Though by no means a text intended to supplement and support Hobbesian political theory – Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* does share certain essential characteristics with regards to the nature of a 'stable' social contract.

political' theory of justice focused on what he described as a thought experiment. In this thought experiment, readers were invited to imagine a first, or original, moment in which all members of society gathered to discuss and agree on the fundamental organizing principles of society – the principles of justice. However, in this fictitious moment of discussion and debate, where all members of society (in the grand and ahistorical sense) set forth the essential tenets of a foundational social contract, Rawls asked us to further imagine that all such participants were limited by a veil of ignorance. (Rawls, 1973: 17-22) Under this veil of ignorance, Rawls' collection of all members of society are simultaneously aware of the intricacies of their social and political contexts (again articulated in an ahistorical and culturally neutral manner) but are rendered unaware of the specific positions they occupy within such societies. For Rawls, at its basic level, this allows for a hypothetical original position in which humans – understood fundamentally as rational, autonomous and self-interested liberal subjects – can agree on the core foundational principles that should organize a just and fair society, without bias towards what they, in particular, stand to gain or lose by virtue of individual privilege or peril within such a society.

Though sometimes obscured when being discussed by both his supporters and critics, Rawls' initial 'original position' is – again, in the tradition of social contract theory - a justification framework. Although he describes this in terms of imagining what would be agreed to as common principles, in actuality the exercise is one of testing proposed principles against this hypothetical original position. To state it plainly, Rawls' initial proposition in *A Theory of Justice*, is that we can consider those potential principles of justice as reasonable, fair and acceptable in so far as we can imagine that all members of our current society would – under the thought experiment of an original position – agree to those principles without reference to their

own selfish gains or losses.<sup>52</sup> This is where the ‘first fundamental difference’ with Habermas emerges. For Habermas, Rawls’ attempt to find a system of justification for principles of justice with moral philosophy fundamentally misunderstands and oversteps the basic structure of constitutional democracy guided by the rule of law. In a challenge that one cannot help but hear the future echoes of the agonistic critique, Habermas argues that:

From the perspective of the theory of justice, the act of founding the democratic constitution cannot be repeated under the institutional conditions of an already constituted just society, and the process of realizing the system of basic rights cannot be assured on an ongoing basis... .They cannot reignite the radical democratic embers of the original position in the civic life of their society, for from their perspective all of the essential discourses of legitimation have already taken place within the theory; and they find the results of the theory already sedimented in the constitution. Because the citizens cannot conceive of the constitution as a project, the public use of reason does not actually have the significance of a present exercise of political autonomy but merely promotes the nonviolent preservation of political stability. (Habermas, 1999: 69-70)

Here Habermas is arguing that Rawls, in relegating the agreement of core principles of justice to a thought experiment meant to justify their contemporary validity, robs democracy of its core ‘action’ component. In his own words, the citizenry in Rawls’ account “...cannot reignite the radical democratic embers of the original position in the civic life of their society...” (69) That is to say, that the essential element of reasoned debate and ‘radical democratic energy’ are lost in Rawls because he relegates active engagement with those principles to an abstracted ahistorical moment. Here is it hard not to hear some whispers of an agonistic sensibility – as Habermas is clearly chastising Rawls for robbing the political of the productive energy born of debate and rhetorical contest. Indeed, Habermas seems to be implying that without the ongoing engagement of the citizenry to call into question, debate and potentially change the institutional character of a

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<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that originally Rawls deploys ‘hypothetical consensus’ as an ontological component of justification, as opposed to an essential or desired outcome of ‘the political.’ Indeed, the practical content of those principles – how they are applied day to day and debated and interpreted – is set aside. Where Mouffe takes offence, is in the idea that this abstracted consensus could constrain the right and proper content of political debate, in so far as those principles or claims that could not be immediately imagined as agreeable to all under Rawls’ proposed thought experiment, would be robbed of legitimacy in a near a priori manner. For Mouffe, and most agonal democratic theorists, it is essential that space be left open for any positions to be brought/fought forward in order to avoid (near invisible) closures and exclusions under the context of pluralism.

society – up to and including its core underpinning principles – democracy, and perhaps the political itself, is robbed of its creative energies.

This is not, by any means, to suggest that Habermas is making a pitch for democracy built on an ethos of political agon, for he is clear in his prioritization and aspirations towards some level of stable political agreement. However, one cannot help but note the essential elements of his challenges to Rawls – that radical democratic embers cannot be relit, that essential debate and discourse is considered settled, that assumed principles become sedimented, and that democratic effervescence is replaced with the mere preservation of political stability. What is even more interesting to note, in terms of the project at hand – to consider the social conditions of possibility for agonal democracy – is the conceptualization of both the political and the social implied in Habermas' position. For Habermas, one of the fundamental challenges with Rawls' approach is that he tries to isolate the public sphere – what we could also call the political sphere - in terms of a discrete set of values that can be considered without reference to other parts of society. Much like Mouffe in this way, Rawls attempts to bracket many of the most complex social dynamics with which society struggles but framing his approach as 'limited to an account of the political.' For Habermas, this is an untenable position. As he explains:

Rawls treats the political value sphere, which is distinguished in modern societies from other cultural value spheres, as something given... ..For only with reference to political values, whatever they may be, can he split the moral person into the public identity of the citizen and the nonpublic identity of a private person shaped by his or her individual conception of the good. These two identities then constitute the reference points for two domains, the one constituted by rights of political participation and communication, the other protected by basic liberal rights.  
(70)

Habermas rejects what he describes as this 'a priori boundary' between public and private life, and argues it conflicts with both the intuition that popular sovereignty and human rights are

inextricably tied, as well as historical experience to date.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, Habermas contends that public and private spheres must be thought as intermingling – and that “...the boundaries between the private and public autonomy of citizens are in flux and that such differentiations must be subjected to the political will-formation of the citizens.” (71)

### *Politics as Deliberative*

Again, in a way that seems much closer to the radical democratic position than one might intuitively expect, Habermas challenges Rawls willingness to bracket the messy realities of the so-called private sphere. Much like Mouffe, Habermas is concerned that by limiting the field of legitimacy in political discourse, Rawls, albeit unintentionally, risks suppressing the essential, real, and lively debates and discourses necessary for a vibrant democratic order. Of course, this is not to minimize the important distinctions between Habermas’s proposed solution to the various limitations he sees in Rawls work, and the radical/agonal democratic challenge. For Habermas, the centre of any just society is a robust and healthy system of engaged citizens discussing and deliberating on any and all necessary issues. Habermas’s deliberative account of democracy is a

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<sup>53</sup> It is interesting to note that Habermas’ position here is based both on intellectual orientation and lived experiences. Having spent his early childhood under the Nazis regime in Germany, Habermas experienced firsthand the radical disjuncture between different values spheres, and the rise to dominance of one pathological political ideology. As a member of *Hitlerjugend* (youth Nazis), Habermas saw how the domination of different value spheres by a ‘common’ political sphere could distort and poison a nation. During the 1980s, Habermas’ membership in the *Hitlerjugend* became the subject of a historical and academic debate, with Ernst Nolte publicly noting that he believed Habermas to have been an ‘enthusiastic’ leader of the Hitler Youth’ in an interview in *Panorama* (January 19189). This however corresponds neither to Habermas’ public position, nor his academic writings. In his response letter to the editor, Habermas noted that not only had he not been an enthusiast of *Hitlerjugend* mentality, his cleft palate (or birth defect in the parlance of the days) made him an unlikely candidate for advancement within the movement. This view is supported, to the extent possible, by malicious notations and drawings found in Habermas’ own schoolbooks – wherein the youth is ridiculed on account of his ‘weaknesses.’ Despite all this, Habermas has, on several occasions, admitted that it was exceedingly difficult not to, to some extent, fall under the sway of the constant Nazis propaganda, and awareness and caution persists as a current across much of his work. (Doohm, 2016: 17,18 & 32)

deeply procedural one, which emphasizes the conditions of possibility necessary for genuine communication between all involved parties. This deliberative approach is in turn built on Habermas' sociological and philosophical account of social action – as discussed in the previous sections – in which social actions are either oriented towards understanding (communication) or success (strategic). This dichotomy – while not presented as a core antithetical 'essence' – does represent, for Habermas, the two primary opposing and mutually exclusive motivations for real and objective social actions.

It is on this basis that Habermas challenges the Rawlsian approach, proposing instead a system that focuses on the necessary procedural conditions of possibility for deliberation, over the abstracted notions of the social contract theory inspired hypothetical-consensus-as-justification, or the generalized idea of an overlapping consensus between citizens holding radically different views – what we described in Chapter one in terms of a sort of 'thick' *modus vivendi*. The deliberative theory of politics and democracy – also sometimes described as a procedural account of democracy – focuses on the institutional conditions of possibility to encourage, support, and ensure genuine communicative action from participants. Habermas describes this approach in terms of setting out the "...ideal process for deliberation and decision making." (Habermas, 1998: 296) Specifically he contends:

Democratic procedure, which establishes a network of pragmatic considerations, compromises, and discourses of self-understanding and of justice, grounds the presumption that reasonable or fair results are obtained insofar as the flow of relevant information and its proper handling have not been obstructed. According to this view, practical reason no longer resides in universal human rights, or in the ethical substance of a specific community, but in the rules of discourse and forms of argument that borrow their normative content from the validity basis of action oriented to reaching understanding. In the final analysis, this normative content arises from the structure of linguistic communications and the communicative mode of sociation. (297)

Of note here is the absence of the concept of consensus in Habermas's account of deliberative democracy. Though consensus is implied throughout as a desirable outcome, the stated objective

is to set up the conditions of possibility, or rules of engagement, to both promote (in the soft sense) and regulate (in the stricter sense) genuine communicative action - social action oriented towards reaching real and uncoerced understanding - as the only legitimate form of political discourse. In this way, deliberative democracy can be seen to share more in common with the radical/agonal approach than many first assume. Both Mouffe and Habermas share a significant concern that the various forms of abstracted consensus proposed by Rawls would serve to limit the real debates that make up the political. While Mouffe believes that the political is defined through ongoing genuine conflict, Habermas defines its essential nature in terms of process through which conflict plays out in its non-violent form – debate, deliberation, and discourse.

That having been said, there are, of course, several important distinctions between Habermas' and Mouffe's understanding of the political well beyond their orientation towards the feasibility and desirability of lasting consensus. Unlike Mouffe, Habermas is hypersensitive to the various ways 'the political' – what he describes as the public political life-world – depends upon and interacts with other value spheres. This is relevant to our current project for a few distinct reasons. First, Habermas very clearly rejects the 'purely political' approach favoured – albeit differently – by both Mouffe and Rawls. Second, and closely related, Habermas grounds his deliberative democratic theory on the understanding that not only are there other valid and equal realms of human sociation outside the purely political, but that the political depends upon those other spheres of human activity. Indeed, Habermas explicitly makes this point, arguing that:

According to discourse theory, the success of deliberative politics depends not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication, *as well as on the interplay of institutionalized deliberative processes with informally developed public options.* (298 – *emphasis added*)

Thus, while Mouffe describes the social in terms of a collection of sedimentary "...practices that

conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted...” (Mouffe, 2005a: 17), Habermas conceives the social in terms of a range of quasi-sovereign spheres which surround and feed a formal public political life-world with the necessary normatively conditioned participants through a myriad of informal processes of will-formation and opinion-formation. Following this view, deliberative democratic theory is able to focus near exclusively on the procedural ‘rules of engagement’ for political public discourse in part because it brackets out the notion of social conditions of possibility and leaves them aside. Of course, for Habermas, this is a matter of referring – directly or indirectly – to his decades of other sociological work exploring the ways in which modern capitalist societies have allowed the economic logics to permeate other spheres of society, and to what effect. However, in terms of deliberative democracy, Habermas is far from coy when he describes the procedural approach’s dependence on a wider concept of social solidarity:

Democratically constituted opinion- and will-formation depends on the supply of informal public opinions that, ideally, develop in structures of an unsubverted political public sphere. The informal public sphere must, for its part, enjoy the support of a societal basis in which equal rights of citizenship have become socially effective. Only in an egalitarian public of citizens that has emerged from the confines of class and thrown off the millennia-old shackles of social stratification and exploitation can the potential of an unleashed cultural pluralism fully develop – a potential that no doubt abounds just as much in conflicts as in meaning-generating forms of life. But in a secularized society that has learned to deal with its complexity consciously and deliberatively, the communicative mastery of these conflicts constitutes the sole source of solidarity among strangers – strangers who renounce violence and, in the cooperative regulation of their common life, also concede on another the right to remain strangers. (Habermas, 1998: 308)

Once again, we should take note of the absence of ‘consensus’ as a formative element of the deliberative approach. Indeed, Habermas’s claim that the potential of cultural pluralism “...no doubt abounds just as much in conflicts as in meaning-generating forms of life” (308) certainly seem to suggest less of a divide between deliberative and radical/agonal accounts of politics or the political. Though by no means suggesting the two approaches are completely

compatible, there are sufficient resonances for certain conceptions and propositions to work across the divide. While agonal democratic theorists are rightly skeptical of how rules that govern discourse could ever be discrete from and neutral regarding the very real conflicts and inequalities both theoretical approaches acknowledge, we can nonetheless consider the ways in which the more in-depth consideration of non-political spheres, as well as the potentially complementary notion of a binary opposition between communicative and strategic social action, might help further clarify and advance a radical democratic vision based on the recognition of the immutable and necessary character of real political agon.

### *Theorizing the Social alongside the Political*

Having explored a range of Habermas' views on social action, democracy, and the interplay between the social and the political; we return to the question of if and how all or part of the conceptual elements examined can be adapted in such a way as to strengthen an account of the social in a radical account of agonal democracy. Specifically, I contend that Habermas offers potential insights to agonal theorists generally, and Mouffe specifically, in three areas: **i)** a means to re-conceptualize the social not as a mere sediment or product of political contest, but as an equal and co-constituting sphere of human action; **ii)** a mixed sociological/philosophical approach that more fully synthesizes the ontological/ontic divide, and guards against the critique of social weightlessness; and **iii)** an implied new categorization of conflict that exists in a liminal space between antagonistic and agonistic – what I have noted above as *diastréfō* (διαστρέφω): the systemic distortion, perversion or contortion of understanding leading to unconscious deception - and which may further nuance the friend vs enemy/adversary binary opposition upon

which Mouffe and Schmitt depend.

That said, it would be intellectually reckless to proceed without acknowledging that agonal theorists generally, and Mouffe specifically, are by no means unaware of the corpus of Habermas's contributions. Indeed, casting our attention back to Laclau and Mouffe's earliest invocation of radical agonal politics – the introduction of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* frames their very enterprise, at least in part, against the backdrop of Habermasian theory. As Laclau and Mouffe explain:

There is another way in which the theoretical perspective developed in this book can contribute to restoring the centrality of the political – by bringing to the fore the shortcomings of what is currently presented as the most promising and sophisticated vision of a progressive politics: the model of 'deliberative democracy' which has been put forward by Habermas and his followers. It is useful to contrast our approach with theirs, because some similarities do actually exist between the conception of radical democracy we advocate and the one they defend... . There are, however, important points of divergence between our view and theirs which hinge on the theoretical framework that informs our respective conceptions... (Laclau and Mouffe, 2000: xvii)

Most notably, Laclau and Mouffe, and later Mouffe, reject and/or take issue with Habermas and his followers in three principal ways. First, they argue that the central role that antagonism plays in their vision of politics forecloses any possibility of a final moment of agreement/consensus.

(xvii) Here, correctly or not, it is assumed that the end point of Habermasian deliberative democracy is stable and ongoing consensus or reconciliation – the elimination or sublimation of ongoing political conflict. Secondly, Mouffe argues in both *On the Political* and *Return of the Political*, that Habermas' philosophical orientation and approach to liberal democracy is both problematically universalistic and distinctively *un-political*. (Mouffe, 2005a & 2005b) For Mouffe, Habermasian deliberative democracy is fundamentally flawed in so far as it is founded on the political-philosophical claim that liberal democracy holds a universal and privileged position as the only rationally justifiable framework for human organization and the progress of civilization. Thirdly, Mouffe suggests that the basic principle of deliberative democracy – that

core decisions can and should be made by procedurally regulated deliberation amongst citizens – cannot be realized in the way that Habermas proposes it. Despite claims to the contrary amongst Habermasians, Mouffe and Laclau, and later Mouffe alone, contend that there can be no reasonable deliberation without defining the content and character of the implied limits of such ‘reasonableness,’ and as a result, the exclusion of those positions not deemed ‘reasonable.’ For Mouffe, following Schmitt, it is precisely that ‘grammatical power’ that best characterizes the functioning of hegemonic domination – not only the political control of what can and cannot be debated, but the very definition of what ‘every reasonable’ topic of debate could potentially be.

Concurrently, it is important to note the near antithetical positions Habermas and Schmitt have come to represent in the contemporary study of politics and political, as well as the direct, and decidedly antagonistic, perspective Habermas has with regards to both the work, and the person, of Carl Schmitt. “Habermas criticizes Schmitt frequently and vehemently” (Howard, 2015: 531) and expresses a deep concern with the left’s infatuation with and cooptation of the Nazis jurist’s romanticizing of violent political conflict and historically problematic critiques of liberal democracy. With this in mind, and before exploring what selected adaptations of Habermas’ perspective might offer a radical agonal democratic project, let us consider in turn the key areas agonal theorists disagree with Habermasians, as well the outline of Habermas’ deep discomfort and distrust of the contemporary appropriation of Carl Schmitt.

### *Necessary and Unnecessary Antagonisms – Mouffe’s critiques of Habermas*

Though spread across nearly all of Mouffe’s writing, and echoed in many other agonal theorists’ works, these three broad critiques are best characterized as exclamatory as opposed to

deeply explored. Whether by virtue of a widespread familiarity assumed on behalf of any reader, or the scope and complexity of Habermas' many writings, Mouffe and most agonal theorists tend to present these critiques in relatively succinct manners, rarely diving more deeply into the complex detail of Habermas' various works.<sup>54</sup> As such, each of these critiques can be summarized relatively quickly.

As noted above, the first 'fundamental distinction' identified between deliberative democracy and radical agonal democracy is articulated by Laclau and Mouffe in the introduction of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. While both acknowledge certain points of similarity between the two projects, they are explicit in pointing out certain fundamental differences. Specifically, Mouffe and Laclau argue that Habermasian deliberative democracy is fundamentally incompatible with a vision of radical (agonal) democracy because of its orientation to political conflict and difference. Specifically, they suggest that:

The central role that the notion of antagonism plays in our work forecloses any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive 'we.' For us, a non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument is a conceptual impossibility. Conflict and division, in our view are neither disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated nor empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of a harmony that we cannot attain because we will never be able to leave our particularities completely aside in order to act in accordance with our rational self – a harmony which should nonetheless constitute the ideal towards which we strive. Indeed, we maintain that without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible. (Laclau & Mouffe, 2000: xvii)

The crux of this argument, which we explored in Chapter 1, is that Habermasian models of deliberative democracy form part of the broader collection of consensus focused political theories which, according to Mouffe and other agonal theorists, fundamentally misunderstands

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<sup>54</sup> Taking Mouffe's writing as an exemplar, Habermas appears in the majority of her works. However, the depth with which his arguments are engaged with remains somewhat shallow. For example, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe note the key differences between their project and Habermas' in the introduction – but do not return to explore those statements at any point later in the book. Similarly, while Mouffe engages with Habermas in *On the Political*, *The Return of the Political*, *The Democratic Paradox*, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, and *For a Left Populism*, this engagement is limited to some 40 pages – typically in sections of no more than 2-3 pages - across nearly 600 pages of writing.

the essence of democracy and politics, and, at extremis, represents the destruction of the political itself. Here Laclau and Mouffe argue that consensus as an ideal, and the associated relegation of conflict and difference to the position of obstacles, represents a fundamental error in terms of understanding democracy and the political. Mouffe expands on this critique in her later work, *The Democratic Paradox*, where she again briefly considers the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy through the work of Seyla Benhabib. Here, Mouffe argues that deliberative democracy cannot help but be at odds with the notion of pluralism. As she explains:

Because it postulates the availability of a consensus without exclusion, the model of deliberative democracy is unable to envisage liberal-democratic pluralism in an adequate way. Indeed, one could indicate how, in both Rawls and Habermas – to take two best-known representatives of that trend – the very conditions for the creation of consensus is the elimination of pluralism from the public sphere. (Mouffe, 2009: 49)

The issue, according to Mouffe, is that deliberative democracy theorists generally, and Habermasians specifically, assume that obstacles to establishing the conditions of possibility for genuine communicative action (social action oriented towards mutual understanding) are, in principle, potentially surmountable. While practically they may not ever all be managed or removed, they are not, by definition, necessary limitations. More specifically, Mouffe argues that:

Habermasians do not deny that there will, of course, be obstacles to the realization of the ideal discourse, but these obstacles are conceived of as *empirical*. They are due to the fact that it is unlikely, given the practical and empirical limitations of social life, that we will ever be completely able to leave all our particular interests aside in order to coincide with our universal rational self. This is why the ideal speech situation is presented as a regulative idea. (48)

In this formulation, Habermas and his followers are at fundamental odds with any radical agonistic vision of democracy, in so far as they seek to negate or expel conflict from within the political. An ontological impossibility according to Mouffe.

The second major critique of Habermas from an agonal perspective is that the formulation of a procedurally guaranteed forum for open deliberation and political debate that

can be secured outside of, or away from, perpetual forces of hegemonic domination. Although closely connected with the first critique – relating to the ideal of consensus – this second remains independent and is focused on the very idea that a non-exclusionary political public sphere of rational will formation is even possible. The argument here is that Habermas’ focus on will-formation is inherently problematic, and ignores both the ontological essence of the political, as well as the empirical realities of the exercise of hegemonic power. As Mouffe contends in *On the Political*:

There is another aspect which reveals the anti-political nature of Habermas’ approach. His discourse-theoretical understanding of democracy requires ascribing an epistemic function to democratic will-formation and, as he admits himself, ‘the democratic procedure no longer draws its legitimizing force only, indeed not even predominantly, from political participation and the expression of political will, but rather from the general accessibility of a deliberative process whose structure grounds an expectation of rationally acceptable results.’ (Mouffe, 2005a: 87)

The problem here, argues Mouffe, is that we are left with certain fundamental questions unanswered: “What are those ‘rationally acceptable results’? Who will decide on the limits to be imposed on the expression of political will? What are going to be grounds for exclusion?” (87) Not unpredictably, Mouffe turns to Schmitt for the answer, quoting the latter “*Caesar dominus et supra grammaticam*, Caesar is also lord over grammar” (87) to argue that it is only through the hegemonic use of power that notions of ‘reasonable’ and ‘rational’ come to be defined. As described above, for Mouffe, as well as most other agonal democratic theorists, “...a non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument is a conceptual impossibility.” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2000: xvii)

This brings us to the third core critique that Mouffe makes of Habermasian inspired deliberative democratic theory: that Habermas, both implicitly and explicitly, champions a universalistic vision of liberal democracy that positions it as the only rationally justifiable option for the organization and regulation of human civilization. This critique is particularly important,

as one of the central themes across all agonal democratic theorists is the rejection of universalizing claims for western democracy, in favour of contingently formulated critical normativity that postulates variously formulated positions for the pursuit of radical democracy based instead on its emancipatory potential. Habermas, Mouffe argues, belongs to the previous tradition of moral philosophy that still seeks to find a universal justification for the liberal democratic ideal. Mouffe makes her rejection of this position quite clear:

One of the most sophisticated defenders of the moral superiority and universal validity of liberal constitutional democracy is Jürgen Habermas, whose work I will use to illustrate this type of reasoning. Habermas' ambition since *Between Facts and Norms* has been to resolve the long-disputed issue concerning the nature of the Western constitutional state marked by the articulation of the rule of law and the defence of human rights with democracy understood as popular sovereignty. (Mouffe 2005a: 83)

The tension Habermas aims to resolve according to Mouffe lies between the primacy of private autonomy as guaranteed by human rights – which Mouffe associates with liberals following Locke – and the primacy of political autonomy via democratic self-legislation – which Mouffe associates with democrats and republicans following Rousseau. The resolution Habermas proposes, in its simplest terms, is that these elements are best understood as co-originating in the liberal democratic model. However, Mouffe believes this leads to a fundamental flaw in Habermas thinking, as she explains:

Clearly if liberal constitutional democracy is such a remarkable rational achievement – the reconciliation of the rule of law and human rights within democratic participation – on what grounds could one 'rationally' object to its implementation? ... The implication is obvious that all societies should adopt liberal democratic institutions which are the only legitimate way to organize human coexistence. This is corroborated by Habermas when, taking up again the question of co-originality, but this time from the point of view of the mode of political legitimation and putting the emphasis on the legal system he asks: 'What basic rights must free and equal citizens mutually accord one another if they want to regulate their common life legitimately by means of positive law?' His answer of is, of course, that legitimacy can be obtained only through human rights which institutionalize the communicative conditions for a reasonable will formation. (85)

The critique of 'universalism' here is far from abstract, and Mouffe is far from restrained in considering its furthest reaching implications. If liberal democracy is universally 'best,' and no

reasonable alternative to Western democracy is viable, Mouffe argues that the choice left to non-western societies is between cultural and physical extermination.<sup>55</sup> (86)

To be sure, Habermas and Habermasians do not concede on many of these points. That said, the goal here is not to validate or dispute the agonal challenges to deliberative democracy, but rather to identify their core content and character. The question that is relevant to the project at hand, is whether the manner and substantive nature of these differences truly ‘forecloses’ all possibility of contribution across the two perspectives? Against Mouffe, most agonal theorists, and likely Habermas himself, I contend that the gulf between the deliberative democratic and radical agonistic democratic positions is not as great as has been described; and there remain a myriad of incipient agonistic currents within the deliberative model, and its underpinning framework for understanding social action, which can be of use in addressing several weaknesses in the agonal account of *democracy, the political* and especially *the social*.

### *Between Habermas and Schmitt*

Notwithstanding the above, and before turning our attention to the potential contributions a creative adaptation of certain elements of Habermas’ work might be able to make for a radical accounts of democracy premised on an ethos of agonism which do not ignore or obscure a robust concept of the social, it is important to also briefly consider the not insignificant distance between Habermas and Schmitt – philosophically, intellectually and politically. While one could certainly argue that, to this point, each of the alternative contributors suggested in this project – Weber, Simmel, and especially Tönnies – all had an antagonistic relationship with the work and political leanings of Carl Schmitt; Habermas has, at times, especially in the late 1980s and early

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<sup>55</sup> Footnote to comment on Mouffe’s rather extreme claim here

1990s, been represented as a sort of antithetical opposite to Schmitt's seductive polemics, his political-philosophical attack on liberal democracy, and its contemporary appropriation by left-leaning scholars. As noted above, Habermas has, throughout his career, been a vocal critique of both Schmitt, and his contemporary re-deployment. While Habermas addresses Schmitt directly very little in most of his seminal works<sup>56</sup>, some have argued that much of his later political and democratic work can be understood as – in part – an ongoing defense against and rejection of Carl Schmitt's core diagnosis of liberal democracy and its many implications. (Johnson, 1998: 26-27)

This is not to say that Habermas was reluctant to critique Schmitt, his post-war apologist and followers, nor the more contemporary reception and infatuation his critique of liberal democracy generated amongst left leaning political theorist – including, most notably for us, Chantal Mouffe. Although the majority of Habermas' comments regarding Schmitt have been made in talks given over the years (predominantly in German), one notable exception is found in *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historian's Debate*. (Habermas, 1989) Originally published in 1985, in this book Habermas takes on the question of German nationalism/patriotism under the long shadow of Nazism and Germany's role in the second world war. At the time, then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, was advocating for Germany to 'put the past behind it.' The political goal here was to reposition Germany as a future facing political and economic leader in a quickly globalizing world, and included significant symbolic gestures of 'repositioning' Germany's past, most notably including U.S. President Ronald Reagan honouring

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<sup>56</sup> For example, in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas briefly mentions his explicit rejection of Schmitt in terms of **i**) the basis of law within a constitutional democracy (Habermas, 1998: 152-153), **ii**) his understanding of the demos under parliamentary democracy (184-186), and **iii**) his Nazis era project to establish the head of state as 'guardian of the constitution' to replace the quasi-independent constitutional court (240-243). However, on the whole, Schmitt is invoked – at least directly – relatively little.

Germany's fallen soldiers at a military cemetery. Several writings at the time also sought to 'minimize' and 'recast' Germany's Nazis heritage, instead emphasizing Germany's role in protecting the West against an encroaching communist Russia. (Matustik, 2001: 133-137)

Habermas addresses Schmitt most directly here, in his fifth chapter entitled - *The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English*. Focusing neither on Schmitt's Nazi pedigree, nor his post-war apologist politics; Habermas instead takes aim at Schmitt's core philosophical foundations.

As he opens the chapter:

In 1932, Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* [*Der Begriff des Politischen*] appeared, a famous work in which Schmitt takes issue in passing with Harold Laski's pluralistic theory of the state, among others. The author was familiar, of course, with the pertinent definitions of Max Weber. But he was no social scientist and had no interest in an analytic concept of political power. Like a traditional philosopher, Schmitt inquired into the "nature" of the political. From an Aristotelian standpoint, to be sure, ***the answer Schmitt offered reads more like an answer to the question of the nature of the strategic.*** (Habermas, 1989: 128 – emphasis added)

Habermas goes on, with his characteristic systematic rigour, to catalogue the various reasons why Schmitt – talented though he might be – is ultimately a deeply problematic figure peddling a dangerous and questionable understanding of democracy and politics through a combination of romanticism and polemic panache. He does concede both Schmitt's competence as a constitutional jurist, and his seductive writing style. As he notes: "Thus, in the expressionistic style of his time, Carl Schmitt constructs a dramatic concept of the political in the light of which everything normally understood by the word must seem banal." (129) Habermas continues to work through Schmitt's core claims regarding the nature of the political and democracy, clearly articulating that they align with the latter's political support for first Italian and later German fascist regimes. He argues that, beneath Schmitt's "polemical discussions of Romanticism" (137), there is concealed a troubling, albeit inconsistent, fascination with what Habermas describes as the 'aesthetics of violence.'

More broadly, Habermas' entire political project can be – and has been – conceived as

antithetical to Schmitt's. While, as Pauline Johnson puts it, "Schmitt has no interest in the redemption of the idea of public reason supposedly betrayed in the flawed institutions of liberal democratic societies," (Johnson, 1998: 19) Habermas' procedural account of public reason rejects the premise that democratic deliberation is inherently at odds with pluralism. As Johnson succinctly summarizes at the close of her article *Carl Schmitt, Jürgen Habermas and the Crisis of Politic*:

Habermas's theory of discursive democracy refuses, then, to accept Schmitt's characterization of the dilemma confronting a modern defense of the idea of public reason. Schmitt, we have seen, thinks that any such undertaking embarks on the futile attempt to square the circle between rival claims of assertive particular individuality and an aspiration toward democratically achieved social solidarity. On Schmitt's viewpoint, a conception of public reason appears, at best, as a mere pragmatic ideology bent on hammering out agreement between self-interested parties but incapable of yielding any value ideas worth defending. To Habermas, by contrast, the idea of public reason, grasped as a discursive process geared to promotion of mutual understanding, must be defended as the site in which the legacy of treasured Enlightenment ideals – of enlargement of understanding through ongoing self-reflection and dialogue – continues to enacted and reproduced... . Habermas does not simply seek to uncover the peculiar telos and governing norms of discursive rationality as an alternative to a hegemonic purposive rational action. His claims go much further: he proposes to reconstruct and defend the normative primacy of this mode of interaction. (27)

In this way, and notwithstanding the real antagonisms that existed between Schmitt and the likes of Weber, Simmel and Tönnies, it seems that Habermas represents – politically, philosophically and intellectually – an antithetical opposition to the Schmittian project along with its attempted taming and redeployment amongst radical democratic scholars.

#### *Deliberate/Deliberative Adaptations - What Habermas can offer Agonal Democratic Theory*

Given the breadth and scope of the antagonism between Habermas' and Schmitt's views of democracy and politics, one might rightly ask to what extent, and by what means, could one productively bring into conversation elements of Habermas' work with radical democratic theories explicitly aligned with elements of Schmitt's perspective? On what basis would one even attempt the creative adaptation of notions like communicative action or deliberative

democracy, given the fundamental philosophical differences Habermas has with the likes of Schmitt, and, though to a lesser extent, the modern transfiguration of his works by Mouffe and other radical agonal theorists? The answer, perhaps with a degree of metaphoric tongue in rhetorical cheek, can be taken concurrently from the normative commitments of both – albeit quite different – political projects. At the very heart of agonistic democratic theory is the claim that true and meaningful conflict both need not be destructive, and indeed lies at the very centre of the essence of the political. Simultaneously, deliberative democratic theory is predominantly based on Habermas’ underpinning framework for both understanding social action, and the normative primacy of ‘genuine communicative action focused on reaching real understanding.’ Cleverness aside, one could rightly reverse the above question and ask how any serious proponent of either a deliberative model of democracy focused on the ideal speech situation, or a radical democratic theorist champion the essential and productive qualities of real conflict/contest could resist the potential for the creative adaptation of either position to facilitate a more genuine engagement between and across these two very different approaches to thinking about democracy, politics and the political. Indeed, I contend that, on both sides, the tendency to focus on the key points of dissention, and the relatively cursory manner in which this tends to be done, have contributed to a significant missed opportunity to cross-pollinate these two theoretical models.

That said, the goal here is not entirely symmetrical. While there may well be many opportunities for Habermas and his followers to more fully engage with the radical democratic critique, ultimately the project at hand is to explore, adapt and potentially deploy certain conceptual tools and theoretical insights from Habermas to strengthen and render more robust the agonal democratic project. In this regard, this chapter concludes with a consideration of three

key ways that a more generous engagement with elements of Habermasian thinking could support Mouffe's project, without compromising her core agnostic commitments. Specifically here we will consider **i)** the space between the ontological and the ontic – and the ways in which Habermas' methodology may help Mouffe and other agonal theorist, bolster their work against the charge of social weightlessness; **ii)** the notion assumed primary of 'consensus' in the deliberative model, and the opportunities presented by recasting this in terms of more contingent 'agreement'; and **iii)** the notion of antagonistic conflict, and the transformative potential of bringing such a conceptualization in conversation with Habermas' distinction between intentional and unintentional strategic action.

Beginning with the distinction between, to use Mouffe borrowed Heideggerian terminology, the *ontic* and *ontological* – I propose that Habermas offers agonal democratic theorists a potential defense and path forward from the risk of over-prioritizing the theoretical philosophical consideration of the 'essence' of the political, at the expense of meaningful consideration of the practical lived experiences of politics. As we observed with McNay's critique, there is a very real danger in focusing exclusively on the 'ontological' question of how to understand the essential qualities of the political, especially when and where that begins to overshadow, contradict, or obscure claims of real experiences of domination that fail to align with the broader philosophical framework. (McNay, 2014: 11-12) Unlike McNay, whose solution to equate the question of the political to the 'ontological' and the social with the 'ontic', while expedient, problematically reduces the social to the 'active' wing of the political; Habermas synergistic oscillation between political theory, philosophy and sociology offers a more robust and productive approach. As I pointed out in the earlier discussion of Habermas, part of this approach is methodological, with Habermas first offering a detailed treatise on this

understanding of the rationalization of modern societies and both the lived reality and normative primacy of communicative social action. Based on this foundation, Habermas' procedural account of deliberative politics and democracy moves away from Rawlsian abstractions and thought experiment, to propose practical conceptual framework for establishing real world environments where ideal speech actions can be encouraged, and strategic actions (both intentional and unintentional) can be identified, regulated and mitigated.

From an agonal democratic perspective, without skirting the very real and fundamental differences between radical visions of democracy and deliberative ones, Habermas' procedural approach offers certain avenues for consideration. Notwithstanding Mouffe's, and others' deep distrust of that any regulated public sphere can be enacted in the absence of the exercise of excluding hegemonic power, the double of movement of sociological account of communicative action and then conditions of possibility for practical political outcomes could be mirrored following the radical democratic paradigm. This would mean reversing the Habermasian paradigm and beginning with Mouffe's core aspirational outcome – an ethos of agonal democracy that understands and praises the centrality of real and genuine conflict, but which seeks the overcoming one's cherished opponent, as opposed to the full destruction of a dehumanized enemy. From this base, the question becomes, what are the practical conditions for the resolution of real and genuine conflict, that conform to the preceding ethos?

Again, it is here that we can see where – since the very beginning of the agonal (re)turn – it has always been acknowledged that the position bears some similarities to the deliberative model. In the absence of descending to a Schmitt-like fetishization of an aesthetic of violence, one must assume that radical democratic theorists remain predominantly committed to various forms of communicative action, though not to the Habermasian understanding thereof. Rather

than repeating the critique of Habermasian proceduralism as being inherently exclusionary – which may well be the case – agonal democratic theorists could turn their attention to the types of genuine communicative political contest they do seem as viable expressions of an ethos of political agon. Presumably here a broader discursive approach could engage with notions of protest, resistance, and domination alongside traditional questions of political debate, deliberation, voting and democratic participation. In short, if nothing else, a more detailed and productive engagement with the mechanics of Habermas’ procedural account could well be a path to dispelling the impression that radical democratic theorists’ ontological preoccupation with the essence of the political has eclipsed any meaningful consideration of more practical ‘ontic’ experiences of politics.

The second contribution that a more nuanced engagement with Habermas might offer agonal democratic theorists, closely related to the first, is the reading of Habermasian deliberative democratic theorists as being centered on a notion of *consensus*. While there are a range of views here, it is safe to agree that – for the most part – Habermas and various Habermasians, do theorize a normative value to the idea of stable society through ongoing agreement over the basic structure, rules, and issues of a modern democracy. Procedural accounts of deliberative democracy certainly strongly imply, if not outright decree, that the desired outcome of a public sphere that enables ideal speech acts oriented towards genuine understanding is ‘*reasonable and lasting agreement*’ amongst rational participants. That having been said, equating this with consensus – especially in a way that parallels Rawls’ use of the term – is neither accurate, nor productive. As discussed above, Habermas describes the role of public reason in terms of “...a network of pragmatic considerations, compromises, and discourses of self-understanding and of justice...” (Habermas, 1998: 297) Habermas is explicit that public

reason – in terms of the reasonable debate amongst informed citizens – cannot, as Rawls abstracts, recreate the constitutive radical energies of political foundation, but instead serve as a mechanism for *some level of* political stability. Furthermore, even if stability is read as consensus, unlike Rawls, Habermas explicitly rejects this as the normative basis for deliberation in the public sphere. It is, in contrast, the normative primary of ‘genuine communicative social action oriented towards understanding’ that provides validity basis for Habermas. (297)

What this means, or could mean, for Mouffe or other radical agonal democratic theorists, is that there is no inherent disconnect between Habermas’ normative foundation – action oriented towards understanding – and the agonal foundation of the primacy of genuine, but not destructive, conflict. Indeed, while understanding could lead to consensus; in the broadest sense, genuine conflict (agonal or antagonistic) would also depend on real understanding between positions. It seems unlikely, for example, that the kind of agonistic contest between true adversaries – though not devolving into enmity – could exist in the context of misunderstanding or ignorance. From this perspective, Mouffe’s friend/adversary distinction would depend just as much on communicative action – albeit likely defined in much broader terms than Habermas is comfortable with – as would any goal of stability, agreement, or consensus.

This brings us to the third area where a more generous/nuanced reading of Habermas could offer agonal democratic theorists productive conceptual tools: the foundational typology of social action, as divided between communicative and strategic actions. Interestingly enough, and perhaps due to the tendency of agonal political theorists to ignore, obscure or completely disregard the notion of the social, neither Mouffe nor many of her agonal counterparts engage with Habermas’ foundational work in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. As such, there is little work considering the implications Habermas’s Weber-inspired alternative typology of social

action would have on their primary interest – conflict. Obviously, at the core of most agonal democratic theory, there is distinction made between *antagonistic* and *agonistic* conflict/contest. While the conceptualization of productive conflict opens an interesting space for radical democratic theorists vis-a-vis consensus focused paradigms, it should not foreclose additional analysis of how conflict operates, and whether or not there might be more variations or sub-types worth considering. Of course, this is not to position Habermas as a conflict theorist, or even a sociologist who spends any marked time on the idea that conflict could be socially or politically productive. Born just over a decade after the end of World War I, and just under a decade before the start of World War II, Habermas’ attention to and orientation towards ‘political conflict’ was no doubt affected the horrors he witnessed in his youth. Habermas grew up on the heels of the first modern Great Depression, and at the start of the rise of the Nationalist Socialist Party in Germany (Müller-Doohm, 2016: 12-13) Surrounded by such events – to this day, widely seen as pivotal turning points in the modern age - it is difficult to overestimate the effect this historical context played in Habermas intellectual development. That having been said, agonal democratic theorists could – considering Habermas’ core dichotomy between communicative and strategic action – refocus some attention on what Habermas’ foundational assumptions mean for understanding social and political conflict.

Specifically of note here is the sub-distinction Habermas makes between concealed/open strategic action, and most importantly between conscious and unconscious deception. For Mouffe, as with many agonal theorists, strategic action is not a difficult concept to accept. Indeed, drawing from the likes of Nietzsche and Machiavelli, most agonal theorists assume – with the centrality of conflict in their understanding of politics and the political – the existence, and perhaps inevitability, of strategic actors and actions. However, while agonal theorists may

not generally dwell on genuine principled actors to the same extent – they are nonetheless a necessary counterpoint to strategic action. In fact, at its core, agonal democratic theory demands a conception of the ethical actor – be it under *Gesinnungsethik* (an ethic of conviction) or *Verantwortungsethik* (an ethic of responsibility) – in order for the idea of productive conflict to have any meaning at all. In short, the dichotomy between conscious deception (open or concealed) and genuine (communicative or otherwise) action is, at least, firmly implied in agonal democratic theory. What is considered far less, is what Habermas describes as unconscious deception – *or the systemic distortion of communication*.

Exploring this idea offers, yet another, opportunity for agonal democratic theorists generally, and Mouffe specifically, to revisit their anemic vision of *the social* as well as enhance their understanding of *the political*. Taken seriously, the conceptualization of a form of systemically distorted social action – wherein social actors believe themselves to be oriented towards genuine understanding but are in fact oriented more towards outcome/success – opens the possibility of unnecessary or misguided antagonisms at both the level of sociation and politics. It also brings into focus a potential dimension of Mouffe’s aspirational relation of ‘adversaries’ under an ethos of political agon – *the absence of systemic distortions to understanding*. Brought forward as a type of conflict, one could read this to imply a third type of conflict existing between and across *antagonistic* (between enemies seeking to destroy one another) and *agonistic* (between adversaries seeking to overcome each other) – *diastréfo* or *distorted conflict* (between misguided/misunderstanding individuals seeking either).

While it would be dramatic to conclude this chapter with the claim that Habermas is a long-lost agonal theorist waiting to be reclaimed, not even the most creative of adaptations, nor most open of re-readings, can make this so. That said, in a similar way to how I have proposed

that the classical sociological insights of seminal thinkers like Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel can be selectively leveraged to supplement and build renewed accounts of agonal democratic politics that take seriously their underlying social conditions of possibility; so too can a more rigorous and productive engagement Jürgen Habermas – both in terms of his sociological foundations and contemporary political theory – offer agonal theorists new opportunities to both address limitations in their foundational assumptions, and more broadly expand the agonal democratic imaginary.

## Conclusion

The world, as ever, is changing. The recent promise of a ‘third way’ ushering in a cosmopolitan vision of global democratic consensus has given way to a new wave of populist leaders, polarized political partisanship, and a noticeable dearth of civility across the world stage. John Rawls’ now famous presupposition of a ‘reasonably well-ordered society’ underpinning *A Theory of Justice*, has, in just under a half century, transformed into a deeply divided and divisive global political and social climate. The question of how the modern western democratic project, once assumed stable, can better *thrive*; has been reduced to a question of whether it will be able to *survive*. If anything, the first two decades of the new millennium have unequivocally demonstrated the dangers of the intellectual and moral complacency underpinning conceptually *thin* accounts of consensus – and made even more urgent the calls for a radical reimagining and re-energizing of fundamental democratic ideals and institutions.

At the heart of the agonal democratic project, is a core philosophical understanding that conflict lies at the heart of ‘the political’ and that any attempts to mitigate, suppress or eliminate such conflict can, at best, lead to a uncontrolled and dangerous build of dissenting energies, or, at worst, lead to a complete dissolution of the political by way of a totalizing homogeneity. Alongside this ontological understanding of the political, radical democratic theorists hold a core normative commitment – to improve democratic institutions to address inequality, domination and suffering. However, this re-centering of the political has come at a cost. As agonal theorists have successfully brought to the fore their vision couched through their account of the political, most have done so at the expense of the social. Historically contingent ontological accounts of

the essential character of political interaction have, to a large extent, brought with them a reduction of the social to the sediment of contest and conflicts fought within the political, to a sort of post-political remainder robbed of any value, creative vitality or effervescence. But for this anemic account of the social, agonal democratic theorists could well be viewed as natural allies to a range of critical sociologists – from those exploring social movements, to those mapping the internal confines of democratic institutions - holding many of the same normative goals. Given the current global political climate, which can best be described as a new crisis of legitimacy for western democratic orders, the possibilities embedded in agonal democratic theory are too important to abandon.

It is within this context that I have brought this project forward, with the overarching objective of injecting radical democratic accounts with selected critical sociological insights to better consider and map what such accounts might offer both disciplines were they to take seriously their own obscured assumptions and necessary foundations vis a vis a more robust understanding of *the social*. By challenging the predominant logic of determinism in agonal democratic theory – under which the social is understood to be byproduct of political struggle – and by exploring and expanding nascent assumptions and conceptions of the social within and around such accounts, I have begun to ask a distinctive, hitherto ignored, and deeply sociological question. Specifically: what are the underlying social conditions of possibility for a radically emancipatory democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon?

To do this, I have argued, one must both map and disrupt some of the underpinning conceptual foundations within agonal democratic thought. However, rather than a traditional

process of simply tearing down perceived weaknesses through analytic or comparative critique, I have undertaken to introduce, through the creative adaptation of selected classical and contemporary sociological insights, alternative understandings and conceptual vocabularies through which to reimagine and transform elements therein while supporting, and potentially advancing, the normative aims and underlying commitments of the agonal democratic project. Exploring the work of Chantal Mouffe as the exemplar of the agonal democratic field, I wondered aloud what might happen to Mouffe's objective - of transforming the political from a field defined by the distinction between friend and enemy (to be destroyed), into an agonal vision based on the distinction between friend vs adversary (to be overcome) – were one to replace Schmitt's proto-fascist and deeply real-politic understanding of the political and the social with a more nuanced account of both? Thus, into this vision I introduced a new conceptual vocabulary through certain selected classical insights from Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, and finally some more contemporary alternatives from Jürgen Habermas.

First, through Max Weber, I introduced an alternative understanding of the political, at once compatible with Schmitt's view while offering a more sophisticated and nuanced articulation of the interplay between power and responsibility. In place of Schmitt's seductively totalizing account of the political as eternal struggle between the antithetical categories of friend and enemy, Weber offers an acknowledgement of the political as defined through ongoing conflict *by* and *for* the means of power, but one in which such constant struggle is founded on a necessary diversity amongst fundamental values. To this, through the important work of Weberian scholar Wolfgang Schluchter, I also introduced a conceptual framework for understanding ethical values within the sphere of the political. Notably through the exploration

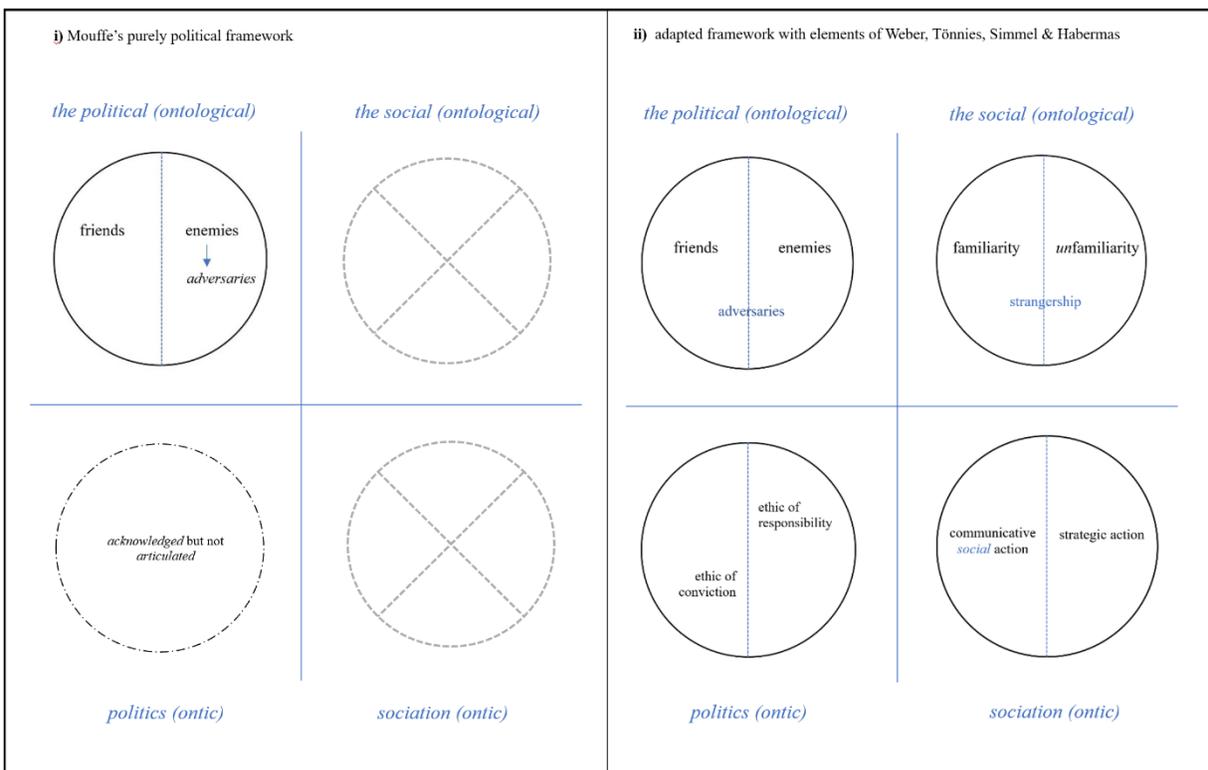
of Weber's understanding of value collision and the ultimate primacy of an ethic of responsibility (*verantwortungsethik*) over an ethic of conviction (*gesinnungsethik*). Ultimately offering Mouffe an account of the political more than a little compatible with her agonistic sensibilities, but one in which values and ethics find an intellectual purchase in contrast to their conspicuous absence in Schmitt's near completely amoral account.

Next, I introduced a potential conceptualization of 'the social' through a rereading of Ferdinand Tönnies' seminal *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Rejecting a nostalgic reading in favor of approaching Tönnies as a dialectic thinker focused on a tension between *organic* and *mechanical* affirmative social relations,' and through the lens of his Hobbesian scholarship, I proposed a reading that emphasized the underlying conditions of possibility for a stable political order. This not only offered an important contrast to Schmitt vis a vis his minimalist and narrow account of social solidarity, but provided a way to re-read the notions of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in terms of an ideal typology introduced – at least in part – to build upon and complicate Hobbes famous 'purely political' account of society in *Leviathan*. Noting certain limitations in the way in which Tönnies, much like Schmitt, understood conflict – at a fundamental level – as destructive, I proceeded offer a conceptual nudge to Tönnies by way of selected insights from Georg Simmel, ultimately proposing a conceptualization of the social understood through both **i)** a core antithetical distinction between familiar and unfamiliar, and **ii)** a liminal third intermediary position of strangership between them. This notion of liminality further allowed a reconsideration of Mouffe's desired transformation of Schmitt's enemy into adversary, instead positioning the adversary as a *liminal* instead of a replacement figure.

I proposed an understanding of *the social*, wherein Mouffe/Schmitt's 'core antithetical distinction' between friend and enemy/adversary could be joined with a complimentary core tension between familiar/unfamiliar.

Finally, this project looked to reconsider the relationship between agonal democratic theories and the famous deliberative/procedural account forwarded by Jürgen Habermas. Exploring Habermas in terms of both a direct continuation of the classical sociological traditions introduced via Tönnies, Simmel, and most explicitly Weber; and as a contemporary democratic theorist, who alongside agonal thinkers, first articulated a position in terms of critical response and rebuke of Rawls. First, looking at how Habermas builds upon and expands Weber's famous account of social action under ever more rationalized society; I proposed the distinction between *Genuine Communicative Social Action* and *Strategic Action* (both intentional and unconscious) as a useful frame for further expanding a complimentary account of the social dimensions of the agonal democratic project, both in terms of its ontological (the social) and ontic (sociation) dimensions. Moving to re-consider the classically antagonistic relationship between agonal visions of democracy and Habermas' procedurally focused deliberative account; I challenged the traditional reading of Habermas as a consensus focused thinker, instead positing a latent agonal current running throughout his later works. Ultimately, through Habermas, I proposed that both his theory of communicative action and his deliberative democratic theory – when considered in tandem – not only offer agonal democratic theorists generally, and Mouffe specifically, a sizeable new conceptual vocabulary, but also an example of a theoretical perspective that better manages to balance its ontological and ontic considerations.

Where then does this leave us? Taken together, I would propose that the critical adaptation of key insights from classical and contemporary sociological thinkers provides a new framework for the re-invigoration of the critical project of reimagining a democratic order premised on the ideal of political agon. These contributions offer a way to move from a one dimensional ‘purely political’ account of agonal democracy that focuses nearly entirely on the ontological, to a four dimensional account of the conditions of possibility for a radical democracy premised on the ideal of agonal context in terms of *the political* and *the social*, in both their ontic and ontological dimensions. This conceptual expansion and transformation is illustrated in figure 5.0 immediately below:



Far from reducing the importance of agonal democratic thought generally, or Mouffe's work specifically, the introduction of these alternative insights aims to provide a deeper and more stable conceptual framework through which build on what has become the most urgent social and political question of our times. No longer a question of simply how to challenge a mainstream interpretation of a relatively stable political order, but instead how to triage, rescue and recover a basic level of legitimacy and functionality in a rapidly unravelling socio-political context. That those who have most recently articulated agonal values as a pivotal part to understanding and evolving democratic politics have initially done so with an (over)emphasis on political philosophy, cannot be allowed to act as an excuse for critical sociologists to ignore its core critical and normative potential. By expanding the conceptual vocabulary through which an agonal vision articulated, this project aims to both strengthen existing accounts and facilitate increased engagements across disciplinary boundaries.

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