Radical democracy redux
Life is living: you cannot describe it to someone who does not know it. It is friendship and enmity, enthusiasm and disenchantment, peristalsis and ideology.

Thinking has, among other functions, to establish an intellectual order in life. As well as to destroy that order.

Robert Musil, Posthumous Papers of a Living Author
KATARZYNA JEZIERSKA

Radical democracy redux
Politics and subjectivity beyond Habermas and Mouffe
Abstract


This thesis investigates two contemporary theories of radical democracy, Jürgen Habermas’s deliberative and Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic democracy. By bringing the two scholars together and constructing a debate between them, their respective strengths and weaknesses are highlighted and the similarities and differences are pointed out. Habermas and Mouffe are seldom dealt with simultaneously as they represent different theoretical traditions, critical theory and post-structuralism respectively. This thesis argues that we can learn from both of them.

The aim of the thesis is to clarify and critically assess Chantal Mouffe’s and Jürgen Habermas’s versions of radical democracy, their disparate visions of democratic politics and subjectivity, in order to clear the ground for a third position that draws inspiration from both of them. The methodological inspiration comes from the deconstructive approach to interpretation, and thus the study aspires to a ‘just reading’ while being conscious of the elements of violence inherent to any instances of reading.

The main bulk of the thesis is dedicated to an analysis of the two authors’ theories of democracy and subjectivity, which leads on to the third position situated beyond the two. From Habermas the stress on political communication and intersubjectivity is taken, while both these concepts are extensively reformulated. The elements rejected from his position are the orientation to consensus and the strong requirements of coherence and transparency of the subject. From Mouffe the accent on the agonistic spirit of democracy is taken, while the ontological status of antagonism is set aside. Her conception of split subjectivity is included, but supplemented with a more explicit theorization of the unity of the subject in the element of intersubjective meetings. The third position on radical democracy embraces the fundamental status of undecidability, which calls for an ethos of questioning.

Keywords: radical democracy, Jürgen Habermas, Chantal Mouffe, deliberative, agonistic, consensus, conflict, antagonism, agonism, subjectivity

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CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION

Contemporary radical democratic theory\(^1\) is marked by polarization. There are mainly two theoretic schools that struggle for hegemony in this field. On the one side there is the critical theoretic tradition with deliberative democracy as its candidate for the radical democratic position. On the other, post-structuralism and agonistic democracy make their claims for a ‘truly’ radical standpoint. Both deliberative and agonistic theorists of democracy put a good deal of effort in marking their own territory, in underlining differences between each other. I believe that such a polarizing attitude is counterproductive. Instead of looking for fruitful ways forward in defining the problems and tasks for radical democracy, they run the risk of fortifying themselves in their towers. In consequence, in spite of the fact that deliberative and agonistic theories have influenced scholars from so disparate disciplines as political science, sociology, educational studies and history, these theories are seldom dealt with simultaneously. It sometimes seems to be a matter of choosing the enemy. Either you are a deliberatist and then, what follows, you shun post-structuralists and never even wander in the vicinity of such concepts as ‘undecidability’ and ‘aporia’; or you define yourself as an agonistic democrat and reject anything that dares to mention reason or enlightenment. In the literature there are only scarce examples of systematic analyses of the two positions juxtaposed with each other, which would provide a clear picture of their respective strengths and weaknesses and would trace the possible areas of mutual learning.

It is against this background that this thesis is written and my intention is to fill this lacuna. The field of radical democratic theory needs revitalization, which I believe can be offered by surpassing the energy-consuming internal struggles. What I see as my task in this thesis is to present a critical analysis of the status quo of the debate between deliberative and agonistic theories of radical democracy and, subsequently, to show a possible way of negotiating between them, which amounts to an outline of a third position situated beyond the two.

**Aim of the Study**

This study is an investigation into one stream of contemporary democratic theory, namely radical democracy. The epithet ‘radical’ has been given disparate, even contradictory, content. Here, I will scrutinize two different understandings of the term. My aim is not to examine radical democracy from an external point of view, i.e., resorting to thinkers situated outside this tradition. Instead, I have chosen to approach the debate from within, that is, through analysis of representative theories of the most prominent branches of radical democratic theory – the critical theoretic and the post-structuralist. The critical theory branch is dominated by deliberative democracy with its leading figure, Jürgen Habermas. The other tradition, that has challenged the deliberative understanding of radical democracy, is post-structuralism. Here, Chantal Mouffe is one of the main figures, who also explicitly outlines her version of radical democracy in opposition to Habermas’s. The theoretical production of these two authors can be seen as a struggle for fixation of the meaning of radical democracy.

In short, the aim of this study is to clarify and critically assess Chantal Mouffe’s and Jürgen Habermas’s versions of radical democracy in order to clear the ground for a third position. This will be done in several steps; first, a close and critical reading of Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories of democratic politics and subjectivity; second, a (re)construction of the debate between them; and third, the outlining of a possible direction for an alternative position on radical democracy that draws inspiration from the two.

The main bulk of the thesis is dedicated to an analysis of the two authors’ positions, and in this respect can be seen as an investigation into Mouffe’s and Habermas’s ontology; not the fundamental and grandiose ontology of “What is being?”, but a more modest ontology that inquires into the na-

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4 Habermas’s theoretical production is very ample and stretches between philosophy of language, philosophy of knowledge, sociology and, lately, religion. Democratic theory is one of his interests. In this thesis I have only focused on this part of his writing.
ture of the political and the subject. Such an approach stems from the conviction that every theory of democracy rests on some more or less explicit ideas about the construction and functioning of its subjects (collective and/or individual).\(^5\) As Tracy B. Strong shows, already in Plato’s categorization of different regimes we find arguments for treating the self and the political order as codifying in different manners a similar pattern of relations. Strong argues for “the permanent and on-going nature of these concerns – concern with the codetermination of the self and the order is not simply a fancy question imported as the latest Parisian fashion – it has been with us since the beginning of Western thought.”\(^6\). That is why, before I conclude with an outline of a third position, I engage in an analysis of the two authors’ versions of democratic politics (Chapters 4 and 5) as well as their assumptions about the subject (Chapter 6).

It should be clear that my goal is not to resolve the differences between Habermas and Mouffe but to show the way the terms of the debate have been set. I will engage in a close reading of the two authors in order to better understand the terms of the debate and, apart from this inventory, the thesis is also an attempt at re-setting the debate by qualifying or questioning some of the binary oppositions that have been attributed to the two sides (like the consensus-conflict or the reason-passion divides). Such an approach will help me outline the possible direction for a third position situated somewhere in between taking advantage of the potentials found in the two theories.

**FOCUSING THE DEBATE**

The choice of the object of study is always questionable. The first point that needs justification in this thesis is the link between democratic theory and theory of the subject. As hinted above and following Tracy B. Strong, I perceive these two as interrelated: “Political theory becomes an important way to approach both the self and the order of which it will be a part. […]"
as political relations assume different forms so also do selves and orders.”

He continues: “It appears to be difficult to try and think of a self independently of how one thinks of a social/political order. When we do not know what to say about the self we do not know what to say about the order; not knowing what to say about a social order makes language about the self difficult.”

I concur with Strong on this point, and that is why I have chosen to include both the discussion about the political order and the subject in the analysis of Mouffe’s and Habermas’s writings as well as in the position I outline at the end. However, it should be noted that such a link does not remain unquestioned. Richard Rorty, for instance, argues that “Rawls, following up on Dewey, shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions” and further on: “As citizens and as social theorists, we can be as indifferent to philosophical disagreements about the nature of the self as Jefferson was to theological differences about the nature of God.”

I think that Rorty is definitively right that we can (and should) do without a theory of an ahistorical human nature, that, by the way, both Habermas and Mouffe explicitly reject, but we cannot avoid making assumptions about a more contextualised subjectivity entwined in the specificities of the democratic visions we put forth. I believe that leaving such discussions out impoverishes the critical potential and the force of appeal of democratic theories.

In this respect, the thesis also draws inspiration from the communitarians vs. liberals debate on the subject, their question about what concept of the subject lies behind the respective theory of politics and society. My intention is to apply this question to the debate between deliberatists and agonists. A similar parallel is observed by Andrew Schaap:

> If the discourse of rights favoured by liberals in the 1980s tended to overlook the moral and political significance of social interdependence, what the discourse of deliberation tends to neglect is the moral and political significance of contest and struggle which, following the Greeks, is increasingly referred to in contemporary political theory as *agonism*.

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8 Ibid., p.7.
The former debate started from communitarians’ questioning of the liberal subject. Michael Sandel\(^{11}\) criticized John Rawls for presuming an atomistic or unencumbered subject in his theory and instead, alongside other communitarians, he proclaimed a subject rooted in his/her social surroundings. What I see as a contemporary parallel to this debate is deliberatists’ and agonists’ struggle for new meanings of democratic politics and subjectivity.

When it comes to my decision to focus on the deliberative and agonistic approaches to democracy as representatives of the radical flank in democratic theory it can be justified by the growing but still rather scarce body of literature dedicated to this comparison. Seyla Benhabib, acting as editor of the volume entitled *Democracy and Difference*, might have been the first to identify these two approaches as distinguishable. She pointed to a tension “among defenders of the proceduralist-deliberative model of democracy and [...] the “agonistic model of democratic politics””\(^{12}\) and organized the whole volume along this axis.

Regarding the concrete representatives of the two approaches, the choice of Habermas is hardly ever questioned. He is undoubtedly *the* figure within deliberative democratic thought and often invoked as its originator. Here, one could critically object, that it is exactly the obviousness that requires more explanation and justification, also due to the amount of already existing literature dedicated to it. My answer would be that, to my knowledge, only few attempts have been made to seriously engage in a debate between Habermas and Mouffe.\(^{13}\)

In case of post-structuralism, this stream of thought is increasingly employed by theoretically and empirically oriented scholars in many disciplines. Mouffe is one of the authors referred to. Among other theorists of agonistic democracy we can find Ernesto Laclau, William Connolly and


\(^{13}\) I will discuss some examples of publications focusing on this exchange in the section dedicated to previous research.
Bonnie Honig. I have chosen to focus on Mouffe’s writings because she presents a cogent and comprehensive vision of politics (and the political) and subjectivity, which provides good grounds for comparison with Habermas.\textsuperscript{14} Besides, it is Mouffe who most explicitly positions herself against Habermas. She sometimes defines the whole project of her agonistic democracy as an alternative to the deliberative ideas. In the preface to the second, 2001 edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Mouffe (and Laclau) states that the book aims at 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.\textsuperscript{15}

On the other hand, Habermas has hitherto not directed any attention to Mouffe’s theory. Seen from a wider perspective, both Mouffe and Habermas have their main adversaries in the aggregative (sometimes called liberal) model of democracy, yet I will disregard this position in my text and refer to it only at places where it serves to explicate the position of either Mouffe or Habermas. In this thesis, I mainly contrast Mouffe and Habermas with each other, and try to highlight their respective specificities, strengths and weaknesses in this way. Certainly, from some points of view these theories will look quite alike and may seem to belong on the same side of the barricade. As will be shown in the section dedicated to previous research, there are different ways of handling the disparity/similarity question in the existing literature.

I will here shortly explicate the specific approach to democratic theory this thesis takes.\textsuperscript{16} To begin with, it acknowledges that democracy is an inherently open term and practice. The countless definitions of democracy are its *ars specifica*, as the struggles for how democracy should be understood and who should belong to it are the very matter of democratic politics.

\textsuperscript{14} This is not to say that the other authors who theorize agonism do not deserve a thorough examination in the search for viable alternatives to deliberative democracy. This is one of the possible directions for further studies in the field.


What follows, every instance of defining democracy, is a contribution to
democratic politics. Otherwise put, part of democratic politics consists in
asking how it should be defined (“What is democracy?”) and where its
limits should be drawn. This standpoint should not be misjudged as defeatist;
I believe that despite the impossible character of this query we cannot
not ask what democracy means. At the same time we should not forget the
political character of this question.

Moreover, I also believe that democratic theories should be seen as dis-
courses. Not only do they provide us with different interpretations of de-
mocracy, they also have a constitutive role. “Democratic theories [...] are
best understood as constitutive discourses that contribute to solidifying
what is possible to think, say, do, and be democratically.” 17 Hence, they
not only enable us to see aspects otherwise blurred, but at the same time
create new possibilities for political expression, make new subject positions
feasible. ‘Theory’ is here treated as a ‘problematic’, consisting of multiple,
connected elements with loose ends, with necessary remainders and para-
doxes. 18 Such a view obviously has implications for the way the analysis is
conducted, which will be discussed in the methodological chapter.

FORGING THE COMMON GROUND

It must be stated at the beginning that the debate between Mouffe and
Habermas reflects a larger dispute between on the one hand, critical the-
tory, and on the other, post-structuralism. In many respects, they stand on
two opposing sides of the barricade, one defending modernity, reason and
Enlightenment and the other post-modernism, passion, and the critique of
reason. 19 Such a starkly contrasting view of Mouffe and Habermas will be

17 Cruikshank Barbara, The Will to Empower. Democratic Citizens and Other
rary Capitalism: An Interview with William E. Connolly”, Contemporary Political
Thought vol.7, no.2, p.204.
19 Thomassen starts with a similar framing of the debate between Habermas and
Derrida to set off with his Derridian analysis of Habermas. See Thomassen Lasse,
Compare Ilan Kapoor: “the Habermas-Mouffe argument can be seen as a stand-in
for the modern-postmodern argument, with Habermas defending reason, legiti-
macy, justice, universality, Mouffe defending antagonism, pluralism, contingency.”
Kapoor Ilan, (2002) “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? The Relev-
ance of the Habermas-Mouffe Debate for Third World Politics”, Alternatives:
Global, Local, Political, vol.27, no.4, p.466.
qualified and elaborated further in the forthcoming chapters. For now, let it suffice to say that there are some similarities, or common concerns, in the two theories. Most generally, as observed by Aletta Norval, these two versions of radical democracy share a critical stance towards liberal (aggregative) democracy and a commitment to certain elements of the liberal tradition such as norms of equality and freedom. They can be read as two post-Marxist attempts at reformulating the liberal tradition.

In the introduction to Hegemony and Socialist Strategy Mouffe (and Laclau) points to the similarities between agonistic and deliberative approaches. The lengthy quote below will help me systemize the common traits discussed subsequently:

It is useful to contrast our approach with theirs [deliberative theorists’], because some similarities do actually exist between the conception of radical democracy we advocate and the one they defend. Like them, we criticize the aggregative model of democracy, which reduces the democratic process to the expression of those interests and preferences which are registered in a vote aiming at selecting leaders who will carry out the chosen policies. Like them, we object that this is an impoverished conception of democratic politics, which does not acknowledge the way in which political identities are not pre-given but constituted and reconstituted through debate in the public sphere. Politics, we argue, does not consist in simply registering already existing interests, but plays a crucial role in shaping political subjects. On these topics, we are at one with Habermasians. Moreover, we agree with them on the need to take account of the many different voices that a democratic society encompasses and to widen the field of democratic struggles.

Hence, I will now shortly elucidate the three features common to deliberative and agonistic theories of democracy mentioned in the quote before turning to a more critical engagement. The similarities mentioned are: (1) the broad account of democracy, (2) the positioning in contrast to the lib-

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21 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.xvii.
eral and communitarian (or republican) theories of democracy, and (3) the transformative vision of politics.  

In the end of this section I will also discuss (4) Habermas’s and Mouffe’s self-understanding as radical democrats.

(1) broad democratic politics

Both Habermas and Mouffe share the view that democratic politics should be broadly understood. In Mouffe’s vocabulary it means that domains hitherto considered un-political should be politicized,  

that is, opened for public contestation; the “project of radical and plural democracy [...] was to extend the democratic struggle to all those areas in which the relation of domination existed.” She seeks to widen the range of democratic politics in order to embrace the informal public opinion and other than parliamentary forms of activity as political. This would be the fulfillment of the promise of the ‘democratic revolution’ as described by Tocqueville. The current phase of democratic revolution is directed at expanding the democratic ambition to all spheres of society. Democratic politics is not to be merely restricted to the traditionally understood political domain, but for example economy should as well be the site of democratic struggle (e.g. against capitalism) and a wide mobilization of different social groups is supposed to vitalize and supplement parliamentary democracy.

Undoubtedly, Habermas as well seeks to widen the range of democratic politics in order to embrace the informal public opinion formation and other than parliamentary and administrative forms of activity. (Democratic) politics is for him not restricted to the organization of the state, but is occupied with the arrangement of the society as a whole.  

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22 Compare Norval’s presentation of the common traits that the critical theoretic and the post-structural versions of radical democracy share: “they also share three core ideas. They include, first, the centrality given to the political; second, an emphasis on the construction and articulation, rather than mere aggregation, of interests and identities; and third, the attention given to the process of subject formation in general, and the constitution of democratic identities in particular.” Norval Aletta, Aversive Democracy. Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p.38.


24 Angus Ian, “Interview with Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau” (a television interview in the series “Conflicting Publics”, broadcast on The Knowledge Network, Fall 1998), transcript of the interview is available at http://english.illinoisstate.edu/strickland/495/laclau2.html.

This broad understanding of democracy is closely related to his two-fold division of society into lifeworld and system. What follows, the process of democratic politics also includes the phase of informal deliberations among citizens, where they define their identities, form their interests and preferences, and ideally come to a consensus. The second part of this process is constituted by a link between these informal deliberations taking place in the lifeworld and the political system. This latter phase is usually conducted with the help of other than deliberative means, namely voting. The system, with its steering media (money and power) forms a kind of relief mechanism with regard to the lifeworld; it serves to ease the burden and reduce the risk of a communicative breakdown. Obviously, even in the system there are some deliberative moments (these could be called formal deliberations), mostly apparent in the national assemblies.

Apparently, Habermas is in line with Mouffe when it comes to the broadening of the sphere of democratic politics. Both of them underline that it should also take place outside the formal state institutions. What is more, the subject-matter of politics is also broadened – it is extended to include other than simply technical and instrumental questions as well. Summing up, both Habermas and Mouffe argue for a broadening of democratic politics with regard to the subjects discussed (thematically) as well as places where it should be conducted (spatially).

(2) between liberal and republican models

Both Habermas and Mouffe, in sketching out their conceptions of politics and democracy, contrast their respective visions with two highly stylized alternatives: liberal and republican/communitarian. Habermas presents the liberal model as one where self interest instead of virtue is the usual motivating force of political behavior. Politics is here typically an effort to

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26 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.185.
29 Habermas most explicitly discusses his own procedural or discursive model (that he also calls deliberative) in contrast with liberal and republican ones in Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, pp.296ff. These passages have also been published separately as an article: Habermas Jürgen, (1994) “Three Normative Models of Democracy”, Constellations vol.1: 1-10.
accumulate, or aggregate private interest by means of compromise and voting. By contrast, republicanism is characterized by emphasizing the value of citizen’s public virtues and active political participation, and politics comprises the classic collective search for common good and ethico-political self-understanding. Law in this conception exceeds the role of merely protecting individual rights to be an expression of the common praxis of the political community. Habermas intends to merge the two opposing models into an alternative he prefers – the deliberative model of procedural democracy. His model is supposed to be a compilation of the best features of the two rejected alternatives. The main shortcoming rejected from the liberal model is the vision of politics as the aggregation of pre-politically formed private preferences, and the shortcoming he wants to avoid in the republican model is the stress on a united citizenry and a commonly shared conception of the good life, which Habermas finds inappropriate for pluralist societies. The Habermasian deliberative democracy is based primarily on more or less institutionalized discourses for the formation of rational political opinion, and not only on a shared ethos.

When it comes to Mouffe, she distinguishes between political liberalism and economic liberalism and argues that they constitute two lines only contingently intertwined in the course of history. She intends to keep only political liberalism as the grounding for her vision of democracy. More specifically, she places her project within the framework of democratic

30 Strangely enough, Habermas states that by ‘liberal’ he means the tradition going back to Locke, but does not comprise such modern liberals as Dworkin or Rawls. This move enforces the impression that the model he speaks of is a very stylized one, one that helps clarify his own position but does not really invite a serious discussion with ‘liberals’. See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p.549 fn 10.


33 “‘Liberalism’, in the way I use the term in the present context, refers to a philosophical discourse with many variants, united not by a common essence but by a multiplicity of what Wittgenstein calls ‘family resemblances’. There are to be sure many liberalisms, some more progressive than others but, save a few exceptions, the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to grasp adequately the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails.” Mouffe Chantal, (2007) “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces”, *Art & Research. A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* vol.1, no.2, p.2.
institutions and procedures, which she sees as the main achievements of liberal democracy. However, she leaves behind the atomistic conception of the subject identified with the liberal tradition. It can also be mentioned at this early stage, that Mouffe interprets this link between liberalism and democracy in terms of a dynamic tension between two ultimately incompatible logics, the democratic logic of equivalence and the liberal logic of difference. She aims at presenting an alternative way of articulating elements of the liberal democratic tradition, inter alia by introducing a commonality perspective to the liberal horizon. This is why she also resorts to the republican tradition in search of the concept of ethos, or possible grounds for sociability. Mouffe argues that while liberalism has theorized and successfully underlined the need and advantages of pluralism, civic republicanism, as a reaction to that, has focused exclusively on the need of community, at the cost of pluralism. “In a sense, my position will be to try to take the best of the communitarians [or civic republicans] and the liberals and try to imagine a way in which we can have a form of commonality that does not erase differences.” From the civic republican tradition she takes up the stress on the central role of politics. Her critique of republicanism is in line with Habermas’s. She too objects to the potentially unifying and too substantive conception of common good, which she judges incompatible with the emancipatory struggles of the oppressed groups.

Summing up, both Mouffe and Habermas undoubtedly recognize and appreciate the achievements of liberal democracy such as liberal institutions (e.g. rights, elections, parliaments) but also show dissatisfaction with the limited scope of liberal politics, e.g. its rigid separation between private

34 It has been observed that this distinction between the liberal and the democratic traditions in modern politics is a change in her original position, where she conceived of ‘liberty’ and ‘equality’ as both legacies of the democratic tradition. See Wenman Mark Anthony, (2003) “Laclau or Mouffe? Splitting the Difference”, Philosophy & Social Criticism vol.29, no.5, pp.592, 597; and Townshend Jules, (2004) “Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Project: The Story So Far”, Political Studies vol.52, p.287.

35 Mouffe Chantal, The Return of the Political, Verso, London 2005, p.133. More on the two logics and the tension between them will come in Chapter 4.


37 Angus, “Interview”.

38 See for example Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.83.

39 See Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, pp.298, 308; Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.2.
and public. They also reject the focus on aggregation of pre-political preferences and the individualistic paradigm. In the case of republicanism, they both reject the idea of a substantial community.

(3) transformative politics

Another important point Mouffe and Habermas share is the perception of politics as a sphere of formation and transformation of preferences and identities. I will here only briefly note the form this ‘transformation’ takes in both cases, as this aspect will be discussed more thoroughly in the coming chapters. It is in the process of deliberative politics, by expressing and discussing our self-understanding that we can develop an understanding of “who we are” and “who we want to be” (the objective of ethical-political discourses). Moreover, it is the aim of deliberation to transform the standpoints of the participants in a common direction, as they should ideally be guided by the telos of consensus.

In the case of agonistic democracy, subjects are formed through their participation in politics. They shape their identities and define their subject positions in the confrontation with others, which is the central focus of agonistic democracy. As will be discussed later, in the course of constructing chains of equivalence, which is the main strategy aimed at establishing a hegemony, the identities of the involved groups adjust.

The three shared points or perspectives mentioned above are linked together. The spatial and thematic broadening of democratic politics has the effect of widening the focus of political theorists to include transformation of the subjects involved in politics. They are no longer perceived as pre-politically formed but as in different ways constituted through political activity. This is also in line with Habermas’s and Mouffe’s rejection of the atomistic liberal subject and the view on politics as mere aggregation of preferences.

(4) what is radical about radical democracy?

As mentioned above, the two theories analyzed in this thesis are both taken as representatives of ‘radical democracy’. Both Mouffe and Habermas de-

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41 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.183.
clare themselves to be radical democrats and some scholars follow this line. However, there are voices that reserve the term to one of the approaches only. For example Mark Devenney, Anna Marie Smith, James Wiley, Thomas Brockelman and Lars Tønder & Lasse Thomassen reserve the term for the post-structural tradition, while Mikael Carleheden and the essays collected in the volume Discourse and Democracy use it as a denomination of the group built around Habermas’s thought.

Habermas’s self-proclaimed ‘radicalism’ in his understanding of democracy rests in the role he ascribes to informal opinion formation. It is in his definition of deliberation or deliberative participation that he locates the radical potential of democracy. More deliberation means a more radical society. In other words, radicalization would here stand for a broadening of the range of deliberatively conducted politics. However, Habermas also asserts that in complex societies public opinion cannot rule but only steer administrative power in particular directions. He emphasises the limiting effect of complexity on democracy, i.e., in the course of transforming our societies in the direction of more complexity and pluralism, the democratizing ambition has to give way to necessary systems integration (other means of integrating society become necessary, such as the means of power and money). Radical democracy remains the “unfinished project of moder-

42 It might be seen as one of the central theses in Between Facts and Norms, that the modern constitutional state cannot be maintained without the ‘radical democracy’ proposed by Habermas: Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.xlii, see also Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.442. Mouffe defines her project as ‘plural and radical democracy’, see for instance Lacoue-Lavergne & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.167.

43 See Norval, “Radical Democracy”.


45 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, pp.xlii-xliii.

46 See for example ibid., pp.300, 371.
nity”; realizing and transforming democracy is still a genuine goal even for complex and globalizing societies, although it is impossible to democratize societies writ large.47

Let me now take a look at Mouffe’s definition of ‘radical democracy’. To begin with we should stay attentive to the distinction that Mouffe introduces between ‘agonistic pluralism’ and ‘radical and plural democracy’.48 The wider concept of agonistic pluralism is intended to embrace a range of democratic projects and concrete directions of the democratic struggle. Agonistic pluralism stands for a multiplicity of different interpretations of the basic democratic principles of equality and liberty, which are supposed to coexist and clash with each other in a vibrant political space. “The radical democratic project is just one way which strives to become hegemonic in this agonistic pluralism.”49 Mouffe defines her radical democratic project as a reformulation of the socialist idea.50 She stresses the extension of democracy to a wide range of social relations. “The project of radical democracy must try to defend democracy and to expand its sphere of applicability to new social relations”51 or, in a different formulation, “the project of radical and plural democracy, in a primary sense, is nothing other than the struggle for a maximum autonomization of spheres on the basis of the generalization of the equivalential-egalitarian logic”52. Aside from this accent on the need of broadening the democratic struggle Mouffe also states that “[c]ontrary to other conceptions of radical or participatory democracy informed by a universalistic and rationalist framework, the view I am advocating here is truly one of radical and plural democracy.”53

As we will see in Chapter 5, in her framing pluralism is always necessarily linked to the dimension of conflict. Hence, Mouffe’s distinguishing qualification is that “there cannot be a radical politics without the definition of

49 Angus, “Interview”.
50 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.10, see also Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, pp.73f.
51 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, pp.18, 90.
52 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.167. In an interview Mouffe explains “the term ‘radical’ means the radicalization of the democratic revolution by its extension to more and more areas of social life.” Angus, “Interview”.
an adversary. That is to say, it requires the acceptance of the ineradicability of antagonism.” She argues that it is exactly due to her idea of the ‘adversary’ that the agonistic approach can contribute to the revitalization and deepening of democracy. That is why, according to Mouffe, deliberative democracy and Habermas, that lack this conflictual perspective cannot be named radical.

Whatever its proponents might claim, the ‘dialogical’ approach is far from being radical because no radical politics can exist without challenging existing power relations and this requires defining an adversary, which is precisely what such a perspective forecloses.

Mouffe underlines that radical politics cannot be located at the centre, because being radical means to aim at a profound transformation of society and the establishment of a new hegemony. As will become clear in the course of the analysis conducted in this thesis, these differences in self-definition, and the different connotations that the authors invoke are rather typical of this exchange. Here, Habermas defines ‘radical democracy’ in terms of alternative ways of legitimating the political order, whereas Mouffe reserves the term ‘radical’ for acts that aim at destabilizing or questioning the hegemonic socio-political order (for example by carving out an alternative to the neo-liberal hegemony).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is obviously ample literature on deliberative democracy, and slightly less on agonistic democracy; there are also countless publications on Habermas (even if we narrow the focus to the ones dealing with his democratic theory) and a growing number of publications that focus on Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) theory. However, as noted above, the number of publications dedicated to both deliberative and agonistic approaches, and even more so to both Habermas and Mouffe, is far from satisfactory. It is a fairly new and expanding orientation in democratic theory, and most of the contributions are published in the form of articles. In the following, I will present a concise and more exemplary than exhaustive overview of this

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54 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.xvii.
55 Mouffe, On the Political, p.32.
56 Ibid., p.51.
57 Ibid., pp.52f.
literature, that is, literature that in different ways touches upon both approaches and/or both authors. The overview is organized around the methodological aspect, that is, the way the authors have chosen to deal with simultaneous discussion of deliberative and agonistic streams of democratic theory. Have they chosen to ‘take sides’, ‘bridge the gap’ or ‘keep them separate’? Such categorization of the existing literature will lead me on to the approach I want to choose in designing the third position on radical democracy and subjectivity.

The first cluster of publications (1) clearly takes a position on one side of the barricade, while treating the other as the anti-hero. The arguments basically boil down to backing one of the ontological frameworks. In this ‘taking sides’ approach, while comparing the two theoretical positions, one of them is judged more appropriate for a specific empirical field of study or more theoretically convincing. For example Andrew Schaap argues that agonistic theories are better fit for analyses of reconciliation practices because, due to the distinction between politics and the political, they can capture the fragile unity of demos, while the deliberative theories (in his article mainly represented by Amy Gutmann & Dennis Thompson) presuppose the unity from the start by reference to the anticipated telos of consensus. The opposite position can be exemplified by Eva Erman, who holds that the deliberative democratic framework is better able to account for conflict in democratic governance, as it embraces the idea that deliberation is constitutive of conflict.

The second cluster of texts (2), tries to find a link between the two traditions, and argues that the differences between them are exaggerated. Such bridging efforts are for example supported by claims that one of the theories already presupposes elements from the other, like those arguing that Mouffe’s theory presupposes consensus, or that Habermas’s theory already includes agonism. The main target is the binary opposition between consensus and contestation or conflict, which the authors want to attenuate. Such a mediating position is either justified by conceptual or empirical

demands. An interesting example of this approach is presented by Aletta Norval’s publications, which underscore that simple synthesis is not in question, and that we always need to investigate to what extent the additions to the original models will change the models themselves. Her publications are often composed in the form of a critical dialogue between the deliberative and the agonistic approaches at the same time as she resorts to some third, extraneous position (for example Ludwig Wittgenstein) in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the two. Another strategy for bridging the gap between agonistic and deliberative approaches is to show misses in the respective authors’ empirical observations. For example Robert W.T. Martin claims that Habermas’s interesting framing of the public sphere can be perceived in a more agonistic manner if we reduce his focus on consensus, which hinges upon purported misinterpretations of historiographical studies. Arguably the most synthetic voice comes from Nathalie Karagiannis & Peter Wagner who put forth the idea of ‘synagonism’ which, simplifying somewhat, stands for an agonism that has the best of all, or the common good in sight. “[A] synagonistic approach would focus on the political as being concerned with common matters without predetermining in which way – agonistically or consensually – these matters are confronted. Synagonism would thus refuse to see either conflict or agreement as the overarching component of political life (or, for that matter, of the “nature” of human beings).”

In the third and last approach (3) the differences between the theories are underlined. They are judged incompatible but not necessarily equally


valid. Some argue that applying both theories in the analysis of different socio-political phenomena, but without merging them, helps highlight different aspects of these phenomena. Here we find those who underscore that the attempts to merge deliberative and agonistic approaches are doomed to failure, as the differences are irreconcilable. Apparent similarities fledge out in huge differences when more closely studied. Some even interpret the bridging approaches in terms of a hegemonic struggle of accommodation, or cooptation by the dominant deliberative theories.

Many of the above-mentioned texts will be used as critical check-points in my discussion of Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories, and then be referred to in more detail. Here, the taxonomy aimed at underlining the main focus or orientation of these publications. Arguably, the distinction between (1) and (3) is not easy to discern. You could occupy both positions, that is, both argue for treating deliberative and agonistic theories of democracy as separate (3) and declare yourself as belonging to one of the approaches (1). The distinguishing principle has been the emphasis that the authors of the publications have chosen. Whereas both publications classified as (1) and (3) share an orientation towards underlining the differences between the two approaches to democracy, those placed in (1) clearly declare belonging to one side of the debate.

I place myself somewhere between cluster (2) and (3). Even though I do not believe in any synthesis of the two approaches, I share the ambition with some of the writers mentioned in cluster two, who stress the often exaggerated opposition between deliberative and agonistic theorists. In consequence, I intend to explore the potential for dialogue between these two and critically engage with both of these traditions without attempts at a unification, or consensus between them. At the same time, my approach is close to Kapoor’s who, precisely in keeping the theories separate, finds a way of highlighting their respective strengths and weaknesses. In the attempt to outline the direction for a third position, placed in-between and to some extent beyond the previous two, such a combination is most fruitful. It allows drawing on potentials from both streams of thought without the aim of merging them into one. It does not claim to resolve the differences between deliberative and agonistic theories, but presents another version of

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65 For example Kapoor, “Deliberative Democracy”. Observe that Kapoor is also one of the few who explicitly focuses on the debate between Habermas and Mouffe.

radical democracy. In this way, it evades the tendency of running over the specificities, at the same time as it surpasses the potentially separatist ‘total differences’ approach.

**Outline of the thesis**

The analysis in the thesis is given the form of a reciprocal critical elucidation of deliberative and agonistic democratic theory. This way I will be able to establish their respective strengths and weaknesses that will result in carving out a third position.

I start with some methodological remarks that will help clarify my particular approach to text and reading. My argument in Chapter 2 follows Jacques Derrida in the acknowledgment that even though our readings should always be guided by the idea of justice, this very idea already witnesses the unavoidability of violence. In other words, interpretation is always an intervention in the text that is being read.

In order to set the scene for the analysis of Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories of democratic politics and subjectivity, I dedicate Chapter 3 to the basic theoretical and methodological assumptions that structure the two approaches. Here I argue that on a very general level, Habermas’s and Mouffe’s methods are not so disparate.

Chapters 4 and 5 are designed in the form of a steered meeting between Mouffe and Habermas. The idea is to present a reading of Habermas’s theory of democratic politics with the help of the critical questions that Mouffe poses to it. These mainly regard his handling of difference/conflict and contingency. On the other hand, Mouffe’s theory of democracy is examined with the help of Habermas-inspired questions. As noted above, Habermas has not addressed Mouffe’s writing, so the questions I pose to her theory are drawn from a Habermasian perspective and mainly concern the problem of unity and commonality, and the risk of violence.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories of democratic subjectivity. I analyze their theories with respect to a set of building blocks that together form a vision of subjectivity. Special focus is given to the way they conceptualize intersubjectivity, that is, the relation to the Other. Even here, while the dominating approach will be the search for distinctive features, or tracing the specificities of the two authors, I will also try to stay attentive to the points of convergence between them that will undoubtedly surface.

Just as in the case of every meeting (this time intertextual and not intersubjective) exposure to the position of the Other can result in a third position, which will not be a simple merging between the previous ones (pace
This is also the theme of the final chapter of the thesis. Apart from some concluding remarks about the findings from previous chapters, Chapter 7 gives an outline of a third position that draws inspiration from different parts of Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theorizing. Mainly, it combines the agonistic spirit and admission of contingency in democratic theory with reformulated versions of communication and intersubjectivity taken from Habermas. It attempts to get rid of the ambiguities that Mouffe’s concept of antagonism introduces, and the Habermasian teleological orientation towards consensus.
CHAPTER 2  FORCE OF READING

Cervantes’ text and Reboul’s are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer.

Jorge Louis Borges, Pierre Menard. Author of the Quixote

Even when I quote a good deal and take over other terminologies I am clearly aware that my use of them often has little to do with the authors’ original meaning.

Jürgen Habermas, Autonomy and Solidarity.
Interviews with Jürgen Habermas

This chapter is intended to form a ‘gate’ to the reading of the rest of the thesis. It outlines the contours steering my way of analysis, that is, my method. Thus it is the only chapter of this book in which Mouffe and Habermas do not have their say.

The thesis is a literature study, a study of theoretical texts and interpretation is the method applied. I believe that in the same way as scholars analysing empirical ‘facts’, we theoreticians analyze our texts as ‘facts’, they become our empirical basis. It follows that there are many different ways of approaching our objects of study. This is one of the statements to which Peter Ekegren devoted his dissertation;

There is no decisive difference between approaching ‘reality’ and approaching ‘texts’. There is no reason to believe that the reading of a text should not in the same manner as the ‘reading’ of ‘reality’ be determined by the reader’s theoretical presuppositions, i.e. the reading of a text is as theory-laden as the ‘reading’ of social/natural reality.1

This might seem to be stating the obvious, however, it is also common practice to leave out methodological ponderings in theoretical theses, which I believe is infelicitous.

**JUST AND VIOLENT READING**

In spite of their differences in style, method and content of their theories, I have obviously attempted to make a just reading of both Habermas and Mouffe. The justice of reading would stand for precision, following the analyzed texts as closely as possible, that is, the effort to read the texts on their own terms. The idea of a just reading is inspired by Jacques Derrida’s ‘justice to come,’\(^2\) that is, the never fulfillable promise of justice; “justice would be the experience that we are not able to experience [...] Justice is an experience of the impossible”\(^3\). In this conception justice works as a messianic promise, which defines the horizon, but can never be brought into presence. Derrida continues: “It follows from this paradox that there is never a moment that we can say *in the present* that a decision is just (that is, free and responsible), or that someone is a just man.”\(^4\) The same goes for interpretation – we can never reach a moment when we can be content with saying that an interpretation is just. It must always necessarily be a process, an aspiration, and the instances of interpretations we engage in can only be placed on a scale from less to more just readings.

Additionally, any reading, in spite of its aspirations to justice, will always necessarily include an element of violence or force (“a performative violence [is] at the very heart of interpretative reading”\(^5\)) that springs from the reader’s entwinement in his/her own idiom, horizon, or lifeworld. We can never fully access the otherness of the other (here being the text), it is always mediated through our understanding, our prejudices, and our situatedness, hence it will never be the text’s idiom alone. The reader needs to appropriate the text, make it meaningful and in this process s/he necessarily runs over some specificities of the text. S/he picks only certain openings, leaving others mute. Just as with translations, the meaning of the text is translated into another language (my horizon of meaning), which always

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\(^3\) Derrida, “Force of Law”, p.16.

\(^4\) Ibid., p.23.

\(^5\) Ibid., p.37. Generally, in this essay Derrida discusses the interrelation between justice and violence.
implies a transformation/deformation. That is not to say that this is undesirable, this is the only way we can have access to any text, or other.

Moreover, following Italo Calvino’s programmatic novel, I believe that there are no originals, and that the book lives only in the moment of its being read. The text on its own does not exist; it is only in its outside (its interpretations). However, this outside is not a strictly delimited entity, it is also inside the text, it becomes a part of it. As deconstructive readings teach us, every interpretation (deconstruction) is an intervention in the text; it does not leave the text intact. Since the author is ‘dead’ to the text by the time it is written, this kind of violence involved in the interpretive practice is a posthumous one.

One practical consequence of such a stance is that the classic distinction between exposition and interpretation is impossible. There cannot be a pure presentation of anyone’s text. Another consequence is that I do not seek for the original, intended, or ‘true’ interpretation of the texts discussed.

Even though I do not think my reading of Mouffe and Habermas can be classified as deconstructive, I nevertheless find Derrida’s plea for a just, close, and fair reading that is always simultaneously and consciously violent, disruptive and transgressing the hospitality of the text, appealing.

**Polyphonic texts**

Any piece of writing is polyphonic, shows disparate traces of meaning. It is a common interpretive procedure to start looking for heterogeneities in texts. However, there are different strategies to handle them. According to the more hermeneutically oriented tradition, we could seek to fix them, to

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8 Compare this to the concept of ‘articulation’ as presented in Glynos Jason, Howarth David, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, Routledge, London & New York 2007, pp.179f. They argue that any act of articulation consists of the moments of contingency (showing how the relations between articulated elements are non-necessary), singularity (putting the elements into a ‘new’ framework), and modification (the identity of each element involved is changed in result).
point them out as flaws, or, more in line with the post-structuralist tradition, we could make sense of the aporias in terms of the intrinsic characteristics of the object of study.

One expression of my approach, in contrast to a more hermeneutically oriented one, is that I do not seek for one interpretation that binds all the pieces together, in neither single publications of the authors discussed, nor in their oeuvre. An example of such reading, that I reject, is presented by James Bohman, who states that “Jürgen Habermas has from the start had the goal of developing a normative democratic theory based on rational consensus”\(^9\). Consequently, he judges all the previous writings against this yardstick. Instead of such a teleological positioning, I prefer to view Habermas’s and Mouffe’s writings as multifaceted productions comprising many heterogeneities. Obviously, that does not mean that I am blind to the changes to the line of argumentation or corrections of the previous statements made by both my theorists. These are possibly more striking in the case of Habermas, who has been extremely productive and has published books and articles for over fifty years now. However, I refuse to ascribe to their oeuvre an intentional, pre-thought end-aim. That would contradict the view on the subject presented in this thesis.

Summing up, I do not intend to read the bulk of texts produced by Mouffe and Habermas as homogeneous wholes. In this aspect my departure points are close to a deconstructive reading, which does not aim to establish the unity of the texts, authors or approaches.\(^10\) The heterogeneities that come across are not treated as mistakes or flaws to be corrected, or as teleological changes. They are rather pointed out as inherent ambiguities or different tendencies present in the texts. At the same time, I do not mean that it is possible to read any text (or author) without searching for some homogeneity, in the form of questions like: what is the meaning of the text? I certainly do impose some unity to the texts analyzed as well as to the collected writings of the authors discussed (for example by speaking of Habermas’s or Mouffe’s theory or position in singular). Even though I focus on the heterogeneity, singularity, and otherness of the studied texts, I need to make sense of them, which is only possible by in part imposing a common language,\(^11\) a Gleichschaltung which is necessary in order to

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compare two texts or even to speak of texts/theories and what they repre-
sent. However, I also try to put this homogeneity in question.\textsuperscript{12} The
changes both authors have made to their works in the course of years are
not seen as some teleological correctives that make the texts more whole or
coherent. They do explicate some unclear points, fill some empty spaces
but this does not result in bringing them closer to a homogeneous product.
The ambiguities are still (and always) there.

\textbf{interpretive pluralism}

The view of texts as heterogeneous or polyphonic leads to an openness for
multiple possibilities of interpretations. Such recognition of different per-
spectives can be called ‘interpretive pluralism’\textsuperscript{13}. The multiplicity of read-
ings/interpretations is also due to a view of interpreting as immersed in the
particular horizons of the reader. Here, hermeneutics is not to be underes-
timated in its constant reminding of the importance of the horizons of un-
derstanding.\textsuperscript{14} However, I do not support a vision of a fusion of these hori-
zons. Georgia Warnke explicates:

\begin{quote}
The first important point to be made about these differences in aesthetic dis-
ussions is that we expect them. We expect that different interpreters will
understand and evaluate the same text or work of art in different ways and
even that the same interpreter will understand and evaluate the same text or
art work in different ways at different times and in different contexts. [...] Yet,
even if certain interpretations of a text or work of art can be wrong, we
do not assume that only one interpretation of a text can be right.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

The interpretive differences in the realm of art and literature are widely
recognized, they are not something we simply tolerate, but expect to learn

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{12} This manner of reading is well explained in Thomassen, “Reading radical demo-
cracy”. Thomassen responds to Clive Barnett’s critique of radical democracy and
claims that it is the homogenizing readings we should avoid. For Clive Barnett’s
representation, and being-with-others”, \textit{Political Geography} vol.23, no.5: 503-528.
\item\textsuperscript{13} Warnke Georgia, “Discourse Ethics and Feminist Dilemmas of Difference”, [in:]
\textit{Feminists Read Habermas. Gendering the Subject of Discourse}, ed. Meehan Johann-
\item\textsuperscript{14} See Gadamer Hans-Georg, \textit{Truth and Method}, Continuum, London & New
\item\textsuperscript{15} Warnke, “Discourse Ethics”, p.255.
\end{itemize}
from. Taking them seriously, we do not expect to resolve these differences. Alternative interpretations are rather sources of different insights, enabling a kind of ‘enlarged understanding’ that Seyla Benhabib proclaims.  

Let me give an example to highlight the consequences of this perspective on interpretation. Patchen Markell, one of the authors engaged in the debate between agonism and deliberation claims that Habermas is mistakenly read as a consensus thinker. He argues that the confusion about Habermas regards the various ways one can read (and translate) Habermas’s central claim that communicative action is oriented toward understanding, agreement or consensus. By means of softening the emphasis on consensus (as a desired end-state) in Habermas’s theory, he claims that Habermas already pre-empts many of the objections raised by agonistic theorists, and that his theory in fact presupposes agonistic political actions. In line with the approach to interpretation applied here, I would argue that the problem brought up by Markell lies in an attempt to present one right reading/interpretation that excludes all others. My position is rather that the interpretation Markell presents is tenable, but requires quite a big portion of good will. For those who do not share this approach toward Habermas at the outset, this interpretation will not be the preferred one. His argument is that there is a wide range of scholars who back up his line of reading. That may be so, but the counter-reading is also supported by a whole range of readers. Besides, I am not sure whether we should judge on the validity of interpretations by simple numbers. Apparently, a consensus on interpretation is not possible in this case either. What I believe is left is an acceptance of the heterogeneities in the texts and openness for multiple interpretations.

Warnke argues that this sort of openness to the interpretations and evaluations of others suggests a possible analogy to the moral domain and her reformulated version of discourse ethics. In this view, the differences that emerge in deliberation would not be sought conciliation; they would rather be something we can learn from; “[T]he fruitfulness of our discussions [would be] less dependent on the force of the better argument than on the insights into meaning we gain from one another.”

Nevertheless, it is not the same as saying that any interpretation is good enough. I do not subscribe to a type of subjectivism where ‘anything

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16 Benhabib Seyla, “Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy”, [in:] Democracy and Difference.
17 Markell, “Contesting Consensus”.
In other words, even though more than one interpretation of a text can be defended, not all interpretations can be sustained. As Stanley Fish teaches us, the judging committee in this case is the interpretive community. From my perspective, this is the only acceptable solution that can guard this thesis from methodological arbitrariness.

Persuasion, or justification of the results before the relevant communities must be a part of the research process. In the face of lack of other justificatory mechanisms that are at hand in natural sciences, such as predictive demonstration, social sciences must rely on persuasion and interventions in the academic milieu as a source of their validity. Turning for a moment to Habermas’s vocabulary, the interpretations are to be treated as validity claims, as utterances that are upheld only by the convincing power of their justifications. Or, as Jason Glynos & David Howarth put it:

The ultimate ‘proof of the pudding’ consists in the production of persuasive narratives that better explain problematized phenomena [...] In this view, then, one ‘test’ of a proto-explanation is the evaluation of publicly available accounts of specific phenomena by a tribunal of critical scholars. And while this tribunal’s acceptance does not determine the validity of a proto-explanation in any simple or straightforward way, these dialogical and discursive practices are surely central in determining what is to count as ‘a candidate for truth and falsity’.

The approach to text and interpretation presented in this chapter translates into practical strategies applied in the remaining chapters. In the course of the thesis I will discuss and critically assess the theories of Habermas and Mouffe. Having the aim of getting to a third position that to some extent surpasses both of these theories, my critical task will be guided by two kinds of reading strategies. Firstly, I will search for aporias, inconsistencies and heterogeneous traces in the texts discussed. And, secondly, my reading will also focus on pointing to another position, which entails a decision—

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taking a normative stance. Hence, my analysis of the texts will bifurcate into the deconstructively inspired search for aporias and the more reconstructively inspired critical critique, which will result in outlining a third position.

Without further ado, let me now proceed to the main task of this thesis – the analysis of the chosen texts. I will start with Mouffe’s and Habermas’s foundations, or their view on ontology and the methods they employ.
In this chapter I intend to explore the methodological grounds of Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories respectively. Habermas designates the presuppositions his theory rests on quasi-transcendental and Mouffe refers to ontology. In the following I will analyse the status of these transcendental/ontological claims (What kind of ontology do they employ?), as well as the way they arrive at them. It will not go unnoticed that Habermas occupies more space in this chapter, which is due to his more elaborate discussions about those issues.

Stephen White’s reflections about ontology provide a good entry for my argument here. He states that “[o]ntology traditionally referred to a fairly restricted field of philosophical reflection concerned with analyzing “being” that was relatively remote from moral-political concerns.”1 It was also traditionally closely connected – sometimes even identified – with metaphysics. He recognizes an ‘ontological turn’ in contemporary political theory. Within it, a different understanding of ontology is in use; here it refers to the question of what entities are presupposed by our scientific theories.2 According to White this ontological turn is a result of “a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those “entities” presupposed

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2 For a similar framing of ‘ontology’ see Glynos & Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p.108: “Instead, an ontological inquiry, for us, focuses attention on the underlying presuppositions for any analysis of politics; it focuses on the ‘basic concepts’ mobilized by a discipline in any empirical and normative investigation.”
by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world.” 3 The example he gives of such an entity that has been put in question is the human subject. 4

**HABERMAS: RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION**

The method Habermas applies in his work is rational reconstruction. It aims to render theoretically explicit the intuitive, pre-theoretical know-how underlying such basic human competences as speaking and understanding, judging and acting. Some of these mechanisms are defined as fundamental and constitute idealizations that guide Habermas’s whole theoretical edifice, his democratic theory included. I will comment on the special status of idealizations in Habermas’s theory later on in this chapter. Let it suffice to say here that they are not only seen as regulative (show the direction) but also constitutive (the practices they explain could not be explained or take place without these idealizations). Habermas states: “I am trying to work out the normative content of the idea of understanding present in language and communication” 5. And more elaborately:

> [M]y references to idealizations have nothing to do with ideals that the solitary theorist sets up *in opposition to reality*; I am referring only to the normative contents that are *encountered in practice*, which we cannot do without, since language, together with the idealizations it demands of speakers, is simply constitutive for socio-cultural forms of life. 6

The ideal is already present in the everyday practice. “The ideal is ‘actually efficacious’ as a presupposition in real practice, and objectivity is actually

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4 White calls the questioned conception of human subject ‘Teflon subject’. In its detachment from the social surrounding and its background traditions it resembles the Sandelian critique of the ‘unencumbered self’. See Sandel, “The Procedural Republic”.


effective in subjective points of view.”7 Habermas’s orientation towards reason and consensus is not deduced from some transcendental source, it is rather conceived as the presupposition always already there, at work in the every-day use of language. Hence, the reconstructed idealizations are called “transcendence from within”8. In contrast to Kant’s ‘ideal’ that was elevated to an otherworldly realm, his idealizations adhere to this-worldly relations. Habermas sees his task as a philosopher in bringing these to light, making the unconscious assumptions visible.

I am seeking a reconstructive analysis, in order to prove what we always already tacitly assume, if we participate in the democratic and constitutional practices that have fortunately taken hold in our societies.9

What is more, the participants in argumentation always start from within the horizon of their lifeworld. In effect, the findings of rational reconstructions are quasi-transcendental, that is, they consider the conditions of possibility, or foundations of communication. The prefix ‘quasi’ aims to highlight the empirical grounding of these findings. Moreover, it also points to the weak status ascribed to these findings (idealizations, or universal presuppositions of discourse) – they are presented as mere interpretations open to falsification.10 By naming his rational reconstructions fallible Habermas puts them under the rules of discourse, i.e., opens them for discursive testing;

Contrary to the stereotype occasionally drawn of me […] I also share Popper’s view that philosophical thought has become just as fallible as scientific thought, and must do without a strong concept of theory. It has long been


8 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.17; see as well Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.20.


10 Compare Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, pp.129-30.
possible to learn from Gadamer that there is no meta discourse – no position which would confer the privilege of always having the last word.11

And elsewhere:

“[T]he reconstruction of the general and necessary presuppositions under which subjects capable of speech and action reach understanding about something in the world […] is no less fallible than anything else.”12

Habermas’s claims to universality and the unconditionality ascribed to his idealizations are therefore tentative.13 Yet, this combination of unconditionality and contestability might seem a bit paradoxical. The conditions of possibility Habermas highlights are necessary, but at the same time hypothetical and fallible. Richard Bernstein does not see a problem here: “Habermas’s fallibilism is not incompatible with making universal claims and seeking to redeem them with the strongest arguments we can give.”14 And Maeve Cooke explains her similar position in this way:

The strategy I propose requires a distinction between the metaphysical content of the idea of the ‘good society’ and its epistemological status. Although the content of the emancipatory perspective guiding critical social theory has an unavoidably static moment of metaphysical closure, its claim to validity can and should be construed dynamically, as inherently open to critical interrogation.15

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Once again, resorting to empirical evidence Habermas aims to render explicit a universal competence that all individuals intuitively possess. In this way, his work is situated between the transcendental and the empirical approaches. In effect, the hypotheses put forth are fallible. That is why I do not follow Mark Devenney in his interpretation of Habermas’s reconstructive method;

[I]n the absence of metaphysical and empirical guarantors, he has to presuppose an ultimate fallibilism [...] While his reconstructive methodology is inherently fallible and, as he consistently acknowledges, subject to either verification or rejection according to the standards of other sciences, this same fallibilism is rarely extended to the results of his analysis.¹⁶

I would say that it is exactly the results of reconstruction that are fallible. Even though it has been argued that Habermas’s fallibilism is rather unspecified as it is unclear how exactly his postulates should be corroborated or falsified.¹⁷

When it comes to the source of fallibilism, the indefinite character of foundations is in Habermas’s theory due to imperfect interpretations and/or faulty arguments. He argues that the universal mechanisms guiding our world can only be accessed through reconstruction, in its more or less accurate interpretation. Habermas explicates:

There is always the possibility that they [rational reconstructions] rest on false choice or example, that they are obscuring and distorting correct intuitions, or, even more frequently, that they are overgeneralizing individual cases.¹⁸

This means that the fallibilism rests in the moment of interpretation of the structures or mechanisms that are there independently of our (mis)readings. It further implies that these imperfections adhering to inter-

¹⁶ Devenney, Ethics and Politics, p.85 (emphasis added).
¹⁸ Habermas Jürgen, “Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences”, [in:] Habermas Jürgen, Moral Consciousness, p.32.
pretation can in principle be overcome. If fallacies of interpretation are a ‘possibility’, there must also be a possibility of interpretations (and rational reconstructions) that avoid such fallacies, i.e., a perfect/ideal rational reconstruction. Lasse Thomassen reads it the same way: “[T]he fallibility of the reconstructions is a matter of not yet having the sufficient knowledge.”19 It is a matter of not yet having found the adequate arguments.

Consequently, Habermas is aware of the element of interpretation that necessarily adheres to the method of rational reconstruction. Indeed, he is aware that his findings are fallible. Nevertheless, he implies that there can be an ideal transparent interpretation, which would get rid of these fallacies and procure solid reconstructions. What he does not see though is the immanence of politics inscribed in the exercise of interpretation.20 There is no such thing as objective, transparent interpretation. Our findings about the quasi-transcendental (if we choose this terminology) are not only fallible due to practical imperfections – they will always remain contingent. The underlying structures will always remain partly obscure to us, due to the fact that these structures are not independent of our interpretations of them. They exist only in our interpretations; they come to being in our making sense of them.21 In effect the fallibility of reconstructions is not only due to empirical obstacles, that Habermas would be ready to acknowledge, but also due to inherent characteristics of the process of interpretation. Put otherwise, reconstructions always include an element of construction. Thomassen again: “Habermasian reconstructions are only one political negotiation, or construction, among others.”22

19 Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, p.39.
20 “All of which is to say that theory’s project – the attempt to get above practice and lay bare the grounds of its possibility – is an impossible one. Theory is a form of practice, as rooted in particular historical and cultural conditions as any other.” Fish Stanley, “Change”, [in:] Doing What Comes Naturally. Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies, Duke University Press, Durham & London 1989, p.156. For different arguments that aim at transcending a strict opposition between theory and practice see McCarthy Thomas, “The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School”, [in:] McCarthy Thomas, Ideals and Illusions. On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory, MIT Press, Cambridge 1991, p.45: “[I]f knowledge is itself understood as a social product, the traditional oppositions between theory and practice, fact and value, and the like begin to break down, for there are practical, normative presuppositions to any social activity, theorizing included.”
22 Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, p.62.
Summing up, and simplifying somewhat, we could say that Habermas’s method amounts to purification of the observed reality to some aspects of communication that he identifies as its quasi-transcendental conditions of possibility and, on the base of these, the construction of a theory of democracy that gives outlet to these aspects of reality. Habermas does this in several theoretical steps which, however, all include construction. He proceeds from choosing some properties of language as fundamental to privileging communicative action. Then, based on communicative action, he constructs his discourse ethics and in the last move – the deliberative theory of democracy. 23

It should be clear, however, that Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality and its constructs such as ‘ideal speech situation’ cannot be applied directly to actual historical circumstances.24 Like all ideals, those of Habermas are abstractions distilled from social complexities.25 Hence, one of the tensions alluded to in the title of Habermas’s book; he locates his social theory of law between the ‘facts’ of social complexity and the ideal ‘norms’ of democracy. This means that we cannot simply dismiss his vision on the ground that he overlooks power, domination, or conflict on the empirical level, as he makes it clear that the mechanisms he chooses as grounds for his idealizations are just one category of mechanisms observed (Habermas is notorious for his multiple typologies and categorizations). However, we can object to naming one of the mechanisms as fundamental and to putting it as a normative ideal for politics. We can also show that these are precisely reconstructions.


25 James Bohman proposes a reading of Between Facts and Norms as an attempt at translating the abstract ideals into more sociologically tenable theories. In this book Habermas tries to respond to the “social fact of complexity” while not abandoning democratic ideals. Bohman, “Complexity, Pluralism”, p.898.
idealizations: Habermas’s “counterfactual imagination”\textsuperscript{26}

The findings of Habermas’s rational reconstructions are called idealizations. In this section I will explore the role they play in his theory, as there is a lot of confusion about their status and also because they contrast Mouffe’s conception of foundations. One thing is clear, they certainly do play an important role and their interpretation has consequences for the conceptualization of communicative action, deliberative democracy, and the subject. Habermas himself acknowledges the centrality of idealizations or counterfactual presuppositions for his theory building:

\begin{quote}
[T]he concept of “counterfactual presuppositions,” or more generally the “vocabulary of the ‘as if’” [is] the nerve of my entire theoretical undertaking. There is still much work to be done in this area.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

It will be argued that in Habermas’s use, idealizations gain an unquestionable, a-political status. Idealizations both stand for something we ought to (and always already do) assume in the beginning of communication (as they spring from quasi-transcendental tendencies present in language), and are supposed to be the outcomes of it.

Habermas speaks of idealizations or normative conditions of possibility on different levels. Some of them are more empirical, other more transcendental. Here, I will only focus on the latter, unavoidable ones. They are depicted as necessary assumptions made in discourse and have the role of rules of the game that together form what Habermas once called ‘ideal speech situation’. He is now skeptical about the accuracy of this term because

\begin{quote}
“Ideal speech situation,” which I introduced decades ago as a shorthand for the ensemble of universal presuppositions of argumentation, suggests an end state that must be strived for in the sense of a regulative ideal.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} For a nuanced and genealogical explanation of different kinds of “idealizations” used by Habermas see Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””. Hereafter I will only take up the idealizations that are linked to the mutual supposition of rationality, and not the suppositions of a shared objective world, or orientation to truth. See ibid., p.26.

\textsuperscript{27} Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.418.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.418.
In spite of the fact that Habermas, paying tribute to numerous criticisms, has acknowledged that the concept could mislead one to think of something to be approximated, instead of highlighting the counterfactual assumptions anyone makes when entering a discourse, and he now rather uses ‘rational discourse’, and firmly holds that we cannot forego making some such idealizations. However, “these idealizations do not imply any anticipation of an ideal end-state”. They should rather be seen as benchmarks, the normative referents that help us judge our current practices, or as Habermas puts it in a recent formulation, as “standards for a self-correcting learning process”. Otherwise put, the latter formulation presents idealizations as critical ideals, that is, counterfactual vantage points from which to assess and challenge extant political practices and institutions. In effect, Habermas’s idealizations play the double role of critical ideals (measuring sticks) and regulative ideas toward which practices should aim (without ever reaching the end-point).

Idealized presuppositions are conditions of possibility of communication and mutual understanding. Even though it is easy to see their counterfactual character, they must be, and are, made in everyday communication. As Michael K. Power explains, “[i]t is the idea that material practices are constituted paradoxically by certain fictions that provide the conditions of possibility of their operations and of their manner of making facts visible”. An example would be the accounting practice that is constituted by economic fictions such as ‘value’ and ‘profit’. For Habermas, such counterfactual fictions active in everyday communication are as follows: the presupposition that linguistic expressions are used with identical meaning, the presupposition of rational accountability, and the presupposition of the

29 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.29; See also Carleheden & Gabriels, “A conversation”, p.251: “But I continue to insist on the idealizing content of the inescapable pragmatic presuppositions of a praxis from which only the better argument is supposed to emerge.”

30 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.419.


34 This example is taken from Michael Power, see ibid., p.212 fn 9.
unconditional character of validity claims. Every single one of these idealizations has been objected to by critics, and further on, in Chapter 4, I will take up some of the objections.

Even though empirically easily deniable (counterfactual), these idealized presuppositions function as critical ideals, having concrete, constitutive influence on our lives. As Habermas puts it, “[c]ounterfactual presuppositions become social facts.” The very assumption of these idealizations brings us closer to them; this is the constitutive power of idealizations, the facticity of the counterfactual. What is more, they are unavoidable, which means that even those who intend to argue against them must resort to them. Describing this paradox Habermas sometimes refers to Karl-Otto Apel’s concept of ‘performative contradiction’. In Habermas’s own, rather convoluted formulation “[a] performative contradiction occurs when a constative speech act k(p) rests on noncontingent presuppositions whose propositional content contradicts the asserted proposition p.” That is, already when entering into discussion we must have made these assumptions (even if unwittingly); the very attempt to deny them is communicative, and thus includes presuppositions of the possibility of mutual understanding and rational consensus. We must assume that our communicative partners understand what we are saying (identity of meaning), and that they are accountable and can rationally discuss the matter, in consequence, we also assume that we might come to a rational consensus.

Habermas rejects the possibility of fully realizing his idealizing presuppositions. Idealizations can never be fully realized, they are rather situated between the real and the ideal, steering our actions without ever being fully attained. Habermas warns us that the idealizations “must not be hypostatized into the ideal of a future condition”, as this would imply an end state or a social utopia. Nevertheless, he states that we act as if these ideals were realizable.

35 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, pp.19f; Habermas Jürgen, “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking”, [in:] Habermas Jürgen, Postmetaphysical Thinking, pp.46f.
36 Ibid., p.47; Compare Carleheden, Det andra moderna, p.28.
38 Maeve Cooke argues that “regulative ideas are inherently unattainable because they negate essential features of what it is to be human and thus some aspect of the unavoidable finitude of human existence.” See Cooke, “Redeeming redemption”, p.423. Even though I agree with Cooke that Habermas’s regulative ideas can be seen as unrealizable, I do not think that it is necessary to invoke some essential characteristics of human beings to show this.
They are regulatory in the sense that they have a motivating force. This is, as Maeve Cooke argues, the intrinsic paradox of the utopian ideals guiding critical theory.\textsuperscript{40} Regulatory ideas must be presented as something at least in principle attainable and only distanced from us due to some socially produced obstacles, while, at the same time they are unattainable because they presuppose an end state. Cooke underlines that we should not content ourselves with this observation but rather see this contradiction as a productive tension. Otherwise, if we choose one of the perspectives, we either end up in ‘finalism’ (a vision of closure of the historical process) or ‘bad utopianism’ (detachment from human conditions and hence loss of the transformative dimension). She argues further that critical social theory must acknowledge the need for motivational utopian images of a condition in which transformative social action would finally have overcome socially produced obstacles to human flourishing; on the other [hand], it must recognize that such utopian visions are imaginative projections that negate essential features of what it is to be human and that, as such, can be imagined but never achieved by human beings.\textsuperscript{41}

Summing up, an interesting aporia or irresolvable paradox emerges in Habermas’s use of the concept of idealizations. The idealizations are both ascribed the role of reconstructed conditions of possibility of communication (and as such are already present) \textit{and} stand for the ideals put forth before us (something not yet realized, and/or never to be fully realized). The assumed counterfactual, but unavoidable idealizations are as well the ideals we are supposed to strive for. What this aporia implies is problematic. The ideals designed as aims of our conduct (symmetry, autonomy etc., which ideally result in rational consensus) also have the status of conditions of possibility of communication (or rational discourse) in the first place. We assume from the start what we are supposed to get at, or strive for. This puts those very ideals beyond challenge. How can we question the ideal (the aim, or orientation) if we simultaneously have to presuppose it at the outset? I find this depoliticized (in the sense of unquestionable) status of ideals that Habermas’s use of idealizations leads to problematic. The conclusion might be that this is precisely why we need a different perspective, in this thesis provided by Mouffe, in order to provide tools for questioning the orientation Habermas sets for democratic politics.

\textsuperscript{40} Cooke, “Redeeming redemption”.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p.424.
Mouffe: retroduction

Even though Mouffe does not choose to do so herself, the method she applies in her theory formation can be called retroduction.\(^{42}\) This term can be generally understood as the process of apprehension of a relationship or phenomenon retrospectively (hence retroduction). It starts from an observation and reflects upon what conditioned this appearance.\(^\text{43}\) In contradistinction to induction and deduction, retroduction consists in putting forth some a posteriori constructs arrived at by abstraction from the ‘real and concrete’. The hypotheses are drawn from observation and *if they were to exist* they would account for the observed phenomena, they would constitute their conditions of possibility. I will soon show how this perspective differs from Habermas’s.

Mouffe (and Laclau) first applies deconstruction in her analysis, especially in the critique of Marxism’s essentialism and class reductionism, and in a second step she resorts to a retroductive logic of theory construction. This entails developing “an alternative ontological grounding of Marxist categories by drawing on a range of new theoretical resources”\(^{44}\). In this thesis, I will focus on this second endeavour of hers, i.e., theory construction.

Mouffe deals with the question of the foundations of her theory by reference to the Heideggerian distinction on the ‘ontological’ and ‘ontic’; “the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted”, or what is “constitutive of human societies”?\(^{45}\) They form “distinct strata in phenomenological analysis, for Heidegger, the ontological is the a priori or transcendentally constitutive features – what Heidegger calls ‘existentials’ – that can be discerned from socially instituted, ontic or a posteriori life”\(^{46}\). Mouffe too is aware of the indispensable character of the quasi-

\(^{42}\) Retroduction most often connotes critical realist analyses in the footsteps of Roy Bhaskar. For different understandings of retroduction (positivist, post-positivist and post-structuralist) see Glynos & Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, chap.1.


transcendental standpoints. “[T]here is no object without conditions of possibility transcending it,”\(^47\) as Ernesto Laclau concludes.

Mouffe’s fundamental presuppositions concern contingency and antagonism, that is, “an ontological negativity or radical contingency that penetrates social structures and identities”\(^48\). Just as in the case of Habermas, she derives these presuppositions from observations of reality and identifies them as already existing in protean form. Hence, she also resorts to some kind of ‘transcendence from within’. For Mouffe, antagonism is this transcendental, even though often counterfactual, presumption. She indicates, “To take account of ‘the political’ as the ever present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and acknowledging the dimension of undecidability which pervades every order.”\(^49\) Antagonism and contingency condition our being with others and, by extension, politics and democracy, which should aim at accommodating these elements in the best possible way. Mouffe argues that “[i]t requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency.”\(^50\) The ontological condition of antagonism and contingency calls for an explicitly hegemonic politics. In much the same manner, Habermas derives his normative vision of democracy from the quasi-transcendental consensus-orientation. Andrew Schaap explains:

The concept of the political [which is defined through antagonism] in this way fulfils an analogous task in agonistic theories of politics to that which consensus performs in deliberative theories: it provides something like a quasi-transcendental principle of counterfactual image of sociality in terms of which to understand ordinary politics.\(^51\)

The same intuition I am developing here is also expressed by William Connelly. I will quote at length, as Connolly’s formulations are very accurate,


\(^{48}\) Glynos & Howarth, Logics of Critical Explanation, p.132.

\(^{49}\) Mouffe, On the Political, p.17.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p.17.

\(^{51}\) Schaap, “Political Theory”, p.61.
even though they partly forgo the arguments that will be developed further on in the thesis.

I concur with Chantal Mouffe, Judith Butler, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche in contending that every identity is punctuated and surrounded by a constitutive outside that is neither teleological in character nor susceptible to full containment by the habits that organize and regulate it. But, first, this thesis is neither located above metaphysics nor one that anyone has demonstrated to be true. To insist otherwise in either respect is to offer an essentialist critique of ‘essentialism’ and, thereby, to recapitulate at one point the very mode of argumentation you oppose at others. It is not above metaphysics, in any generous use of that word, because these invocations of the constitutive outside present the world as without inherent purpose and as replete with energies that exceed every social organization of humans and things. Second, this distinctive and fugitive article of faith remains, like its competitors, a highly contestable rendering of the fundamentals of being.\(^{52}\)

This “article of faith” is what I am trying to get at in this chapter. How do Mouffe and Habermas frame their foundations, how do they legitimize them and how aware are they of the element of “faith” involved?

In the quote above, Connolly renders explicit two commitments – the unavoidable invocation of fundament in interpretation and the deep contestability of those invocations. In other words, Connolly, alongside other post-structuralists, wants us to admit that theories are based on contingent foundations or tentative metaphysics. Mouffe (and Laclau) explain it this way:

Any substantial change in the ontic content of a field of research leads also to a new ontological paradigm. [...] To put the argument in a transcendental fashion: the strictly ontological question asks how entities have to be, so that the objectivity of a particular field is possible. There is a process of mutual feedback between the incorporation of new fields of objects and the general ontological categories governing, at a certain time, what is thinkable within the general field of objectivity.\(^{53}\)


\(^{53}\) Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p.x (emphases added).
Here the question is not about some transcendental preconditions (underlying mechanisms) that are universally valid. Mouffe (and Laclau) is rather occupied with “how entities have to be” in the particular “objectivity”, at a certain time. Recall here Habermas’s admission of fallibility that was only due to imperfect interpretations of the fundamental universal mechanisms. Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) admission of contingent foundations goes further. Not only are they valid at a certain time only. Formulating claims of their theory they write: “Our approach is grounded in privileging the moment of political articulation, and the central category of political analysis is, in our view, hegemony.”  

54 This reveals their consciousness of the moment of choice (or decision) involved in theory construction. And choice is always paired with exclusions of other alternatives. Judith Butler underlines this point arguing that any theory is based on some foundations, that is, premises that function as authorizing grounds. She holds further that these foundations are constituted through exclusions. It is exactly these exclusions which “expose the foundational premise as a contingent and contestable presumption.”  

55 Exclusions reveal the non-necessary character of the present social formation. And further: “That is not to say that there is no foundation, but rather, that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering, a contestation.”  

56 In short, Butler, in congruence with Mouffe, claims that foundations are contingent (constructed) and indispensable, as well as secured through certain exclusionary moves.

This point also touches upon another divergence in Mouffe’s and Habermas’s approach to foundations. As discussed above, both authors identify some mechanisms as conditions of possibility of interpersonal relations, however, the distinctive characteristic of Mouffe’s theoretical framework is her underlining that these conditions of possibility of social relations at the same time constitute conditions of impossibility. They help us realize what options are foreclosed and prevent the identity from full realization or establishment. Habermas, on the other hand, in Mark Devenney’s reading

54 Ibid. (emphases added).


56 Ibid., p.51.
does not view quasi-transcendental arguments as pointing to conditions of impossibility which are at the same time conditions of possibility. Rather his idealisations rely on a quasi-empirical, quasi-transcendental argument seeking to delineate conditions that are absolutely necessary yet hypothetical.\footnote{Devenney, \textit{Ethics and Politics}, p.85.}

With the reservation that the idealizations Habermas describes are not \textit{absolutely} necessary, but rather, as discussed earlier, that the claim to their necessity is fallible, I concur with Devenney’s conclusion.

Summing up the sections about Habermas's method of rational reconstruction and Mouffe’s retroduction let me return to the question of ontology. Stephen White introduces a distinction on two ideal types of ontology; strong and weak. Strong ontologies carry an underlying assumption of certainty in the move from the ontological level to the moral-political (how things are and how political life should reflect it). In contrast, weak ontologies are an expression of the standpoint that “all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable” and that “such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life”\footnote{White, \textit{Sustaining Affirmation}, pp.7-8.}. Hence, weak ontologies are based on ‘contestable foundations’, which basically means that the fundamental entities the theories rely on embody within them “some signaling of their own limits”\footnote{Ibid., p.8.}. As we have seen above, the foundations both in case of Habermas and Mouffe are defined as fallible, and in Mouffe’s case, also contingent. This way, the ontological assumption of contingency is built into the \textit{modus operandi} of Mouffe’s research process. In the same vein, Habermas is faithful to his ideal of deliberation in which propositions are to be defended and presents his rational reconstructions as mere interpretations, which temporarily cherish the status of better arguments but can always be replaced by new, even better ones.\footnote{Glynos & Howarth express a similar transposition of the ontological assumption to their method of theory construction by claiming that “our ontological framework [consisting mainly of the acknowledgement of radical contingency] \textit{is itself historical and ultimately contingent and contestable}. While ontological logics are axiomatic and universal, and exhibit for us something with real effects, they constitute nothing more – though nothing less – than the horizon of our theoretical world view. They comprise, in short, a \textit{theoretical} horizon, which emerges from our \textit{quotidian} experience and is thus in principle subject to historical displacement and contestation.” Glynos & Howarth, \textit{Logics of Critical Explanation}, p.154.} Both Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories thus rec-

\section*{References}

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57 Devenney, \textit{Ethics and Politics}, p.85.


59 Ibid., p.8.

60 Glynos & Howarth express a similar transposition of the ontological assumption to their method of theory construction by claiming that “our ontological framework [consisting mainly of the acknowledgement of radical contingency] \textit{is itself historical and ultimately contingent and contestable}. While ontological logics are axiomatic and universal, and exhibit for us something with real effects, they constitute nothing more – though nothing less – than the horizon of our theoretical world view. They comprise, in short, a \textit{theoretical} horizon, which emerges from our \textit{quotidian} experience and is thus in principle subject to historical displacement and contestation.” Glynos & Howarth, \textit{Logics of Critical Explanation}, p.154.
ognize their own limits and, according to White’s categorization, they place themselves in the tradition of weak ontology. However, Habermas might be interpreted as opening for the possibility of surpassing these limits.

One could argue that the difference between Habermas and Mouffe regarding the status of their foundations is insignificant. After closer scrutiny though, it appears that Habermas’s position is that his rational reconstructions are *contestable*, as I argued, due to imperfections of concrete interpretations, but they are not *contingent*, that is weak due to the inherence of construction (or politics) in any interpretation. As Devenney argues, ‘contingent’ and ‘contestable’ are not entirely replaceable. Mouffe goes one step further and poses that the weak status of her claims rests in the contingency of the structures themselves, and not only as in the case of Habermas, in our fallible interpretations of them. For Habermas, quasi-transcendental form a ground, which we, however, might never discover completely. For Mouffe, there is simply no such ground, there is no essence, or truth to be found. Both Habermas and Mouffe agree that the quasi-transcendental, the conditions of possibility, are always interpreted. However, they draw different conclusions from this observation and perceive the very process of interpretation differently. While Habermas outlines a horizon of, at least in principle, possible perfect interpretation of these quasi-transcendental, Mouffe ascribes the element of politics to any process of interpretation, which means that for her, the quasi-transcendental are truly contingent and exhibit traces of exclusions; they are constructed in the process of interpretation.

**BEYOND FACTS AND NORMS: PERSPECTIVES ON NORMATIVITY**

Above, I have discussed the status Habermas and Mouffe ascribe to their ontological assumptions. I have also focused on the problematic consequences of Habermas’s use of idealizations. Let me now take a look at the normative load of Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories.

**Habermas**

Habermas’s rational reconstructions have clearly normative implications. On the base of the reconstructive findings he constructs his theory of democracy. Richard Bernstein is helpful once again:

61 “Habermas insists though that the results of his reconstructive science are hypothetical not contingent.” Devenney, *Ethics and Politics*, p.95.
Habermas’s theoretical reconstructive project of elucidating the universal conditions for communicative action is not merely ‘theoretical’: it has strong practical consequences for orienting our ethical and political activity. It directs us to the normative task of overcoming those material obstacles that prevent or inhibit undistorted and non-coerced communication. Positively stated, it means working toward the cultivation of practices that bring us closer to the ideal of seeking to resolve conflicts through discourses where the only relevant force is the ‘force of the better argument’.62

Habermas does not seem devoted to the distinction on descriptive and normative propositions. In his work, faithful to the critical theoretic school, he explicitly attempts to overcome the one-sidedness of both normative and social-scientific theories.63 On the one hand, he considers purely normative positions, such as John Rawls’s theory of justice, to be “sociologically naïve”; on the other hand, he charges purely descriptive sociology, such as Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, with collapsing into “legal positivism”.64 Habermas presents his theory of democracy as a solution to these deficiencies. He thinks that a normative and sociological theory of democracy has to be developed at the same time and believes that his rational reconstruction is the key to a successful combination between normative and empirical analyses of social practices.65 Habermas declares:

I’ve never had any ambition of sketching out a normative political theory. Although it’s perfectly sensible, I don’t design the basic norms of a ‘well-ordered’ society on the drafting table. It’s more a matter of the reconstruction of actual conditions.66

Against the background of what has been discussed above in this chapter, Habermas puts forth an empirically informed normative concept of de-

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64 See Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, pp.289ff.
mocracy” or, as Cooke puts it “contemporary critical social theory identifies utopian potentials within existing social reality (Habermas, as we have seen, draws attention to the emancipatory potentials implicit within everyday practices of linguistic communication).” In Habermas’s own words:

As I understand it, this question does not imply an opposition between the ideal and the real, for the normative content I initially set forth for reconstructive processes is partially inscribed in the social facticity of observable political processes. A reconstructive sociology of democracy must therefore choose its basic concepts in such a way that it can identify particles and fragments of an “existing reason” already incorporated in political practices, however distorted these may be.

As noted above, Habermas’s method consists of reconstructing micro-level mechanisms in language, where he identifies necessary presuppositions for communication to take place. John Brady argues that Habermas is not normative in the traditional sense of putting forward

ideals of communicative interaction – rational exchange of viewpoints, the avoidance of force and manipulation, the equal inclusion of perspectives – as norms of action that individuals can or should adopt and these same ideals conceived of as unavoidable conditions of any interaction in which speaker and hearer raise and discuss validity claims.

His claim is that Habermas does not offer ideals as norms of action, that is, directions for individuals and groups acting in politics. “Habermas does not automatically take the position that these ideals should then

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67 Carlehedén, Det andra moderna, p.129. Even though some critics judge that “Despite his repeated attempts to overcome a false juxtaposition of normativity to facticity, this model remains at the level of an abstract “ought”.’’ See Scheuerman, “Between Radicalism and Resignation”, p.63.
68 Cooke, “Redeeming redemption”, p.422.
69 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.287.
70 Brady, “No Contest?”, p.343.
have the power to regulate action.” Indeed, Habermas’s rationally reconstructed idealizations do not directly, or automatically translate into norms of action, there is no determination here. However, I would argue that even if Habermas’s main objective is to reconstruct the context-transcendent presuppositions present in everyday communication, in his theory these ideals obtain this double role, both of unavoidable conditions of interaction (the ‘is’) and as Habermas designs his vision of democratic politics they become normative ideals to be strived for, that is, norms of action (the ‘ought’).

In other words, Habermas starts from his interpretations of ‘what is’, by identifying the basic conditions of possibility of communication. From this ‘description’ of reality, he draws normative conclusions, that some of the mechanisms he identifies are more fundamental, and should be privileged and given more room in our daily communication as well as in democratic practices.

**Mouffe**

I will argue that a similar strategy, i.e., the same link between the reconstructed (retroducted) elements of reality and the normative vision of democratic society, is adopted by Mouffe as well. In her case, the reconstructed elements regard the conflictual and contestatory dimension that is subsequently translated into an agonistic vision of democracy. I do not think that a strict distinction between the descriptive and the normative, the real and the ideal, can be applied to Mouffe’s theory either. Even though she does not develop this point explicitly, it is in congruence with her other borrowings from Derrida. In consequence, she must be suspicious of all forms of boundary-fixing, including the boundary between the normative and the descriptive. As any oppositions, they are interconnected, impure and influenced by each other.

Mouffe sees traces of her normative project in contemporary societies, and at the same time welcomes more such trends. Her claim is that agonis-

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71 Ibid. This, according to Brady, opens up for a synthesis of the deliberative and agonistic conceptualizations of the public sphere. As reconstructions, Habermas’s idealizations are derived from observations of the language structures but do not constitute concrete action norms to be followed by subjects. This interpretation leads Brady to conclude that, in spite of the reconstructed orientation towards mutual understanding, agonistic politics can have a place in Habermas’s vision of democracy. In this way Brady hopes to contribute to the questioning of the binary opposition between consensus and contestation or conflict.
tic pluralism is suited best for capturing the political, with its aspects of contingency, power, hegemony and antagonism that pervade our societies.

[I]t is enough to look around us in the real world to realize that, far from having disappeared, the supposedly ‘archaic’ passions and antagonisms are more active than ever. [...] This should reveal the shallowness of the consensual dream. [...] It is therefore crucial for democratic theory to grasp the dynamics of constitution of those antagonisms instead of wishing them away with pious declarations.72

Her theory of democracy is intended as the best option for cultivating further the elements that are already there in protean form and for dealing with the antagonisms and passions in a democratic way. So, concluding, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism springs from empirical observation and at the same time is a normative postulate. By introducing a new way of conceptualising the political and politics she contributes to creating new ways of thinking about democracy, and opens up for new identifications, in this way bringing us closer to her preferred vision:

Political philosophy has a very important role to play in the emergence of this common sense and in the creation of these new subject positions, for it will shape the ‘definition of reality’ that will provide the form of political experience and serve as a matrix for the construction of a certain kind of subject.73

Jules Townshend argues that Mouffe and Laclau exhibit a difficulty in the step from ‘is’ to ‘ought’, “difficulties in moving from one discourse (neutral/descriptive) to another (ethical preferences)”74. He finds Mouffe’s vision of democracy voluntaristic and inadequately grounded. This in spite of the fact that he observes at the beginning, that Laclau and Mouffe aim at transcending the positive/normative divide.

73 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.19; see also Mouffe, “Radical Democracy”, p.42.
Let me contrast this statement with Andreas Kalyvas’s, which is closer to my reading:

Democratic agonism does not seek to describe real existing democracies but rather to point at a normative vision. Democracy ought to be a permanent and open-ended contest among identities and particularities struggling over self-affirmation, recognition, inclusion, power distribution and the definition of collective meaning.\(^{75}\)

Mouffe’s normative vision, just as in the case of Habermas, springs from the identified ‘ontology of life’. Through retroduction she identifies antagonism and contingency as fundamental components of the human condition and seeks to formulate a theory that gives best expression of these. Life is conflictual and so should be the best political regime. Mouffe presents her interpretations of ‘what is’ and confronts them with what she thinks are inaccurate theories (for example Habermas’s).

By remaining blind to the place of passions in the construction of collective political identities, modern political theory has been unable to understand that the main challenge confronting democratic politics is not how to eliminate passions in order to create a rational consensus, but how to mobilize them toward democratic designs.\(^{76}\)

It is too easy to refute her objections as missing the level of Habermas’s analysis (he speaks of idealizations and normative postulations, she speaks of reality and the empirical level). As I see it, both of them represent different interpretations/reconstructions of what conditions the ‘is’ that result in different normative stances. Mouffe claims that

instead of producing theories about the world as it should be, democratic theorists would be more helpful if they would dedicate their attention to the different ways in which this dimension of conflictuality could be played out in ways compatible with a democratic order.\(^{77}\)

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\(^{76}\) Mouffe, “Politics and passions”, p.616 (emphases added).

\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Here she argues that her vision of democracy is based on a more adequate and empirically validated ontological view of society. Once again, she is also normative (proposing a normative view on the role of passions and conflicts in a democratic order) but starts from a different ontology than Habermas.

**Concluding remarks**

What I have tried to argue for in this chapter is that Habermas’s and Mouffe’s methods are not as far apart as one might think. Habermas’s reconstruction and Mouffe’s retrodiction consist of similar methodological moves and result in a similar entwinement of descriptive and normative levels of analysis. Some scholars argue that Habermas’s method of reconstruction bears close resemblances to critical realism’s retrodiction. Both focus on the conditions of possibility, i.e., deeper quasi-transcendental mechanisms that condition the observable, empirical occurrences. In both cases, the method boils down to an a posteriori reconstruction of some necessary conditions that make the observed anomaly/occurrence possible. However, when we compare Mouffe’s version of retrodiction with Habermas’s reconstruction, the similarities are not that unambiguous. In contrast to critical realists, Mouffe does not assume ‘real things and structures’ as her point of departure. Whereas Roy Bhaskar and critical realists focus on “contingent interaction of necessary causal mechanisms”, Mouffe does not presuppose any such necessary structures or mechanisms. Contingency in her case goes all the way down. This is also, as we have seen, where her and Habermas’s methodological similarities part. Moreover, for Mouffe, the identified conditions of possibility simultaneously form conditions of impossibility of the observed occurrences. That is, Mouffe’s focus is as much on the enabling conditions as on their limiting impact. This form of analysis aims to highlight the exclusions, the omissions as well as what makes the observed phenomena possible.

The ‘rational’ in Habermas’s rational reconstruction points to yet another important divergence between Mouffe’s and Habermas’s methodology. In my view, it is supposed to highlight both the rationality of the underlying structures (their teleology) and the rationality of the research process itself. Mouffe commits herself to another judgment here; her retro-

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78 See Carleheden Mikael, “Kritisk teoretisk metodologi eller konsten att bedriva teoretisk och normativ forskning”, Arbetsrapport 13, Örebro universitet 2007, p.11f; Danermark et al., pp.194-5.

ductions and ontological propositions point to lack of any such overriding logic or design, that is, to a radical contingency of being.

Neither are Habermas and Mouffe in concert when it comes to the status of their reconstructed/retrucked findings. Habermas calls them fallible, even though, as we have seen, it is not a whole-hearted fallibility, and Mouffe presents them as contingent, that is questionable not only due to the imperfections of concrete instances of interpretation, but mainly due to the very rules of the game of interpretation.

When it comes to the relation between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, let me invoke once more White’s distinction between weak and strong ontologies. As an example of the latter he gives Carl Schmitt. In his reading, Schmitt’s “ontological destiny too tightly determines political destiny. […] Ontology certainly prefigures ethical-political life in important cognitive and affective ways, but there is no determination of the one by the other, as Schmitt implies.”

Even though, as discussed above, Mouffe and Habermas do derive their respective normative orientation from the observation of the fundaments of being, that is, ontological postulates or conditions of (im)possibility, these ontological postulates do not translate into direct ethical-political recommendations. In my reading, Arash Abizadeh is polemical rather than ‘just’ to Mouffe’s writings when he argues that one must be careful not to redescribe the empirical phenomena in terms of conceptual or metaphysical necessity. Chantal Mouffe’s work is perhaps the most robust attempt by a political theorist to collapse the empirical and conceptual/metaphysical in this regard, and it is in part successful, at least on the surface, because of existing phenomena that make such a description of political dynamics seem accurate.

Once again, Mouffe does indeed derive her ontological postulations from empirical observations; however, she is definitely not alone here. In such a perspective, Habermas should be no less guilty than Mouffe of “transforming a contingent, empirical possibility into a metaphysical determinative necessity.” Moreover, what I have tried to argue for is that both analyzed authors subscribe to the idea of hypothetical, or weak foundations. And

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82 Ibid., p.54.
neither of them speaks of any metaphysical determinative \textit{necessity}, or a directly translatable link between the ontological and the recommended norms of action. Instead, they try to identify the conditions of possibility of the socio-political life.

From the point of view defended here, both Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories are descriptive-normative. In a way, both are expressions of a deconstruction of the is/ought divide. That is why I will not put much effort in making the distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ in the following analysis. The ‘is’ recurrent in the quotes from both theorists should thus be read as \textit{both} conditions of (im)possibility reconstructed from reality, \textit{and} the recommended normative orientation. Simon Critchley this time:

\begin{quote}

Purely descriptive theories are impossible, which is widely acknowledged (even though the distinction between normative and descriptive still haunts much of political theoretic analyses). The reasons for that are that strictly factual or descriptive theories, in the sense of value-neutral descriptions of the facts are impossible – all ‘facts’ are discursive and hence interpretative constructs. Moreover, any apprehension of facts is governed by normative elements.\textsuperscript{83}

\end{quote}

A strict separation between normative and descriptive, between domains of morality and knowledge, elaborated on by Kant and positivists is untenable. Questions of fact and explanation on the one hand, and questions of critique and normative evaluation on the other are intertwined.\textsuperscript{84} Laclau expresses it this way: “things could have been described the way they are from a certain perspective involving a normative dimension and, conversely, [...] there is no factual reading which will not have some normative consequences.”\textsuperscript{85} In the context of both theories under scrutiny in this thesis, they not only offer explanations of the present phenomena but also a critical stance to those, which entails a normative direction.

\textsuperscript{83} Critchley, “Is There”, p.117.


“[C]omfortable” was one of Janice Wilder’s favourite words. She was fond of the word “civilized,” too, and of “reasonable” and “adjustment” and “relationship.” Hardly anything upset or frightened her: the only things that did – sometimes to the point of making her blood run cold – were things she didn’t understand.

Richard Yates, *Disturbing the Peace*

In this chapter I will introduce and critically assess Jürgen Habermas’s theory of democracy. The discussion will be steered by the tangent surfaces, that is, areas that have been subject to both Mouffe’s and Habermas’s concern, this in order to provide some basis for cross-references. The questions posed in this chapter are derived from Mouffe’s critical objections; Does Habermas recognize and validate difference in his theory? Does he give an account of contingency? I believe that these questions point to central problems in Habermas’s democratic theory, as well as they hint at the direction I want to develop in the last chapter of the thesis. The aspects analyzed will be deliberation as a way of conducting politics, with its restriction to certain kinds of utterances (rational and universalizable), Habermas’s view on conflict and pluralism, and, not surprisingly, consensus as an aim of deliberation.

As noted above, Mouffe has directed several points of critique toward Habermas’s writings. She, alongside other critics, is mostly skeptical about Habermas’s focus on consensus and rationality in theorizing democracy. Moreover, she purports that deliberative democracy à la Habermas fails to valorize difference:

The shortcomings of the model of “deliberative democracy” are also evident in its incapacity to come to terms with the nature of pluralism. [...] it does not acknowledge the ineradicable dimensions of undecidability and antagonism present in social relations.¹

¹ Mouffe Chantal, (1997) “Decision, Deliberation, and Democratic Ethos”, *Philosophy Today* vol.41, no.1, p.27.
In effect, Mouffe argues, Habermas misses the dimension of ‘the political’ in his definition of democracy and does not recognize the import of contingency. In this chapter I will argue that he only recognizes ontic, or empirical contingency, in contradistinction to ontological, or radical contingency.\(^2\) A few words of explanation are in place here. Empirical contingency, or structural uncertainty is well explained in the oft cited quote from Claude Lefort:

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\text{[D]emocracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life.}^3
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As I see it, empirical contingency is an expression of openness, non-closure and disruption of the ‘grounds’ (dissolution of the markers of certainty in the quote above). This opens multiple paths of possibility – everything can, in principle, be otherwise. Ontological contingency, on the other hand, as Jason Glynos & David Howarth explicate, “opposes empirical contingency’s sense of possibility with a sense of impossibility: the constitutive failure of any objectivity to attain a full identity.”\(^4\) It is an expression of the persistent negativity that permeates any identity. Hence, ontological contingency accentuates both openness to alternative possibilities (empirical contingency) \textit{and} the sense of some fundamental impossibility of closure. It is my contention, that the choice of either empirical or ontological (or radical) contingency has huge implications for our conceptualizations of politics and subject.

Let me put it this way: “Today […] the experience of contingency is a whirlpool into which everything is pulled: everything could also be other-

\(^2\) For the distinction between ontic and ontological contingency see Glynos & Howarth, \textit{Logics of Critical Explanation}, pp.109f. The other term used by Mouffe in the quote above, ‘undecidability’, has a slightly different connotation, mostly associated with Derrida. In the following, I will try to reserve this term to refer to situations that liken the Derridian use. See Norval Aletta, (2004) “Hegemony after deconstruction: the consequences of undecidability”, \textit{Journal of Political Ideologies} vol.9, no.2, p.146.


wise”. Surprisingly enough, these are the words of Habermas and not Mouffe. Apparently, he also shares the perception of social reality as unfixed. Nevertheless, whereas for Mouffe, contingency is \textit{radical}, or \textit{ontological} (belongs to the level of defining characteristics of being expressed by recognition of an irreducible element of negativity), for Habermas it is only \textit{empirical}, or \textit{ontical}. This leads them to disparate conclusions. Mouffe argues that we should recognize this state of radical contingency as a condition of possibility of democratic politics and affirm it. Habermas, on the other hand, sees contingency as a starting point that ought to be limited by consensus. He maintains that we should wish for and orient our actions towards consensus. In the insecure and unstable surrounding, Habermas presents language as the safe haven that supports his normative postulates. However, as we will see, even in this conception, it is not a deterministic tendency, as the intrinsic inclination of language toward consensus can be jeopardized by the elements of intersubjectivity present in any communication (Das Nein sagen Können).

**DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY – INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Let me start with a short presentation of deliberative democracy before I proceed to a more detailed analysis of Habermas’s different concepts. Habermas’s two enduring interests in political theory and rationality come together in his discourse theory of deliberative democracy. James Bohman argues: “The challenge here is to show how an idealized model of practical discourse connects with real institutional contexts of decision-making.”\textsuperscript{6} Habermas is one of the main representatives and inspiration sources for the approach to democracy that has come to be named deliberative.\textsuperscript{7} Especially his \textit{Between Facts and Norms}, first published in German in 1992, counts among the seminal works on the theory of deliberative democracy. In this conception of democratic politics, citizens or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Habermas, “The Unity of Reason”, p.139.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Bohman & Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas”; The same observation is expressed by William Rehg in his introduction to Habermas’s \textit{Between Facts and Norms}: Rehg William, “Translator’s introduction”, [in:] Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms}, pp.ix-x.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Some other representatives of this approach are: Seyla Benhabib, James Bohman, Joshua Cohen, John Dryzek, James Fishkin, Amy Gutmann & Dennis Thompson, and Iris Marion Young. It goes without saying, these authors do not present any monolithic view on democracy. Their conceptions differ in many respects but they, nevertheless, form a recognizable ‘school’ of thought. In the following, I will only focus on Habermas’s version of deliberative democracy.
\end{itemize}
their representatives seek to give one another mutually acceptable reasons to justify the laws they adopt. The reasons appeal to certain principles.

One such rule guiding Habermas’s version of deliberative democracy is called discourse principle (D) and reads:

D: Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses.  

Habermas explains that (D) is not only a principle of moral discourse but an overarching principle of impartial justification that holds for all types of practical discourse. In other words, the (D) principle is a benchmark for deliberative procedures and results. It sets the ambition of inclusiveness, of representing the interests of all possibly affected, that is, “anyone whose interests are touched by the foreseeable consequences of a general practice regulated by the norm at issue”10. This principle, while emphasizing participation in public discourse, retains the strong criterion of consensus or the agreement of all (affected) citizens as the goal of democratic practice. Importantly, it is not an ideal of direct democracy, mind the “could agree” in the quote, which opens for representation of absent interests that might be affected by the norm under scrutiny. Habermas explains “rational discourse” in the quote above as “any attempt to reach understanding over problematic validity claims”11 that conforms to the rules of unconstrained deliberation. I will discuss the demand of consensus and the idealized preconditions of deliberation later on in this chapter.

Habermas distinguishes between politics as informal and formal will and opinion formation. He calls this a ‘two-track’ process in which there is a division of labor between ‘weak publics’ – the informally organized public sphere that does not encompass decision-making, and ‘strong pub-

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8 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p.107. For a discussion on the changes Habermas introduced to the D principle in *Between Facts and Norms* with respect to earlier formulations see Kettner Matthias, “The Disappearance of Discourse Ethics in Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms*”, [in:] *Discourse and Democracy*.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.
lics’ – i.e., parliamentary bodies. Moreover, politics in Habermas’s conception also comprises formally organized institutions, that is, the administration. This corresponds to a conceptual division of political power into communicative and administrative power. The link between these two is provided by law and its form of legal power that is supposed to translate communicative into administrative power. Of the three kinds of power; administrative, legal and communicative, the communicative is seen as the most important in democratic societies. Habermas underlines that all manifestations of political power ultimately should derive from communicative power. Even if indirectly, administrative power needs to legitimize itself by reference to discursive processes based in civil society and the medium of law simply transfers communicative power into administrative power.

As noted in the Introduction, it is in this understanding of public autonomy, or the ultimate reference to public will- and opinion formation in the process of legitimization that we can trace the expression of Habermas’s radicalism (his meaning of ‘radical democracy’). Processes of public discourse must influence formal decision-making in legislative bodies in order for them to be legitimate. Habermas calls this requirement the principle of democracy:

only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.

He presents the democratic principle as a specification of the (D) principle for a specific kind of discourse – the legal-political one. On the other hand, it is supposed to pull together all forms of practical discourses and sets forth conditions of their external institutionalization; it links the idea-

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12 Habermas borrows these terms from Nancy Fraser who used them to describe the Habermasian conception of the public sphere in Fraser Nancy, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, [in:] Habermas and the Public Sphere, ed. Calhoun Craig, MIT Press, Cambridge 1992.

13 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.169.

14 Ibid., p.110.

15 The other specification he discusses is the universalization principle (U) that regards moral discourses. See ibid. I will take up this principle further on in the chapter.
lized discourses to the demands of institutional realization in complex societies.  

The other characteristic analytical distinction Habermas introduces in *Between Facts and Norms* is the division between different forms of practical reason and corresponding forms of practical discourse. He speaks of moral, ethical and pragmatic discourses. For my purposes it will suffice to focus on the distinction between ‘moral’ and ‘ethical-political’ discourses. Moral discourses concern questions of justice, or what is right, that is, in the interest of all. Here such meta-norms as human rights are decided. Other norms concerning questions of self-realization, or the realization of the ideas of the good, both individually and collectively are labeled ‘ethical’ discourses. These give expression to conceptions of the ‘good life’ shared by members of a community. Consequently, the norms decided in ethico-political discourses are only valid within the community, and we should not expect those issues to win universal consensus. They are oriented at understanding “who we are” and “who we want to be”. Importantly, in this view, morality, that is the wide perspective of what is right for all affected, is prioritized over the local, situated ethical perspective of what is good for me (us). The moral (the just) sets the limits for the ethical (plurality of the conceptions of the good). Many scholars have pointed to the too rigid (or simply analytic character of the) distinction between moral and ethical discourses, and argue that “they are two interdependent aspects of the same problem”.

After this succinct presentation of some distinctions that will help me navigate through Habermas’s democratic theory, I will soon proceed to a

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16 Bohman & Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas”.
18 On Habermas’s distinction between ethical and moral reasons see ibid., pp.162-68.
19 In Munnichs Geert, “Rational Politics? An Exploration of the Fruitfulness of the Discursive Concept of Democracy”, [in:] *Discourse and Democracy*, p.190. Munnichs argues that the arguments used in ethico-political discourses acquire an unclear status. How rational and universal are they supposed to be? Habermas states that they have a “relative validity, one that depends on context”. See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p.156. How can we handle competing self-understandings within communities that are rather characteristic of our contemporary plural societies?
20 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, pp.386f.
more in-depth analysis of the aspects of his theory that shed light on the questions posed in the beginning of this chapter (Does Habermas validate difference? Does he leave room for contingency in his democratic theory?).

**Politics as deliberation**

As noted in the Introduction, Habermas, in line with Mouffe, undeniably stands for a broad understanding of democratic politics. However, from a Mouffean perspective, even if he indeed widens the range of (democratic) politics, Habermas does not ensure the political a place in his theory of democracy. Ignoring the primacy of the political, which Mouffe has made her trademark, Habermas consequently fails to give conflict, antagonism as well as contingency their proper place in his theory of democracy. Mouffe finds both interest group pluralism and deliberative democracy guilty of ignoring the nature of the political;

But this attempt to annihilate the political is doomed to failure because it cannot be domesticated either through calculus of interests or rational deliberation. As was pointed out by Carl Schmitt, the political can derive its energy from the most diverse sources and emerge out of many different social relations: religious, moral, economic, or other. [...] To deny this dimension of antagonism does not make it disappear; it only leads to impotence in recognizing its different manifestations and in dealing with them.22

She equates Habermas’s politics with consensus-seeking and argues that he omits the most fundamental aspect of politics – its latent political or antagonistic dimension. In Mouffe’s eyes, Habermas’s politics is depoliticized or anti-political.23

It is my contention, that Mouffe is a bit too quick in criticizing Habermas’s definition of politics. Admittedly, the political does not have any ontological status for Habermas, but his conception of politics is far more complex than she seems to argue. By reducing Habermas’s concept of politics to consensus-seeking, Mouffe seems to ignore his ponderings about the mainly strategically oriented politics conducted in the system. Even if we read her critique as a critique of Habermas’s conception of politics limited to the lifeworld, it is not fully accurate. Within the lifeworld as well Habermas allows for other than consensual modes of decision-making. According to him

23 Mouffe, On the Political, p.87.
Politics cannot coincide as a whole with the practice of those who talk to one another in order to act in a politically autonomous manner. [...] The concept of the political in its full sense also includes the use of administrative power within the political system, as well as the competition for access to that system.24

The system is ruled by completely other means than the lifeworld. In our modern complex societies, the systemic coordination executed by market and administration relieves actors of the demands of strongly communicative actions. The relatively autonomous subsystems of administration (steered through power) and economy (steered through money) function according to other logics than the communicative one. ‘Lifeworld’, in contrast, refers to domains of action in which consensual modes of action coordination should predominate.25

As Nancy Fraser has pointed out, there are two possible interpretations of Habermas’s position here. One takes the distinction between the two action contexts as absolutely disparate. Thus, system-integrated contexts would involve no consensuality, whereas socially integrated contexts would involve no strategic calculations in the media of power and money. The second interpretation takes this contrast as a difference in degree. In this reading, orientation towards consensus would be traceable in system-integrated contexts, but would not be the dominating mode of action and, analogously, strategic action would be present in lifeworld as well.26 I find this latter interpretation more plausible, and more accurate with respect to Habermas’s concern of taking account of the ‘fact’ of social complexity. Hence, I believe that we should not ascribe communicative action solely to the lifeworld and strategic action to the system;27 they interpenetrate each other in many ways (take the example of family that Habermas places in lifeworld while the relations between family members are obviously partly dependent upon material resources, that is, the media of money that, ac-

24 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.150.
25 ‘Lifeworld’ refers to the background resources, contexts, and dimensions of social action that enable actors to cooperate on the basis of mutual understanding: shared cultural systems of meaning, institutional orders that stabilize patterns of action, and personality structures acquired in family, church, neighbourhood, and school. See Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol.1, Chap. 6.
27 See Carlehed, Det andra moderna, p.58.
According to the ‘absolute differences’ reading, do not belong to this sphere of action). What is more, we should rather see the distinction between lifeworld and system as analytical, pointing to different aspects of social interaction and cooperation. Irrespective of how definite a distinction we draw, one thing is clear – the full picture of Habermas’s understanding of politics must comprise both lifeworld and system, and hence consensus is not even for Habermas an aim for all political matters.

Habermas underlines his awareness that communication is just one action form among others. Even in the lifeworld deliberation does not saturate the field of politics. Other actions such as bargaining, compromises and voting also have their legitimate place there. This said, while acknowledging this differentiation of the possible political actions, Habermas nonetheless ascribes a special status to communicative action oriented to consensus. He sees it as a fundamental concept and “cornerstone of [his] theory of democracy”. Other forms of action than the communicative that are included in the concept of politics bear resemblance to it. Otherwise put, communicative action is one type of action among others and the most fundamental, from which other types of action are, in a sense, derivative. “Fair bargaining then, does not destroy the discourse principle but rather indirectly presupposes it. [...] This applies mutatis mutandis to ethical-political discourses as well.” In short, communicative action is guaranteed primacy before strategic, or put more forcefully, strategic action is ‘parasitic’ on the communicative.

Summing up, even if in his theory Habermas gives priority to communicative action as the main component of democratic politics, we must not forget his awareness of the existence of other forms of action that are necessarily present in democratic politics. What is more, the whole sphere of the system must be taken into account as well. Habermas’s focus on communicative action could be partly explained by former theorists’ stress on strategic action as paradigmatic for politics. Consequently, Habermas sees the theory of communicative action as his contribution to the theory of

29 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.283; see also Bohman, “Complexity, Pluralism”, p.905.
30 Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, p.246.
31 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.167.
society and politics and not a substitution of other forms of action. He admits that there are subject matters better suited for other than consensual/discursive means of decision-making, such as ethical questions about the good life or distributive conflicts between different interest groups (but never says that they are excluded from communicative mediation, only better suited for other means). Although, whatever form politics takes, its deliberative character is decisive in the judgment of the grade of its democratization. That might be the reason why Mouffe, along with other critics, equates Habermas’s conception of politics with deliberation. Once again, such a reduction might be explained by Habermas’s major focus on deliberation in discussing politics. In the following I will focus on politics as deliberation as I take this to be the most innovative part of Habermas’s thinking, and the one that has inspired a whole range of followers in democratic theory. Most importantly, it is here we can find the radical potential of Habermas’s theory. It is also here Mouffe places the explicit kernel of her critique. Concluding the discussion above, it is one thing to focus on a specific aspect of Habermas’s democratic theory – politics as deliberation, it is quite another to accuse Habermas of reducing politics to deliberation, which is simply not the case.

After these general remarks on Habermas’s understanding of politics, I will now investigate the meaning of ‘deliberative’ in deliberative democracy in his theory. The next two sections are labeled ‘opening’ and ‘closing deliberation’ and aim to highlight, in the first one, the amount and kind of contingency included in Habermas’s conception of the deliberative processes, and in the second one, the circumventions of contingency he introduces in his democratic theory.

**OPENING DELIBERATION**

Deliberation is obviously a fundamental concept in the theory of deliberative democracy. Contrary to Mouffe’s assertion that Habermas overlooks contingency altogether, I will argue that this is the element of Habermas’s theory that has the potential for the contingent. Even though structured by and dependent on the idealized presuppositions of formal pragmatics, deliberation includes several unforeseeable elements such as the open structure of deliberation guaranteed by the aim of better and not the best argument and the intersubjective moment of taking yes/no positions with regard to validity claims raised. However, it will also be argued that Habermas indeed includes some elements of closure even at this point, by introducing

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exclusionary requirements for what arguments should ‘count’ in deliberation.

For Habermas, deliberation is an argumentative practice that is as inclusive and continuous as possible. It is a kind of ‘endless conversation’, completely inclusive both thematically and socially. He seeks grounds for such a conceptualization in the structure of language itself;

[T]he ideal limit of complete inclusiveness […] is precisely what the practice of argumentation aims at by its very structure. Rational discourse is a process that ensures the inclusion of all those affected and the equal consideration of all the interests at play.

A practice can only count as deliberation/argumentation if it meets certain pragmatic presuppositions. These are: the openness and full inclusion of everybody affected, the symmetrical distribution of communicative rights, the absence of force in a situation in which only the force of the better argument is decisive, and the sincerity of the utterances of everybody affected. Translating it into the political lingo, these criteria would correspond to the value of democracy, publicity, inclusion, and egalitarianism. These are all undoubtedly strong idealizations, that are counterfactual, but as Habermas assures us, the participants make these assumptions in actum. He maintains that even though they seem quite unlikely from the observer perspective, they are actually in force in concrete practices of communication. The participants must bracket these realizability reservations and assume their partners’ rationality, accountability and so on in order to be motivated to engage in communication at all, or so the argument goes.

The practice of argumentation sets in motion a cooperative competition for the better argument where the orientation to the goal of a communicatively reached agreement unites the participants from the outset.

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35 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.29.
36 Ibid., p.33.
37 Habermas formulates these presuppositions slightly differently in different works. Compare Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, p.44; Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.34; Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, pp.387-8.
38 Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, p.17.
39 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.35.
40 Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, p.44 (emphasis added).
The participants in deliberation, or argumentation, aim at convincing other participants of the superiority of their validity claims and the only permitted means in this process is the ‘forceless force of the better argument’. Habermas purposefully does not speak of the best but only better argument here. We need humbly to talk of better arguments, as “no evidence is decisive and no arguments are compelling “in the final instance”.”\(^{41}\) There could always emerge new perspectives that would shed light on the subject matter or new participants might come into play. This choice of better argument implies openness for future better validity claims, whereas the best argument would end all communication.\(^{42}\) The paradoxical moment in Habermas’s theory is that consensus could be read as just such a ‘best’ argument that would empty the meaningfulness of all deliberation. I will come back to this point in due course.

The decisive moment of deliberation is the taking of yes/no positions by the participants in argumentation. In this way they validate each others’ claims, or judge the convincing power of arguments. “[F]or the participants, the success of attempts at mutual understanding is gauged unmistakably by the public “yes” and “no” of the addressees.”\(^{43}\) What is of interest here is the participants’ possibility to say No, “das Nein sagen Können”\(^{44}\). Habermas will see it as a check-point for inclusiveness. The participants can object to arguments raised (but still have to justify this objection) for example when they discover that the arguments used do not conform to the (D)principle. However, it also sheds light on the ultimate power of the deliberative parts to accept, or to reject the validity claims raised in deliberation. By such a rejection, the whole aim of deliberation, namely consensus, is jeopardized. And the power to do that is in the hands of the interacting subjects. This strong intersubjective element in Haber-

\(^{41}\) Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.36.

\(^{42}\) Borradori highlights an important reservation: “The idea that there is always a better argument clearly presupposes a fundamental epistemological unity – namely, the existence of a single scheme within which all possible options can be ranked according to a unity of measurement”. Borradori Giovanna, “Reconstructing Terrorism. Habermas”, [in:] Borradori Giovanna, Philosophy in a Time of Terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2003, p.60 fn 29.

\(^{43}\) Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.423.

\(^{44}\) Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.324; Habermas Jürgen, “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere”, [in:] Habermas and the Public Sphere, p.445.
Habermas’s theory is where we should search for his admission of contingency.\textsuperscript{45} The possibility to say No inscribed in every communicative action might be read as an unpredictable element introduced to deliberation. I would argue that we can find the potential for openness here. This potentiality is, however, dependent upon the notion of the subject employed by Habermas. I will come back to these ponderings in Chapter 6.

Patchen Markell is close to my line of argumentation on this point.\textsuperscript{46} He argues that Habermas’s account of communicative action and discourse ethics is intrinsically linked with the fallibilistic nature of validity and the reflexivity of discourse. Fallibilism consists in the claim that all agreements reached are in principle subject to revision in the light of new relevant arguments; the reflexivity of discourse consists in the self-critical nature of communication, which implies that no argument is in principle immune to critical evaluation in argumentation. This seems like statements very close to the Mouffean acknowledgement of openness and unpredictability of the political process. However, Markell’s conclusion that “Habermas here acknowledges the \textit{fragility} of democratic legitimacy, which results from its paradoxical dependence on unpredictable and potentially disruptive modes of political action”\textsuperscript{47} is a bit too hasty. Once again, the unpredictability and disruption hinges upon the concept of the subject Habermas employs.

\textbf{Closing deliberation}

The above characteristic of deliberation leads us to perceive it as a potentially open practice. Yet Habermas introduces some restrictions here. As Mouffe asserts:

[t]here is of course nothing objectionable about establishing conditions to be met in order to participate in the deliberation. Indeed, no deliberation could ever take place without such limits. What I am arguing is that it is necessary to be aware of this necessary move and of the nature of the limits in order to acknowledge its consequences.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Habermas forcefully argues for deliberation as interactive. He sees the idea of “deliberation within” as secondary. Internal discussion (with projected discussants) is an alternative to intersubjectivity, but comes second to intersubjectively obtained rational decisions and enlarged understanding (or consensus). Compare Goodin Robert E., (2000) “Democratic Deliberation Within”, \textit{Philosophy and Public Affairs} vol.29, no.1: 81-109.

\textsuperscript{46} Markell, “Contesting Consensus”.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.393.

\textsuperscript{48} Mouffe, “Decision, Deliberation”, p.29.
This is exactly the task of this section – to explore the nature of the limits Habermas puts to deliberation. I will show that he constrains his rational deliberation to certain forms of communication. These stem from the idealizing presuppositions he identifies as necessary conditions enabling communication; ‘unconditional character of validity’ and ‘rational accountability’, or universalizability and rationality.

**universalizability requirement**

Starting with universalizability, according to Habermas, the validity claims raised need to be detached from their specific conditions or environment. He states that arguments used in deliberation are Janus-faced, being at once immersed in a concrete context (stemming from the lifeworld of the communicative partners) and at the same time pointing beyond that context:

> The ideal moment of unconditionality is deeply ingrained in factual processes of communication, because validity claims are Janus-faced: as claims, they overshoot every context; at the same time, they must be both raised and accepted here and now.⁴⁹

The claims to validity are by necessity always locally accepted, but, at the same time, they transcend the local and become context-unbound.⁵⁰ Such context-transcending is conducted by the projection of a limitless communication community (as a substitute for direct access to all perspectives). In other words, we are supposed to express ourselves abstracting from the local conditions, in universal terms that could have been accepted by everyone (affected). In the domain of moral discourses this is expressed by the universalization principle (U) that “works like a rule that eliminates as nongeneralizable content all those concrete value orientations with which particular biographies or forms of life are permeated”⁵¹. However, Habermas also admits that it is never fully possible to eliminate the factic-

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⁵⁰ This in-between stance of validity claims is by Habermas presented as yet another expression of the transgression between facticity and validity in law, or the empirical and the normative. See ibid., p.21.

⁵¹ Habermas, “Moral Consciousness”, p.121. It is worth noting that this logic does not rule over ethical discourses, that is, discourses about the good life that are by definition locally situated and context bound.
ity of the existing context. That is, “even the rationally grounded political will retains a certain contingency insofar as it rests on context-dependent reasons”\textsuperscript{52}, in other words, the particular always permeates the universal, even though the universal (moral, the right) is formally given priority to the particular (ethical, the good). Habermas argues that within the frame of the universally formulated moral norms multiple conceptions of the good are possible, that is, multiple ethical communities are allowed for within the frame of commonly accepted moral principles.\textsuperscript{53}

I would argue, following Mouffe, that Habermas’s requirement of stating arguments in a universalized, context unbound mode denies the very condition of their formulation.\textsuperscript{54} Any voice in deliberation has its say just because of its specifically situated and particular embeddedness. Mouffe underlines the importance of situatedness and concrete contexts from which understanding springs:

The free and unconstrained public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility since the particular forms of life, which are presented as its ‘impediments’ are its very conditions of possibility. Without them no communication, no deliberation would ever take place.\textsuperscript{55}

The question directed at Habermas is whether it is at all possible to transcend the situated condition (possible not in the empirical sense, but in the sense of conforming to the condition of the formulation of a position, argument etc.). Indeed, he acknowledges our different anchorages, expressed by the reference to the lifeworld we are rooted in, but at the same time states that we can detach ourselves from them in order to come across the borders of our particular lifeworld and understand others. In other words, we can bracket our context and adopt a wider perspective or see with the eyes of an Other (mutual perspective taking). Habermas continues:

\textsuperscript{52} Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms}, p.157.

\textsuperscript{53} Compare John Rawls’s explication of the priority of the ‘right’ before the ‘good’: “A conception of political justice must contain within itself sufficient space, as it were, for ways of life that can gain devoted support. In a phrase: justice draws the limit, the good shows the point.” Rawls John, (1988) “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good”, \textit{Philosophy and Public Affairs} vol.17, no.4, p.252.


\textsuperscript{55} Mouffe, \textit{The Democratic Paradox}, p.98.
For irrespective of cultural background, all the participants intuitively know full well that a consensus based on insight is not possible [without] a shared willingness to look at one’s own traditions through the eyes of a stranger.\textsuperscript{56}

Hence, mutual perspective taking is here presented as the very condition of rational consensus. At the same time, according to what has been said above, communication is always locally anchored in our lifeworlds. What \textit{conditions} understanding must at the same time be \textit{transcended} in order to enable it. My proposition to get beyond this paradox is to go through a genuine acknowledgement of our hermeneutic condition. By this I mean that our horizon of understanding is always local, we can meet an Other and seek for (broader) understanding only from a particularistic position. However, I believe that it is not enough to recognize local anchorage as a necessary entry condition. I think that we should abandon the assumption that this situatedness can or should be transgressed. In Chapter 7 I will argue that instead of mutual perspective taking we could see communication as widening our range of vision, limiting our ambitions to seeing the Other, to admitting its presence (also within ourselves).

Habermas also argues that in our complex societies norms become even more general and abstract, as their justification must satisfy a wider range of criticisms due to increased pluralism and diversity. He notes that:

\begin{quote}

as interests and value orientations become more differentiated in modern societies, the morally justified norms that control the individual’s scope of action in the interest of the whole become even more general and abstract.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Within a homogeneous society, there would be no need to satisfy such a wide range of criticism and objections from the differing positions, and the justification of norms would be less demanding. For example, in the communist, predominantly Catholic Poland before 1989, the definition of marriage was unproblematically ascribed to heterosexual couples and the rights of gay persons were not even thinkable. This meant that validating claims in discussions about marriage in such a context was narrow and


\textsuperscript{57} Habermas Jürgen, “Morality and Ethical Life: Does Hegel’s Critique of Kant Apply to Discourse Ethics?”, [in:] Habermas, \textit{Moral Consciousness}, p.205.
relatively easier when compared to the complexity of the issue in a more pluralistic and democratic Poland after 1989, where a new aspect, gay rights, has been added. It obviously does not mean that gay persons were not present or did not form couples in Poland before 1989, but only that such subject positions were not allowed for within the official public sphere. It followed that their rights could not be acknowledged and, importantly, that the homogeneity of the Polish society was not a simple ‘fact’ but an effect of the suppression of differences.

According to Habermas, in a post-conventional society only the norms that can represent principles generalizable within pluralism by gaining the support of all will survive.\(^{58}\) What will be even clearer in the section dedicated to consensus, Habermas makes a surprising link between consensus and difference. Here he argues that a more differentiated or pluralistic society is even more in need of consensus. I find it sound to argue that the sphere of obviousness in a pluralist society shrinks, which makes the justification of norms more difficult. However, I do not think that we have to jump to consensus from such a standpoint. As Stanley Fish observes, in a multiple context these abstracted and universalized norms will become the place of political struggle of meaning. The universalized norms (or concepts) will become even more contested.\(^{59}\)

Another thing is that the outcome of communication is often presented and perceived by the participating parts as universal (i.e., transcending the particularistic situatedness) while it is just another form of perspectivism. In other words, it might be presented as universal but in due fact it is always a kind of hegemonic claim that gains the status of obviousness. Fish argues further:

> It is therefore not surprising but inevitable that at the end of every argument, even of an argument that says there can be no end, the universalist perspective will reemerge as strongly as ever. [...] Even though the self-reflective clarity of critical self-consciousness cannot be achieved, the experience of having achieved it is inseparable from the experience of conviction.\(^{60}\)

\(^{58}\) Chambers Simone, “Feminist Discourse/Practical Discourse”, [in:] Feminists Read Habermas, p.171.

\(^{59}\) Fish, “Critical Self-Consciousness”.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p.467.
What Habermas seeks to argue for – the abstracted, (self)distanced argument, is thus not possible as it runs counter to the condition of possibility of the very formulation of an argument. Under the disguise of a universal statement there will always be just another, reframed version of situatedness and particularism. This, I believe, is the full acknowledgement of our hermeneutic condition. As we will see, Mouffe expresses similar reservations with reference to consensus that for her is always a dress-up for particularistic power-relations.

The discussion above reveals a significant difference between Mouffe’s and Habermas’s positions. Whereas she stands firm on the situated and historicized ground and does not see the possibility to obtain a view (or interest) detached from it, Habermas does. In consequence, negotiation is as far as she can (and wishes to) go. When Mouffe in places uses the term ‘consensus’, it never stands for a strong Habermasian understanding of the term. Habermas, on his part, believes in the possibility of consensus, which for him is a standpoint raised above the situated ones and one common to all participating parts, i.e., impartial. A more systematic discussion of Habermas’s understanding of consensus will come later on in the chapter.

rationality requirement
Apart from universalization, the other restriction that ‘closes’ deliberation is the presupposition of rationality. It entails that we should ideally state our validity claims and arguments for and against them in a rational manner. This way we could argue that Habermas wants to keep some forms of communication – more expressive, passionate and unreasonable – out. Habermas holds that this kind of intellectualization only seeks to secure focused discussions, in which “only those topics and contributions that are supposed “to count” in reaching a decision are permitted to pass through”.

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61 Compare the different contributions to the volume Feminists Read Habermas where several authors argue that Habermas “misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal”. This particular formulation is taken from Landes Joan B., “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration”, [in:] Feminists Read Habermas, p.98.

62 See for example Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, pp.70, 103.

63 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.385.
In order to be able to conclude to what extent the presupposition of rationality could be seen as such a sieve I will now examine Habermas’s definition of reason and rationality.

To begin with, Habermas detranscendentalizes Kantian ‘pure’ reason by transforming it into ‘situated’ reason. Reason, or rationality no longer depends on the assumption of a noumenal sphere, it is not a metaphysical entity we try to access; it is rather something that emerges in the act of communication, when we apply the deliberative procedure. The deliberative procedure itself (with its idealizations or conditions of possibility discussed above) warrants the rationality of the outcome. Habermas states that “[r]ational acceptability depends on a procedure that does not shield “our” arguments from anyone or anything.” What we see is a procedural and not a substantive understanding of rationality. Reason, in other words, is not a propriety of mind, nor of the world, but emerges in concrete situations, in the intersubjective meeting. If the procedure is applied correctly and the idealizations approximated (social and thematic inclusiveness), the outcomes will be rational.

In consequence, reason is here understood intersubjectively, it does not belong to the subject but emerges in language communication between subjects. In Habermas’s account, rationality as well as any agreement or understanding are decided inter-subjectively, they depend on the interacting

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64 Here it should be noticed that in Habermas’s terminology, an ‘argument’ is always rational. Speaking of ‘rational arguments’ is a logical repetition or tautology.

65 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.12.

66 Ibid., p.29.

67 Hence, “Lefort’s implied condemnation of objective conceptions of reason as pre-modern remnants of a transcendental closure of the empty place of power cannot hold in any straightforward manner for the communicative and intersubjective conception of reason Habermas defends.” Rummens Stefan, (2008) “Deliberation interrupted. Confronting Jürgen Habermas with Claude Lefort”, Philosophy & Social Criticism vol.34, no.4, p.397. Thomassen explains this in the context of his discussion of Habermas’s concept of tolerance: “the rationality of the norms of tolerance depends on the characteristics of the relations among subjects rather than the characteristics of a particular subject”. Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?”, p.441. This is a common point of misunderstanding in the reading of Habermas’s writings. Inter alia Mouffe seems to miss this point and, in her critique of Habermas, she seems to ascribe reason to the subject. Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.48; compare Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, pp.24-7. However, it might be argued that Habermas’s procedural and intersubjective conception of rationality presupposes a certain kind of subject, equipped for example with a rational capacity.
subjects. In other words, the outcome is both a product of and dependent upon the parties participating in deliberation (as well as the procedures applied). Hence, the question Richard Bernstein poses: “Who decides what is and what is not an argument, by what criteria, and what constitutes the force of the better argument?”68 is only apparently devastating for Habermas. According to his understanding of rationality, what is an “argument” (a rational argument), or a “better argument” is decided intersubjectively, in deliberation. Rationality is established through its grounding in the ‘forceless force of the better argument’, it shows itself in the process of convincing others with the use of arguments.

In spite of its procedural definition, the rationality requirement has obvious bearing on the subject, presupposing a particular kind of subject (capable of rational argumentation). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of the thesis. Habermas states that acting reasonably and accountably entails being ready to put forth validity claims and explain one’s actions. According to him, “[s]omeone who cannot account for her actions and utterances to others becomes suspect of not having acted reasonably or “accountably.””69 Being aware of this, we both need to adjust our actions accordingly (by acting rationally) and make this supposition of rationality about other agents in everyday communication.

Habermas argues that the presupposition of rationality and participants’ capability of it undergirds the very practice of reaching mutual understanding.70 In other words, rationality, as an idealizing anticipation and condition of possibility, is built into the practice of argumentation and self-understanding of its participants.71 In Habermas’s eyes, just as with other idealizations, this adaptation to the requirement of rationality that regards both our attitude and the assumption of others’ equal disposition is unavoidable if we want to deliberate, as we have to assume other participants’ accountability in order to be motivated to engage in communication. It is nevertheless counterfactual and empirically easy to deny. However, once again, as Habermas puts it, in actu, in the course of deliberation, the participants bracket this empirical awareness and “presuppose that they indeed do act on the basis of rationally warrantable reasons”72. Rationality functions as a pragmatic presupposition that is constitutive of communica-

69 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas”, p.21.
70 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.427.
71 Habermas, “From Kant’s “Ideas””, p.36.
72 Ibid., p.24.
tive action but in any given instance it can be falsified. What follows in such a case, according to Habermas’s vision, is a new instance of deliberation; the participants seek to reach understanding, or justify rationally their validity claims anew.

Considering the working of rationality in Habermas’s theory, it is both a presupposition necessary for communication to take place, and it is supposed to be guaranteed by deliberation, being a result of deliberation. This paradoxical construction that has been brought up in the discussions about Habermas’s use of idealizations will resurface again in the case of consensus.

In Habermas’s conception, there is no predefined meaning of rationality, we fill it with meaning in the course of deliberation. The only requirement that is inherent to it from the beginning is the urge to be ready (and able) to defend our claims communicatively. For Habermas, rationality consists not in the possession of particular knowledge, but rather in how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge. In effect, having in mind the presuppositions required for deliberation, ‘rational’ would stand for impartial (stemming from the presupposition of universalizability) and well-informed (as all relevant arguments, and perspectives of all affected are supposed to be taken into consideration). Consequently, one could argue that the restrictive power of the requirement of rationality boils down to the reservations discussed with the requirement of universalizability. However, the very focus on rationality hooks up with Habermas’s ignorance of the sphere of emotionality in his discussions about the working of deliberation. I would argue, following Sharon Krause, that this seriously ‘closes’ deliberation restricting it to certain spheres of human action;

The rationalist models of deliberation and norm justification that predominate in political theory today (as represented, for instance, in the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas) suffer from a motivational deficit. The ideal of reason as a faculty that abstracts from sentiment, which undergirds impartiality on this view, disconnects the deliberating subject from the motivational sources of human agency, which are found in the affective attachments and desires from which subjects are asked to abstract. The self as deliberator comes apart from the self as agent.

73 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.384.
Krause refers to empirical findings from neuroscience and neuropsychology to prove that passions and sentiments are crucial elements of deliberation, that they are a part of practical rationality itself. She argues that Habermas’s lack of theorizing of “the affective attachments and desires that normally animate action” results in the weak motivating character of his deliberative procedure. This touches upon the specific conception of the subject adopted by Habermas. Reserving some more in-depth discussions till later, let it suffice to say here that there is a presupposition of reciprocity, or others’ equally deliberative attitude, otherwise it is hard to explain why citizens would enter into the discursive process of reaching an understanding. At the outset, there is a necessary presupposition that “they all happen to consider “rational cooperation” to be a “good,” preferable to other forms of interaction.” Habermas takes up this objection raised by a symposium participant and agrees that the moment of deliberation “requires a complementary moment of prior trust and ethical commitment.”

The universalizability and rationality requirements have been objected to by scholars sympathetic to Habermas, many of whom have argued against his narrow formulation of deliberation. Both Lynn Sanders and Iris Marion Young charge deliberative democracy with being too exclusive on the kinds of communicative practices allowed. They argue that Habermas’s deliberation represents a particular kind of communication: dispassionate,

73 Ibid., p.40.

76 It should be noted that Habermas does include an element of passions in his theory, even though it is certainly not his main focus. For example, he introduces the concept of ‘constitutional patriotism’ and speaks of democratic political culture to illustrate other than purely argumentative grounds for attachment to institutions and regimes. Recently, he has also turned to the question of religion and its place in the public sphere. Nevertheless, when discussing argumentation, or deliberation he does not weigh in the role of emotions in argument formation.

Habermas discusses ‘constitutional patriotism’ in for example Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.398; Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, pp.118, 225. For his discussion of the place of religion in public debate see Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion.

77 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.414; see also Habermas, “The Relationship”, p.291.

78 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.414.


80 Young Iris Marion, Inclusion and Democracy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, esp. Chap. 2; Young Iris Marion, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy”, [in:] Democracy and Difference.
reasoned and logical, and in effect that it privileges a certain kind of speech and so certain kind of power (typically male and that of privileged social groups).\textsuperscript{81} They judge these restrictions unjustified and argue for including other forms of communication, such as storytelling, testimony, rhetoric and greetings in the procedure of validating better arguments. According to Habermas’s standards, these utterances would not fall under the category of arguments that are supposed to ‘count’ because they are not susceptible to universalization. Also John S. Dryzek supports this line of argumentation albeit with some reservations. He wants to put up some entry conditions by admitting all forms of communication a place in deliberation as far as coercion is excluded and only insofar as they can connect the particular to the general.\textsuperscript{82} Dryzek is thus making only an apparent concession.

Both Krause, Sanders, Young and Dryzek criticize Habermas’s narrow formulation of deliberation (what I called ‘closing’ tendencies in the concept of deliberation) from within the deliberative framework. This means that they retain the goal of consensus,\textsuperscript{83} but argue for a broader, more inclusive conception of ‘argument’. I am inclined to take a different route here. As will be discussed later, I believe we can exclude coercion as a necessary restriction without sticking to Habermas’s version of the universalizability requirement oriented at consensus. Universalization can be understood in a very different manner from Habermas’s. However, with such adjustments to the kinds of arguments used and the goal of deliberation, we need to examine how that changes the original model of deliberation \textit{in toto}.\textsuperscript{84} The question is, whether we can still call such a reformulated version ‘deliberation’.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., pp.123-4. For an overview of the arguments of deliberation as exclusive see Kapoor, “Deliberative Democracy”, pp.469f.


\textsuperscript{83} Even though Young retains the ideal aim of deliberation as mutual understanding, and hence, consensus, it should be noted to her credit, that she issues some important critical objections to consensus as a possible means of suppressing difference. “Too strong a commitment to consensus as a common good can incline some or all to advocate removing difficult issues from discussion for the sake of agreement and preservation of the common good.” Young, \textit{Inclusion and Democracy}, p.44.

\textsuperscript{84} See Norval, \textit{Aversive Democracy}, p.32 fn 50, pp.37-8, where she argues that many deliberative commentators simply add other versions of arguments allowed for in deliberation without assessing what consequences this addition will have for the concept of deliberation.
Recalling the discussion about idealizations and Habermas’s rational reconstruction in Chapter 3 we need to remember that what I labeled ‘requirements’ here is placed at the level of conditions of possibility. This means that in Habermas’s view, universalizability and rationality are unavoidable conditions of communication oriented at understanding. The discussion in the sections above aimed at highlighting how, in Habermas’s perspective, these mechanisms (do and should) work, and also how, in my perspective, inadequate these normative-descriptive accounts are.

Concluding the sections dedicated to the opening and closing aspects of deliberation and contrary to Mouffe’s assertion, there are moments of contingency in Habermas’s conceptualization of deliberation (and what follows, deliberative democracy). These spring from its intersubjective character. The open nature of deliberation, perceiving it as a never ending process of recurring discussions, is expressed by the choice of better argument. Moreover, the moment of final acceptance or rejection of validity claims put in the hands of the deliberating parts (das Nein sagen Können) adds to the potential unpredictability and insecurity of deliberation. However, this openness, or unpredictability is ultimately dependent upon the notion of the subject that Habermas constructs. The perception of intersubjectivity cannot be separated from the notion of the subject. Hence, a more appropriate estimation of Habermas’s admission of contingency will be given in Chapter 6 dedicated explicitly to his and Mouffe’s ideas of the subject. What we can say now, on the basis of the above discussion, is that there are elements of closure already in the concept of deliberation. By restricting it to certain forms of utterances (rational and universalizable), Habermas confines the sphere of possibilities and hence, tries to limit contingency. The options for his subjects wanting to engage in democratic politics are limited as he precludes a whole range of more situated and particularistic utterances as well as passionate (which would be unaccountable) ones.

**Consensus**

In contrast to deliberation that has here been interpreted as (at least to some extent) admissible of empirical contingency, consensus mainly stands for a counter tendency, i.e., closure. The concept of consensus is probably the most criticized part of Habermas’s theory and the one that raises most
controversies. Mouffe is certainly not alone in her critique here. It is also one of the points on which Habermas has changed position throughout the years. In the following, I do not intend to make a genealogical reading of Habermas, although some time (or change) perspective will be necessary in places.

Mouffe argues that rational consensus is a conceptual (and not only empirical) impossibility. She sees it as aporetic and including unsurpassable obstacles to itself in its very formulation. Paraphrasing her comment on grounds for deliberative legitimacy, the very conditions of possibility of the exercise of democracy constitute simultaneously the conditions of impossibility of the aim put to it by Habermas, namely rational consensus.

Even though throughout Between Facts and Norms Habermas is careful to distinguish the demands of politics from those of morality, in his principle of democracy, he still sets the standard of agreement at unanimity, that is, an agreement of all (affected). Let me once again invoke his principle of democracy that is supposed to guide the legal-political discourses:

> only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.

Consequently, the focus on consensus in the analysis of deliberative democracy is justified. Additionally, what distinguishes Habermas’s consensus from other forms of agreement is the strong requirement of consent on the part of the deliberating participants. Not only do they need to conform to the outcome, they also have to conform for the same reason.

Whereas parties can agree to a negotiated compromise for different reasons, the consensus brought about through argument must rest on identical reasons able to convince the parties in the same way.

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85 “For some critics, even those who are sympathetic to Habermas’s ultimate aim of protecting politics and ethics against the threat posed by the spread of instrumental reason, Habermas’s emphasis on consensus in his account of the public sphere threatens to efface the agonistic dimension of political action in the same way that Rousseau’s theory of the general will threatened to suppress plurality in politics.” Markell, “Contesting Consensus”, p.387.

86 For a good overview of Habermas’s shift in position concerning consensus see Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, pp.27ff.

87 Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, pp.33, 98.

88 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.110.
These two aspects of his concept of consensus – setting it as a standard for legitimacy (by inscribing it in the principle of democracy) and putting the demand of a unanimous agreement for the same reasons make Habermas’s consensus rather abstracted from the complexity of our contemporary societies and place him closer to norms than facts. It needs to be noticed, however, that, despite his ideal of a consensually steered society Habermas does not subscribe to the ideal of a fully rational and entirely consensual society. In this way, he dissociates himself from Rousseau’s fetishization of unity and the immediacy of the general will.

Habermas derives his understanding of consensus from universal/formal pragmatics, which is his version of speech act theory. In spite of the recognition of empirical contingency as an underlying condition, it is in language we find the grounds for Habermas’s orientation towards consensus:

Communicative reason, too, treats almost everything as contingent, even the conditions for the emergence of its own linguistic medium. But for everything that claims validity within linguistically structured forms of life, the structures of possible mutual understanding in language constitute something that cannot be gotten around.

Consensus is both the condition of possibility of communication inbuilt in the language system, and an immanent aim of communication. The telos of language is consensus. The aim of rational consensus, according to Habermas, is an unavoidable presupposition of any communicative action, that is, action oriented towards mutual understanding. It is a counterfasc-
tual idealizing supposition we cannot avoid making. An example of his placing consensus at the pragmatic level is the explanation Habermas gives of what ‘linguistic competence’ is. According to him, apart from grammatical use, it consists of orientation toward consensus, or mutual understanding.

However, the rationally reconstructed formal pragmatic characteristics of language do not have a determining force. From the assumption that language and communicative action are oriented towards consensus, does not automatically come the (so easily empirically denied) conclusion that we will necessarily reach consensus in any particular communicative action. Here, the element of intersubjectivity and the possibility to say No are crucial. As discussed above, in deliberation the interlocutors always have the freedom to reject the validity claims raised by their partner(s) in conversation. Hence, even though one could say that Habermas puts the integrative force of communicative action into language, in the last instance it relies on the contingent (in the sense of ‘not given’) approval of the communicating parts. The fragile character of such a bond is obvious;

Rather, consensus achieved through communication depends both on the idealizing supposition that an identity in linguistic meaning already prevails and also on the power of negation and the autonomy of unique, non-substitutable subjects – for whom intersubjective consent to criticizable validity claims has to be obtained anew in each case. All consensus achieved

96 Compare Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, pp.16ff.

97 As a matter of fact, Habermas speaks rather of ‘communicative competence’, in contrast to Noam Chomsky’s ‘linguistic competence’. Instead of focusing on the question: “What knowledge must a speaker have in order to be able to speak and understand a language?”, that guides Chomsky, Habermas is rather interested in the question: “How is mutual understanding between speakers possible?”. Consequently, in order to understand our ability to learn and use language we have to study consensus, rather than the speaker’s understanding of a language. Communicative competence for Habermas is synonymous with a person’s capability to reach mutual agreement with others. See Braaten Jane, Habermas’s Critical Theory of Society, State University of New York Press, Albany 1991, pp.19-20.

98 Compare the discussion about normativity and the question whether action norms spring from Habermas’s rational reconstructions presented in Chapter 3. Compare also Maeve Cooke’s similar ponderings about the rationalization of the lifeworld. She holds that Habermas’s ideal of a ‘good society’ is not an inevitable result of the developmental dynamics of modern societies but only a possibility contingent on the activity of autonomous agents. Cooke, “Redeeming redemption”, p.415.
within discourse rests on the power of negation held by independent subjects.99

Once again we can observe the import of the unpredictable element put in the hands of every participant in deliberation. Intersubjectivity (and openness that goes in hand with it) is given crucial importance, it is a kind of last instance in the attainment of consensus. Every deliberation ultimately rests on the ever latent possibility of ‘das Nein sagen Können’ of every singular subject participating in deliberation. One could say that this element of intersubjectivity makes consensus porous.

As noted before, one of Mouffe’s objections to consensus is that it is not only empirically, but also conceptually impossible. Over time Habermas has made major adjustments in this respect. Instead of stating that consensus could be approximated if only empirical obstacles were overcome100 or that it is realizable in principle,101 in more recent writings he actually admits that rational consensus is not just an empirical but also a conceptual impossibility. He is aware that the realization of rational consensus would put an end to communication; “[t]his entropic state of a definitive consensus, which would make all further communication superfluous, cannot be presented as a meaningful goal.”102 The possibility of realization of a final consensus would contradict its fallible character mainly expressed in the process leading to it, i.e., deliberation. Habermas indeed maintains that the goal of rational consensus is a condition of possibility, a necessary assumption of communication, but the state of achieved rational consensus would be its condition of impossibility, it would bring an end to all discourse.103

Summing up, even if we could argue against the desirability of putting consensus as an aim of deliberation we should do Habermas justice and appreciate his admittance of the impossible character of a definitive consensus. As mentioned above, consensus ultimately rests on the consent of every single deliberating part and in this way is always contingent. One could also interpret the requirement of a universal agreement of all (af-

102 Ibid., p.418.
103 Compare Thomassen, Deconstructing Habermas, pp.27-8.
fected) as an expression of a different kind of openness. The ideal of inclusion inscribed in the principle of democracy entails the aspiration to open access to deliberation. I will argue in Chapter 7 that we can retain the ambition of inclusion of as many as possible in political communication without the orientation to consensus. I would also suggest a reading of Habermasian consensus as inscribed in the process of deliberation. It has been noted earlier that deliberation is the essence of deliberative democracy and that it is supposed to be oriented to consensus. However, I would stress the components of deliberation that bear the potential for contingency and make it an open practice (better argument, das Nein sagen Können). In this reading, other aspects need to be toned down, including the orientation towards consensus inscribed in the process of deliberation. Even though those parts are undeniably there in Habermas’s writing, so are the ones I mentioned before, and I would treat them as the heterogeneous tendencies, the ones showing different openings, different possible interpretations of his texts. It is my contention that consensus can be read as put under the rules of deliberation, i.e., somehow subordinated to it. In effect, a consensus, in order to avoid the status of the best argument that ends all communication, would need even more emphasis on its temporary and porous character. It could for example be understood in Mouffe’s terms of temporary fixation, or naturalization of meaning, that is a hegemonic truth.

**Conflict and difference**

In the preceding sections I explored Habermas’s understanding of deliberation and consensus in order to better understand the room he makes for contingency in his theory of democracy. Now I will approach a related question of whether his version of democracy “make[s] room for dissent” as Mouffe pleads it should. I quote Mouffe’s critique of Habermas’s view on pluralism once again:

> [t]he shortcomings of the model of “deliberative democracy” are also evident in its incapacity to come to terms with the nature of pluralism. [...] [I]t does not acknowledge the ineradicable dimensions of undecidability and an-

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tagonism present in social relations. [...] Pluralism implies the permanence of antagonism, [...] conflict and division are not to be seen as either disturbances that, unfortunately, cannot be completely eliminated or as empirical impediments that render impossible the full realization of a good constituted by a harmony that we cannot reach. 106

Despite such strong formulations against the deliberative model of democracy, Habermas is certainly aware of the challenges that pluralism puts to his theory. In spite of putting consensus as the telos of communication, he is clear about what he perceives as the ‘normal’ state in modern societies:

Despite such strong formulations against the deliberative model of democracy, Habermas is certainly aware of the challenges that pluralism puts to his theory. In spite of putting consensus as the telos of communication, he is clear about what he perceives as the ‘normal’ state in modern societies:

Stability and absence of ambiguity are rather the exception in the communicative practice of everyday life. A more realistic picture [would be one] of a diffuse, fragile, continuously revised and only momentarily successful communication in which participants rely on problematic and unclarified presuppositions. 107

It is obvious that the above is a description of the ontic level of empirical reality. Here disagreements prevail and are connected to the ‘fact’ of pluralism. Differences in our societies are ineliminable and Habermas acknowledges the presence of dissention. 108 What Mouffe and others have criticized Habermas for is that he sees conflicts as resolvable, whereas Mouffe believes some differences are incompatible even if they should be allowed to coexist. ‘Conflict’ should be understood as not only disparate perspectives on political (and other) issues but also arguments about the nature of things like justice, equality and freedom. In Jacques Rancière’s parole, disagreements we should focus on are not only between those who say white and those who say black, but as well between those who both say white but mean different things and those who do not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. 109 Adrian Little invokes an example of the use of the veil in public in the French debate. He underlines that political actors on both sides of this particular dispute

108 Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.26 fn 19.
present their claims in terms of the same concept, that is, justice.\textsuperscript{110} Habermas underlines the presupposition of the synonymy (or identity) of meaning which is one of the idealizations he enlists as necessary preconditions for communication. “Any human communication would break down the moment you could not presuppose that we exchange identical meanings.”\textsuperscript{111} This could be read as overseeing the kind of disagreement and conflicts Rancière focuses on. However, for Habermas, the identity of meaning is never fixed, even if some stability is there, which enables communication and understanding. The synonymy of meaning is always coupled with intersubjective redefinition of it.\textsuperscript{112}

It has been put forth by deliberative theorists sympathetic to Habermas’s position that difference is a prerequisite for deliberative democracy.\textsuperscript{113} Among others, Anne Philips has argued that deliberative theory should be enriched by a more admissive attitude towards difference and strongly stated that “[d]eliberation matters only because there is difference”\textsuperscript{114}. It is then pictured as an entry requirement that springs from the multiplicity of experiences in lifeworlds and explains the motivation for deliberative practices in the first place. Here, these authors recall Habermas’s argument that subjects only turn to deliberation in the case of disagreement or contestation of something otherwise taken as given. If there were no differences deliberation would be redundant, we would already start off with a consensus, and no (trans)formation of positions would take place in politics.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p.152.


However, even on this account, in the course of deliberation, if only the procedure is applied accurately, the expressions of particularity are supposed to transform into a universalized standpoint, that is, consensus, which is an abstraction from the particular. As I discussed above, there can be no doubt that for Habermas a successful communication aims at consensus. With such a prospect, differences that obstruct the universalizing attempts are by necessity perceived as mere impediments to obtaining consensus. Again, Habermas is fully aware of the empirical pervasiveness of differences and dissent. However, when we take a closer look at the status he ascribes to disagreement in his normative vision of society, it is pictured as a risk lurking in the corners of communicative practices – “the risk of disagreement”\textsuperscript{115}, or “the shadow of difference that is cast in every linguistically attained agreement”\textsuperscript{116}. These pejorative framings of difference and disagreement tempt the conclusion that being aware of the fact, Habermas does not see it as desirable.

Here it would be useful to introduce a distinction between differences/particularities at entry which are accepted by Habermas, and even form the condition of possibility of discourse (deliberation), and differences at the exit point, which Habermas implicitly erases, by putting consensus as the ideal result of deliberation. Puzzlingly, Habermas argues that differences are ineliminable, in spite of the fact of consensus being the aim of communication. According to him, consensus by no means eliminates differences:

\begin{quote}
The intersubjectivity of linguistically achieved understanding is by nature porous, and linguistically attained consensus does not eradicate from the accord the differences in speaker perspectives but rather presupposes them as ineliminable.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

Let me confront this statement with the one already cited above:

\begin{quote}
Whereas parties can agree to a negotiated compromise for different reasons, the consensus brought about through argument must rest on identical reasons able to convince the parties \textit{in the same way}.\textsuperscript{118}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{116} Habermas, “Themes”, pp.47-8.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p.48.
\textsuperscript{118} Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms}, p.339.
How can we make sense of this discrepancy? Obviously, we need differences in speaker perspectives if there is to be any communication at all, but if Habermas at the same time argues that consensus stands for the acceptance of claims for the same reasons, does it not necessarily require a switch in the participants’ positions towards unity and sameness? Despite some more sympathetic readers’ attempts to defend his position, stating that Habermasian consensus should not be perceived as a search for totality or any absolute and should rather be understood as the art of separation (söndringens konst) and not the force of reconciliation (försoningskraft),

I find it hard to support this line of interpretation. The element of consensus is undeniably still very central in Habermas’s theoretical building, and however benevolent his sympathizers are, the posing of consensus as an aim of deliberation inevitably leads to overriding differences.

Habermas is quite enigmatic on this point:

> Repulsion towards the One and veneration of difference and the Other obscures the dialectical connection between them. For the transitory unity that is generated in the porous and refracted intersubjectivity of a linguistically mediated consensus not only supports but further and accelerates the pluralization of forms of life and the individualization of lifestyles. More discourse means more contradiction and difference.\(^\text{120}\)

Here Habermas maintains that unity not only presupposes difference but accelerates it too. I find it perfectly acceptable that discourse (or deliberation) breeds difference, but cannot see how unity (or consensus) does the same. It seems as if these two move in different directions. Here, once again an aporia, or a heterogeneous element in Habermas’s writing comes forth. A more dismissive reading would be represented by Mouffe, for whom Habermas acknowledges pluralism only as an addition to the superior concept of consensus, which is a “typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without [the threat of] antagonism.”\(^\text{121}\) I do not deny such a line of interpretation, but I also see an alternative interpretation that would, however, go beyond Habermas’s theory in the direction of privileging the stress on deliberation (or communication), which fosters pluralism and consequently, of minimizing the role of consensus to a temporary moment of agree-

\(^{119}\) See Carleheden, *Det andra moderna*, p.159.

\(^{120}\) Habermas, “The Unity of Reason”, p.140 (emphases added).

\(^{121}\) Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.20.
ment. This reading helps me develop a third position sketched out in the last chapter of the thesis, borrowing some insights from Habermas but also transcending his theory.

Summing up, the problem Mouffe touches upon in Habermas’s theory is his downplaying of differences (and the contingent) by introducing consensus and the circumventing requirements for utterances allowed for in deliberation. I find the privileging of consensus over disagreement questionable. Drawing further on Mouffe’s line of critique, we could argue that Habermas does not win much by softening his conception of consensus. The problem remains, as to the incompatibility of consensus and difference or dissent. The privileging of consensus puts into question the place of pluralism, diversity, and difference. In this reading, (orientation towards) consensus is the central concept in Habermas’s theory and other theorems are subordinate to it. Then, deliberation is seen as simply propaedeutic to consensus (as we will see, the same perspective or objection could be raised against Mouffe’s use of contingency as simply propaedeutic to decision, or hegemony). Even if we accept the amendments made by theorists sympathetic to Habermas, who underline difference as a necessary entry condition to deliberation, what is still lacking is the recognition of difference as an achievement of political action. As we will see, such a full recognition of difference is offered by Mouffe. As discussed

122 Robert W.T. Martin presents a different argument in support of the position presented here. He criticizes Habermas’s exaggerated stress on consensus and downplaying of the role of dissent in the public sphere through a critique of Habermas’s reading of historiography (esp. the Physiocratic conception of “public opinion” Habermas presents in his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere). “Habermas’s misreading in turn demonstrates the fundamental expectation of consensus in his approach and the concomitant devaluing of genuine dissent and acceptance of token dissent.” Martin claims further that these early formulations in favour of consensus and disregarding dissent put a trajectory to Habermas’s later research. “Habermas’s historical study unintentionally laid the groundwork for some later weaknesses in his theory, weaknesses he is still trying to overcome.” See Martin, “Between Consensus and Conflict”, quotations from pp.373, 388.


124 Compare Dana Villa on a similar point with respect to Hannah Arendt. In an article dedicated to the debate between Habermas and postmodernism/poststructuralism he discusses the differences between Habermas’s and Arendt’s conceptions of the public sphere arguing that Arendt offers an acknowledgement of plurality while Habermas does not. Villa Dana R., (1992) “Postmodernism and the Public Sphere”, American Political Science Review vol.86, no.3: 712-721. For an answer to the general theme of Villa’s article see the subsequent exchange between Villa and James Johnson in Johnson, “Public Sphere, Postmodernism”.

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above, Habermas’s postulations of a unity fostering difference are not convincing. Difference or dissent and consensus are two mutually contradictory imperatives.

I signaled in the Introduction that the opposition between consensus and conflict seems to be the nexus of the debate between agonistic and deliberative theorists. However, from the perspective taken in this thesis, this particular distinction cannot be exempt from the critique of binary oppositions. There are obvious connections between the two, for example, all kinds of democratic conflict require some kind of minimal commonality (see the critique in Chapter 5 against Mouffe’s distinction between agonism and antagonism in this respect). On the other hand, the motivation for seeking consensus always leans back on the acknowledged possibility of dissent. The point is, however, that their mutual dependence or entwinement does not negate that they constitute two disparate imperatives in democratic politics. One of them must necessarily be given priority, which consequently diminishes the role of the other. Even though it should be added that it is indispensable for any contemporary democratic theory to deal with both difference and some kind of unity. Once again, the choice of one of them as the hero in one’s story on democratic theory necessarily makes the other a villain. Hence, remembering the non-exclusive position of consensus in Habermas’s theory, we can still concur with Aletta Norval that

Even though achieving consensus is not the aim of all social interaction there is no disputing the fact that the model of deliberative democracy does indeed privilege consensus over dissensus.

**Concluding Remarks**

The issues I have discussed in this chapter centered around difference and contingency in Habermas’s theory of democracy. This approach was guided by Mouffe’s critique of deliberative democracy as de-politicized, that is, as ignoring the import of difference and conflict in democracy. Habermas undeniably chooses a different point of departure. He reconstructs mechanisms in language that direct us towards mutual understand-

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125 See for example Rummens, “Deliberation interrupted”; and Brady, “No Contest?”. Or for a different standpoint Thomassen, *Deconstructing Habermas*, pp.29f.

ing and consensus. In effect, difference and pluralism are given a lower status and difference is here subordinated to consensus.

It appears that consensus is responsible for downplaying differences whereas deliberation potentially allows for or even is dependent upon difference as an entry requirement. However, even here Habermas puts some restrictions. I agree with Lasse Thomassen that

[i]t cannot be a criticism of Habermas that his conception of rationality [and democracy] excludes difference, as is often alleged. Of course it does. The question is whether it excludes too much and whether it excludes the wrong kinds of difference.\(^{127}\)

Every conceptualization of democracy or politics is by necessity exclusionary, as it entails drawing a border (in the practice of demarcating a demos). Consequently, some things (or subjects) are left outside. The question is how we justify these exclusions and whether we consider them to be the right kind of exclusions. Alongside other critics I find it hard to justify Habermas’s exclusion of other than rational and universalized utterances in deliberation. However, in contrast to Krause, Young, Sanders and Dryzek, I do not think it is enough to widen the concept of argumentation. The route I propose is to reformulate the concept of deliberation more thoroughly, by separating it from the aim of consensus. Such communication would rather aim at establishing a hegemonic objectivity, and in the context of decision-making, it would be better understood as majority rule than as consensus.

One could accentuate the shift Habermas has made in his theory over time and argue that he can be read as having moved from consensus theory to discourse theory,\(^{128}\) from a conceptualization in which finality and attainability of rational consensus was a firm point, to one stressing the open and uncertain character of consensus. Due to the intersubjective elements adherent to the deliberation process, every consensus could be seen as conditional. In such a reading, “[c]onsensus is structurally analogous to the open-ended nature of the debate that founds democratic deliberation.”\(^{129}\) It is not a coincidence that Habermas calls his theory of democracy *deliberative* and not *consensual*. Nevertheless, a reshaped consensus, put in more tentative terms, is still problematic. Having accepted its empirical and con-

\(^{127}\) Thomassen, *Deconstructing Habermas*, p.21.

\(^{128}\) Ibid., pp.32ff.

\(^{129}\) Borradori, “Reconstructing Terrorism”, p.47.
ceptual impossibility, Habermas still clings to it as a putative aim and the ideal telos of deliberation. In this way, he necessarily ends up downplaying pluralism and difference. Moreover, the idea of consensus is closely linked to a specific conception of the subject as coherent and transparent. I will return to these assumptions in Chapter 6.

On the surface, Habermas’s redefined concept of consensus might seem similar to Mouffe’s conception of hegemony as the moment of temporary fixation of the fluid.¹³⁰ Here, the effect of deliberation would not be consensus but hegemonic objectivity, where one argument wins the trial, and is temporarily accepted by others. There are though crucial differences in these two vocabularies. Whereas for Habermas this temporary fixation is equal with a power-free agreement, for Mouffe this ‘freezing’ of antagonisms is the very expression of power. Hegemony is only possible as a result of and can only be legitimated by power. Moreover, counter-hegemonies are absolutely necessary in this respect, which, in consequence, gives conflict a higher status. For Mouffe difference and conflict are not only entry conditions of communication, but are inscribed in the outcome as well. In her theory power gains a completely different status too. I will come back to this parallel in the next chapter where Mouffe’s concept of hegemony is introduced.

Now, moving to the second critical question that guided this chapter, the amount of contingency Habermas allows for in his theory, it is important to underline that instead of picturing an opposition between contingency and closure we can see any theory as an attempt at negotiating between them. Here I follow Lasse Thomassen once again:

Thus, we are not facing a choice between either closure or openness, either provisionality or conclusiveness. Rather, it is always a matter of both closure and openness, both provisionality and conclusiveness, and consequently of more or less closure and openness, provisionality and conclusiveness. [...] It is then a question of negotiating between closure and openness.¹³¹

What we can discuss then are the results of such negotiations. From this perspective, it is rather clear that Habermas’s theory entails both components but is more inclined to closure. One such element of openness is Habermas’s focus on the idea of a power-free agreement.

bermas’s “insistence on the fallibilism of the rational reconstructions of the presuppositions of discursive reason”\textsuperscript{132} discussed in Chapter 3. Others have been dealt with in this chapter and regard the open structure of deliberation, which always invites objections by any participant (No-saying). The outcomes of deliberation are provisional or open too; they are based on the better argument that may be augmented by even better arguments coming in the future, which would entail the reopening of deliberations.

As I have tried to show above, Habermas’s texts have an inbuilt incongruence that emerges from the competing concepts of deliberation, which I interpreted as bearing the potential for contingency and openness; and rational consensus that predominantly stands for closure. Even if Habermas sees it as yet another idealization, all deliberation will end once consensus is reached. A perfectly rational consensus will not be in need of any betterment. It would be the best argument, where no imperfections are admitted of. Again, already the concept of deliberation comprises a spilt – alongside with the elements warranting the ‘contingency’ interpretation, there are requirements for deliberation that circumvent openness, mainly identified with the demand of universalizability of the arguments used. However, on the whole, deliberation has the potential for openness and the contingent whereas consensus, that deliberation is supposed to be oriented at, equates with closure. Such discrepancy could be understood as an aporia, or a non-passage, that is, an irresolvable paradox. Deliberation is supposed to lead to consensus, but consensus would be an end to deliberation. Such a reading does not really play along with the Habermasian idea that consensus is already inscribed as telos in any communication.

What I have tried to argue here, is that consensus must be preceded by deliberation, whereas deliberation does not necessarily need to be oriented to consensus. In congruence with Richard Rorty I believe that one can “retain the Socratic commitment to free exchange of views without the Platonic commitment to the possibility of universal agreement”\textsuperscript{133}. Again, some consensus at the outset of communication, or deliberation, is needed, for example regarding the basic meaning of some words (whereas others will be the very subject of deliberation), or the identification of a controversy as controversy. Nevertheless, I believe we should be able to keep the focus on communication as a legitimating procedure and a fundamental tool in democratic politics without taking on Habermas’s telos of consensus.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., p.471.
\textsuperscript{133} Rorty, “The priority of democracy”, p.191.
In this chapter I have discussed some aspects of *intersubjectivity*, exploring the kinds of relations Habermas designs for individuals and collectives in politics. By scrutinizing his notions of politics, deliberation, and consensus I have tried to highlight the kinds of intersubjective relations that he finds recommendable in the political sphere. But, once again, the amount of contingency (or closure) allowed for depends on the Habermasian understanding of the subject. Thus, in Chapter 6 I will come back to the problematic of intersubjectivity, focusing on *intersubjectivity*. 
CHAPTER 5  MOUFFE ON DEMOCRACY

He suspects that the given order of things is not as solid as it pretends to be; no thing, no self, no form, no principle, is safe, everything is undergoing an invisible but ceaseless transformation, the unsettled holds more of the future than the settled, and the present is nothing but a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted.

Robert Musil, The Man Without Qualities

The objective of this chapter is to critically present and discuss some aspects of Mouffe’s democratic theory. The selection procedure has even here, just as in Chapter 4, been the tangent spheres that enable and justify a parallel reading of the two theorists. Hence, the main questions steering this chapter are Habermas-inspired and read: How is society possible, i.e., how can we live together without resorting to violence? What are the grounds for social integration in the agonistic vision? Through dealing with questions of commonality and the role of violence I will try to highlight the central ideas in Mouffe’s democracy vision and provide a springboard for my own position presented in the final chapter. The Habermas-inspired critical query that underlies this chapter is whether Mouffe, with her focus on conflictual social phenomena, can adequately account for social cohesion and community.

I will analyze a few concepts in use in Mouffe’s theory that shed light on this problematic. The notions of undecidability and pluralism that form a background for Mouffe’s theory will help understand the status ascribed to antagonism. The characteristic distinctions between politics and the political as well as agonism and antagonism will be introduced and discussed to highlight the tension between lethal forms of conflicts and the venerated differences. In the end, I will examine passions as the main drive in agonistic politics, standing for the unpredictable, possibly risky element of politics.

Before I start a short methodological remark is in place. A slight difficulty arises from the fact that the bases of Mouffe’s political thinking were formulated in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (originally published in 1985) and
co-authored with Ernesto Laclau. This has led some scholars1 to analyse her subsequent texts as a common enterprise with Laclau. I find the reference to the authorial conglomerate of ‘Laclau and Mouffe’ highly unjustified as, since Hegemony and apart from some joint interviews, they have only published one text2 together and all the others separately. Moreover, it is a homogenising move that leads to inattentiveness to heterogeneities. Obviously, there are some similarities to trace, as both Laclau and Mouffe have continued on the path outlined in Hegemony, but one can also distinguish important differences in their theoretical development.3 Just as an example one could recall Mouffe’s scattered references to psychoanalysis and the vanishing traces of Marxism in her post-Hegemony writings. Although Mouffe and Laclau undoubtedly share the basic post-structuralist perspective and many theoretical and political commitments, one of the main differences between them that lies behind my choice to study Mouffe’s works and not Laclau’s is her focus on democratic subjectivity, or what I have chosen to call intersubjectivity. She is interested in the democratic relations between citizens, which provides interesting points of comparison with regard to Habermas. Laclau, on the other hand, focuses mainly on the more vertical relations between citizens and the state (which might be explained by his focus on populism).4 Moreover, of the two, Mouffe has more explicitly developed thoughts about democracy and the


2 The common text referred to is Laclau Ernesto, Mouffe Chantal, (1987) “Post-Marxism without apologies”, New Left Review vol.166: 79-106. To be accurate, they have also rewritten the preface to the second edition of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.


3 For a discussion on this topic see Wenman, “Laclau or Mouffe?”. Wenman even puts forth a hypothesis about a labour division in the writing of Hegemony, ascribing chapter 4, where the democratic theory is developed, to Mouffe, and the preceding chapters focusing on the discourse theoretic and post-Marxist grounds to Laclau. See also Townshend, “Laclau and Mouffe’s Hegemonic Project”.

4 See Norval, Aversive Democracy, p.84.
political (or, one could argue - the mainstream political theory). However, even though I have chosen to prioritise Mouffe’s writings in this thesis, it is not to say that Laclau’s work is not important for the themes discussed here. He has continued to spin on other threads present in *Hegemony*, developing such concepts as hegemony and antagonism. These are obviously very closely related to Mouffe’s theoretical concerns. Nonetheless, the main focus in this thesis will be on Mouffe and her development of the idea of ‘radical and plural democracy’ and I will resort to Laclau’s writings only at places where Mouffe draws on his thought, in order to better explain the content of the borrowed terms.

**AGONISTIC DEMOCRACY – INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Mouffe proposes a specific perspective on democracy that she calls ‘agonistic pluralism’. Within this perspective, she welcomes a range of different conceptions of democracy that would consist of different (adversary, as I will explain later on) interpretations of the principles of equality and liberty and, in consequence, divergent conceptions of citizenship and ‘common good’:

Ideally such a confrontation [between adversaries] should be staged around the diverse conceptions of citizenship which correspond to the different interpretations of the ethico-political principles: liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical-democratic, and so on. Each of them proposes its own interpretation of the ‘common good’, and tries to implement a different form of hegemony. [...] A well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions.⁵

The vision of democracy she prioritises, called ‘radical and plural democracy’⁶, is only one project among others (such as liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, and probably even deliberative) that in an agonistic relation with alternative visions fights for hegemony. In order to avoid confusion with Habermas’s project of democracy that, as discussed in the Introduction, also appears under the name of ‘radical’ I will use the term

⁵ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, pp.103-4.
‘agonistic democracy’ to denote Mouffe’s idea of a radical and plural democracy. This terminological shortcut is also justified by the theoretical slip she makes. Namely, it is rather easy to observe, that the agonistic pluralism, even though it welcomes other conceptualizations of democracy, is already steered by Mouffe’s vision of democratic politics. Observe for example the resort to such concepts as hegemony and agonistic struggle.

Going back to the basics, the epithet ‘agonistic’ derives from the ancient Greek word *agon*, meaning struggle;

Contrary to the dialogic approach, the democratic debate is conceived as a real confrontation. Adversaries do fight - even fiercely - but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives.⁷

Mouffe’s term ‘agonistic pluralism’ is intended to draw attention to two important aspects of this perspective: stress on the conflictual (agonistic) character of politics and recognition of pluralism. Her vision of democracy underlines the centrality of power and antagonism combined with the appreciation of pluralism. It is a vision of constant or ever-latent conflicts that she argues need to be acknowledged and only tamed with the help of democratic institutions and principles.

**undecidability and decision**

A condition of possibility of thinking democracy the way Mouffe does is the concept of undecidability. Following Jacques Derrida, she seeks to express the ontological assumption about structural undecidability, or radical contingency of social reality and identity:

From deconstruction, the notion of undecidability has been crucial. If, as shown in the work of Derrida, undecidables permeate the field which had previously been seen as governed by structural determination, one can see hegemony as a theory of the decision taken in an undecidable terrain. Deeper levels of contingency require hegemonic – that is, contingent – articulations, which is another way of saying that the moment of reactivation

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⁷ Mouffe, *On the Political*, p.52.
means nothing other than retrieving an act of political institution that finds its source and motivation nowhere but in itself.8

Such a perspective of a destructured social field serves to underline the openness and principal indetermination of all decisions taking place in the political. Due to structural undecidability, any decision could have been otherwise and every social order can be questioned. Just like Derrida, Mouffe (and Laclau) also sees undecidability as always coupled with decision. Hegemonic fixations of meaning (decisions) are the flip side of undecidability. Decisions always take place in an undecidable terrain.9 Or, otherwise put, undecidability is the “necessary condition” of decidability.10 By extension, for the hegemonic politics Mouffe envisions, undecidability is the sine qua non; “structural undecidability is the very condition of hegemony.”11 For a choice to be called a ‘decision’, it must have been taken in the undecidable. “A decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process.”12 This means that there must have been alternatives, i.e., multiple options and consequently – exclusions. These, right after the decision has been made, become obliterated in order to strengthen the ‘decisiveness’ of the decision. However, it would be wrong to perceive the relation between undecidability and decision in a linear way, which is, undecidability as a kind of preparatory stage for deci-

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8 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.xi. Mouffe does not elaborate at length on the concept of undecidability. That is why in this section, I will resort to her source of inspiration – Derrida – in this respect.


11 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.xii.

Rather, once the decision is made, it still has a remainder, a trace of undecidability in it (the memory of the not-chosen). Moreover, the decision is never fully conscious and, in this sense, never definite, as a fully informed decision is “not accessible to man”\(^{14}\). Thus, we should see undecidability as both making a decision possible (in order to be a decision it must have undergone an uncertain choice between different alternatives) and, in a sense, impossible (no decision is ever complete; it always contains a certain degree of undecidability). Derrida explains:

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\text{[T]he ordeal of the undecidable that I just said must be gone through by any decision worthy of the name is never past or passed, it is not a surmounted or sublated (aufgehoben) moment in the decision. The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost – in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision.}^{15}\]

Undecidability never stops, even after the decision is made, which, despite the reference to such discouraging entities as ‘ordeal’ and ‘ghost’ has an optimistic ring. Namely, it points to the possibility of questioning, transformation and re-articulation of any existing socio-political order, no matter how solid the self-authorised efforts seem to be.

Aletta Norval, explicating Derrida’s statement, underlines that we should be careful to distinguish between the more general structural indeterminacy or openness (of identity, social order etc.) and undecidability. The former is usually recalled to express the essential non-closure of identity in general, whereas the latter “designates a terrain, not of general openness and contestability, but of regulated tension and of a suspension in the ‘between’”\(^{16}\). Undecidability in this more strict sense shifts the focus

\(^{13}\) As both Aletta Norval and Lasse Thomassen have argued, this is a mistake made by Ernesto Laclau, who seems to perceive of undecidability as propeadeutic for decision (or as Thomassen puts it, Laclau orders deconstruction and hegemony linearly). They both effectively argue that undecidability and decision co-exist and co-determine each other (while not being complementary). See Thomassen Lasse, (2005) “Antagonism, hegemony and ideology after heterogeneity“, Journal of Political Ideologies vol.10, no.3, p.292; Norval, “Hegemony after deconstruction”.


\(^{15}\) Ibid., pp.24-5. See also Lucy Niall, A Derrida Dictionary, Blackwell Publishing, Malden 2004, p.150.

\(^{16}\) Norval, “Hegemony after deconstruction”, p.146.
from mere constatation of non-necessity of any order to the tension between multiple and determinate possibilities. Decision (hegemony) should not be seen as made in a flow, in a complete non-determinacy, it is always restricted by the existing options. Undecidability is here seen as an effect of the suspension of decidability.\(^\text{17}\) In such a formulation, decisions are not indeterminate, they are always “limited by the terrain of the given”\(^\text{18}\).

Undecidability has important implications for many aspects of the Mouffean theory. It cannot be simply reduced to a background condition that ceases to exist as soon as decisions (hegemonic orderings of the social) are made. Hence, it is more proper to use the term ‘undecidability’ and not structural uncertainty in her case. What I will try to show is that, when taken seriously, undecidability, or radical contingency, has far-reaching influence on the way politics and the subject are perceived.

**undecidable democracy**

The assumption of radical contingency is visible already in Mouffe’s discussion about the status of democracy, which is seen as an uncertain and fragile construction, never definitively acquired and hence in need of constant re-articulation. With its improbable and uncertain character,\(^\text{19}\) democracy can never be fully reached. It will “always be a democracy ‘to come’”\(^\text{20}\).

Speaking of democracy ‘to come’ is intrinsically linked with undecidability as a defining characteristic of democracy. This Derridean term underlines the difference with regard to theorizing democracy as a ‘regulative idea’.\(^\text{21}\) As ‘to come’, democracy is parted from any teleological readings, it cannot define an aim for itself. Not only does it express the potential for perfectibility, the unrealized ideal (here, Habermas is still on the train), but, additionally, it does not point to any concrete direction, or reference point. The very idea is that this ‘point’ is empty.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.147.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.148.


\(^{20}\) Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.8; See also Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.137.

\(^{21}\) Aletta Norval discusses the Derridean distinction between ‘regulative idea’ and ‘to come’ in her Aversive Democracy, pp.145-6; see also Derrida, Rogues, pp.84-5.
One could argue that Mouffe’s principles of equality and liberty for all form such an aim. Yet, here it is important to properly understand her use of these terms. In her theory they function as empty signifiers, and among their many contrasting interpretations, what distinguishes the agonistic approach is “the acknowledgement that such a principle [of liberty and equality for all] is empty, that it has no foundational guarantees beyond the interpretations and political identifications themselves.”22 Democracy is thus marked by a sense of undecidability. As such it could be understood as a sphere of possible and open-ended actions. Mouffe’s agonistic democracy is, according to her, best suited for the task of securing the insecure, or seeking to institutionalize undecidability.23

The undecidability perspective on society is necessary in order for Mouffe’s other central concepts to be thinkable. The state of contingency is an effect of “the dissolution of the markers of certainty” described by Claude Lefort24 (and introduced briefly in Chapter 4). In his account, democracy can be analyzed as a shift in the political imaginary, which led to the disappearance of the king as a representative of God and the figure uniting sovereign power and justice. What is left is an empty space of power with no transcendent guarantor; there are no secure grounds. Such a condition opens up the possibility of hegemonic practices that seek to partially stabilize and unite society. One amendment to Lefort’s conception is added by Laclau (and is congruent with, although not explicit in Mouffe’s writing) – he argues that the place of power is not simply empty after the death of the symbolic figure of the king. Instead, this place must be institu-

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22 Glynos, “Radical Democratic Ethos”, p.196. Moreover, one could rightly object that these very principles, of equality and liberty, are commonsensical and could be recognized as guiding most, if not all, of contemporary political theory. Mouffe is well aware of this point. Here, Glynos’s explication is useful once more. He argues that the idea of agonistic democracy hinges upon the assumption that there is “a consensus on the substanceless empty universal signifier ‘liberty and equality for all’”. Ibid., p.197.

23 Mark Devenney poses the question of what the status of contingency in Mouffe’s theory is. He traces performative contradiction in the claim of a ‘necessary contingency’, as even this claim should be regarded as contingent. See Devenney, Ethics and Politics, p.173. Here we have to keep in mind the always contingent foundations that Mouffe explicitly grounds her theory on discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

tionalized as empty, as it is always partly filled, or embodied. Laclau explains:

So it is not the case that there is a particularity which simply occupies an empty place, but a particularity which, because it has succeeded, through a hegemonic struggle, in becoming the empty signifier of the community, has a legitimate claim to occupy that place. Emptiness [...] is a political construction.25

Thus, it is only in an insecure environment (and here the structural uncertainty is alluded to) that hegemonic politics can take place, and conflicts and pluralism can be played out. Hegemonic articulations are ways of dealing with uncertainty, they constitute temporary fixations.

**hegemony**

Partial stabilizations or temporary fixations are due to hegemonic articulations.26 Mouffe’s and Laclau’s concept of ‘hegemony’ follows Antonio Gramsci in his reformulation of hegemonic relations as involving ethical, moral and political leadership, rather than the definition of hegemony as a synonym of domination. Their amendment to the Gramscian understanding can be found in the detachment from the class basis. Hegemonic relations no longer need to be grounded on class belonging, but express unity of a political force through the articulation of elements with no necessary class basis.27

Hegemony in Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) words refers to:

an absent totality, and to the diverse attempts at recomposition and rearticulation which, in overcoming this original absence, made it possible for

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26 I think Andrew Schaap is wrong in his observation that agonistic democrats seek to “postpone the moment of decision in order to affirm the openness of political life”. Indeed, they do seek to affirm openness, but not by postponing decision. Politics according to them is conducted in the form of hegemonic practices, attempts at establishing hegemonies through chains of equivalence, that is, through decisions. These decisions are surely not definite, are impossible in this sense, as they always show traces of this openness or undecidability (the non-necessity). But it is exactly through such decisions that agonistic politics is conducted. Compare Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”, p.270.
struggles to be given a meaning and for historical forces to be endowed with full positivity.28

As we see, she clearly links the idea of fundamental contingency (here called “absent totality”, and as I will discuss later, it also appears as ‘Lack’) to differing attempts at covering up this condition by formulating hegemonic projects. Hegemony, for Mouffe, expresses the mutual collapse between objectivity and power.29 It is believed that all social objectivity (the commonly accepted truths) is constituted through acts of power, in other words, every social order is hegemonic as it privileges certain meanings, groups and subjectivities while discriminating others. What follows is that any social order might, in principle, be questioned. By revealing its political origin, we debunk its naturalness, or obviousness, and open space for new power constellations (new hegemony). The paradox lies in the fact that, according to the logic of hegemony, the political (contingent) origins will always be partly obscured and naturalized, i.e., seemingly obvious. Simon Critchley clarifies that “[m]any political decisions […] attempt to deny their political character. […] Arguably the main strategy of politics is to make itself invisible in order to claim for itself the status of nature or a priori self-evidence.”30 The contingent grounding of any hegemony reveals


29 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.99. It is quite surprising how little place Mouffe gives to theorizing ‘hegemony’ in her recent writings. This might be the reason why Stefan Rummens, in my eyes, misinterprets her conception of hegemony, as a dominating power constellation (interpretation of the will of the people) that precludes any alternatives. See Rummens Stefan, (2009) “Democracy as a Non-Hegemonic Struggle? Disambiguating Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Model of Politics”, *Constellations* vol.16, no.3: 377-391. As I see it, hegemony in Mouffe’s theory has an inscribed dimension of contestation, an always latent counter-hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe put it as follows: “the two conditions of a hegemonic articulation are the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them”. See Laclau & Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p.136. Hence, full hegemony is not possible, as it would deny its own logic. “[N]o hegemonic logic can account for the totality of the social and constitute its centre, for in that case a new suture would have been produced and the very concept of hegemony would have eliminated itself”. Ibid., p.142. The insight that any relation of power produces resistance to it can also be found in Michel Foucault’s writing. He insists that “there are no relations of power without resistances”. See Foucault Michel, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, New York 1980, p.142. Importantly, these resistances are not something external to hegemony, but inherent to it, emerging from within.

acts of exclusion behind it, as well as it enhances questioning and new formulations of any such objectivity. A necessary condition for such a reformulation to take place is the availability of alternative ways of seeing and acting (allowed by the multiplicity of subject positions – see Chapter 6).

More practically, hegemony is formed through the establishment of a chain of equivalence, a common front between the needs and demands of different social groupings. The particular interests have to form alliances with other particular interests in order to win the struggle. This process consists in constructing a minimal common denominator (logic of equivalence) and in this way, uniting the different particularities by presenting a common, potentially dominant position. The forming of the chain of equivalences could be seen as a process of abstracting from the particular interests and a search for a higher level, universal principle. It necessarily implies a certain suspension of the relations of difference. Jason Glynos & David Howarth explain:

>[P]olitical practices can be characterized as more or less hegemonic depending on the degree to which the political demands articulating a grievance are formulated in terms that succeed in having more or less universal appeal.32

On this ground, one could argue that this process bears a resemblance to Habermas’s universalization requirement (see Chapter 4). As we have seen, it also consisted in abstracting from the particularities in order to form a universal, commonly acceptable standpoint. Both could be read as acts of oblivion, forgetting one’s ignoble past. A hegemonic articulation necessarily obscures its particularistic groundings in order to gain the support of a wider group than the one it emerges from. One could argue that consensus is also oblivious of the process leading to it, that is, deliberation. Even if dependent on it, consensus replaces the logic of deliberation (see Chapter 4 for more on the tension between deliberation and consensus). However, there are two major objections that can be raised against a parallel reading of consensus and hegemony. Firstly, chains of equivalence are intrinsically linked to the moment of negativity, as the construction of a

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33 Aletta Norval presents this comparison in the following formulation: “Are they claims based upon generalizable norms, agreed upon through reason, or are they universalized claims forged through a process of hegemonic articulation?”. Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, p.14.
unified set of equivalences presupposes a definition of that which is radically other. Such a claim works against Habermas’s ideal of full inclusion. Mouffe is explicit on this point:

[T]he logic of equivalence is the one that introduces negativity into the field of the social. This implies that a formation manages to signify itself (that is, to constitute itself as such) only by transforming the limits into frontiers, by constituting a chain of equivalences which constructs what is beyond the limits as that which it is not. It is only through negativity, division and antagonism that a formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon.34

Only through defining the opposite, the Other, can the united front establish itself. The different groupings unite not because of some positive characteristic they share, but because of a shared antagonist. They unite against something. Hence, exclusion is always inscribed in the universalizing process. Secondly, Mouffe underlines the simultaneous and equally important logic of difference that balances the logic of equivalence described above.35 Differences are never erased, they are only temporarily (and contingently, that is, as an act of power) suspended. They are not to be overcome, or transformed into a more universal standpoint, but only suspended in a strategic way, in order to unite the forces in a common enterprise.

Let me take a look at the example from Poland before 1989 and the collapse of communism. In the struggle against the communist Polish United Worker’s Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza), the Solidarity movement united several groups of workers and intellectuals that created a chain of equivalence, a united front against the communist party and regime. The link between them was established by reference to commonly recognized terms of ‘justice’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, that functioned as empty signifiers (the different groups involved represented stark differences with regard to the meaning of these words, that is, there was no single conception of democracy or justice that was shared by the members of Solidarność). The joint actions and common front did not mean that there


35 It should be noted that some scholars interpret Mouffe and Laclau’s framing of this dynamics in *Hegemony* as giving priority to equality over difference. Even if such an interpretation might be justified with respect to *Hegemony*, I do not think it holds for Mouffe’s subsequent writings. See Norval, “Frontiers in Question”, pp.61ff; Connolly, “Review essay”.

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were no internal differences within the Solidarity movement, which became all too obvious already in the first free elections in 1991, when 111 electoral committees put up candidates, and 29 parties entered the parliament (obviously not all of them stemmed from the Solidarity movement). In the aftermath of 1989, the terms ‘justice’, ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, that previously acted as the uniting empty signifiers became the very locus of political struggle.

What the above example points to, and what is clear from Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) theory, is that true hegemony (and as we will see true antagonism) is impossible,\(^\text{36}\) as it would imply an erasure of the logic of difference. Consequently, there can only be partial hegemony, as counter-hegemonic projects are always there. Thus, pluralism, or the admission of diversity is crucial for agonistic democracy, on a par with the equalizing (and consequently, antagonizing) forces.

**PLURALISM AND ITS LIMITS**

As mentioned above, any hegemonic order requires alternatives, multiple options, or alternative counter-hegemonic projects. That regards both the individual level (multiplicity of subject positions) and the collective level, where pluralism is absolutely necessary. It is also yet another characteristic of Mouffe’s vision that might put both peaceful coexistence and commonality at risk. In her democracy vision, pluralism gains a constitutive status; it is not only an observable fact, but concerns the ontological-normative level. Not only is it an expression of the disappearance of a substantive common good, it also helps legitimize conflict and division. Pluralism “is taken to be constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should celebrate and enhance”\(^\text{37}\). What Mouffe understands under the term pluralism is not simply a multiplicity of interests and values. It is also the kind of multidimensionality that William Connolly systematically argues for, that is, a multidimensional pluralism “involving diversity in the domains of creed, sensual disposition, gender practice, household organization, ethnic identification, first language, and fundamental existential orientations.”\(^\text{38}\) As

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\(^\text{36}\) Thomassen, “Reading radical democracy”, p.637.


Mouffe takes this plea seriously, her conclusion is that consensus as a goal or even a regulative idea is to be abandoned.\textsuperscript{39}

From such a standpoint, conflicts are not seen as disturbances that unfortunately cannot be eliminated [...]. For a radical and plural democracy, the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible, even if envisaged as an asymptotic approach to the regulative ideal of a free and unconstrained communication, as in Habermas, far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk.\textsuperscript{40}

One reservation about Mouffe’s interpretation of Habermas is here in place. He does not speak of any final resolution of conflicts (recall his \textit{better} not \textit{the best} argument) but indeed does put orientation to consensus as an ideal for democracy. What Mouffe tries to underline here is that pluralism goes hand in hand with conflicts. Hers is not a simple multiplicity but one necessarily linked to contestation (\textit{agonistic} pluralism). Conflicts, in turn, are seen as the core of democratic politics. The same critique of ‘smooth’ pluralism is brought up by Amarpal Dhaliwal: “Cultural difference, in liberal discourses of “multiculturalism” or “pluralism,” frequently means a simple, compatible plurality with no conflict, contestation, or contradiction”\textsuperscript{41}.

Mouffe identifies two competing logics that mark the unstable territory of pluralism – the logic of equivalence or identity and the logic of difference,\textsuperscript{42} which stem from the litigious marriage between democracy and liberalism. These two always remain in a relation of tension – “one aiming


\textsuperscript{40} Mouffe, \textit{The Return of the Political}, p.8.

\textsuperscript{41} Dhaliwal Amarpal K., “Can the Subaltern Vote? Radical Democracy, Discourses of Representation and Rights, and Questions of Race”, [in:] \textit{Radical Democracy}, p.44.

\textsuperscript{42} ‘Logic’ should be here understood as a ‘unit of explanation’, distinct from laws, self-interpretation, and mechanisms. This conception of logic “refers to the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible and intelligible.” Or, put in a more colloquial language, “when we talk about the \textit{logic} of a practice or a regime of practices we seek to capture those aspects which make it tick.” See Glynos & Howarth, \textit{Logics of Critical Explanation}, pp.8, 15, 135. The political logics that Mouffe identifies function as axioms, they gain a quasi-transcendental status and define the conditions of possibility (and the conditions of impossibility as they mark the limits) of the social world.
to achieve complete equivalence, the other to preserve all differences”. Hence, their articulation must be constantly re-created and renegotiated: there is no point of equilibrium where final harmony could be attained. It is only in this precarious ‘in-between’ that we can experience pluralism.43

There is no possible compatibility between the drive towards simplification of the political space on the one side and expansion and increasing diversity on the other. According to Mouffe, it is this undecidable game between these two logics that keeps liberal democracy alive and secures the primacy of the political.44

It is also in this context that we can understand Mouffe’s discussion about the limitations of pluralism. She argues that agonistic pluralism does not stand for unconstrained or total pluralism and that absolute pluralism can never be fully realized. Some limits must be put on the free play of differences. In line with the ambitions of agonistic democracy is the challenging of differences constructed as relations of subordination. It is vital to “distinguish between differences that exist but should not exist and differences that do not exist but should exist”45. Otherwise put, not all differences can be accepted within the frame of an agonistic-democratic project, its democratic dimension requires setting limits to pluralism; or, the recognition of difference as such should not lead to indifference towards the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of difference. This is quite clear when we consider inequalities and discrimination of different kinds, that doubtlessly contribute to pluralism, but that nevertheless should not be tolerated in a democracy striving for the aim of equality.

Mouffe states that “[t]rue pluralist democracy is therefore to be seen as an impossible good, that is to say, as something that exists only as long as it cannot be perfectly achieved.”46 Not only is it impossible (empirical ob-

43 Mouffe, “For a politics”, p.112. See also Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.133; and Glynos & Howarth, Logics of Critical Explanation, pp.144f.

44 Compare Habermas’s reflection about equality and individuality. “Moral universalism must not take into account the aspect of equality (equal to all others) at the expense of the aspect of individuality (different from all others).” Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, p.40. At first glance, it seems to be very close to Mouffe’s logic of equivalence and logic of difference, however in her account these logics are highly contradictory.

45 Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.20.

46 Mouffe, “For a politics”, p.112.
obstacles), it would be undesirable from the democratic point of view. The realization of unconstrained pluralism would contradict the democratic ambitions. The limits to pluralism are another expression of the play between the logics of equivalence and difference that are distinguishing for democracy. Nevertheless, we should always be aware of the political character of any such limitations imposed on pluralism.

I concur with Mouffe’s radical democratic commitment that leads her to condemn differences that are built on relations of subordination,47 however, I cannot see how she wants her agonistic democrats to discern between the different kinds of differences. Mouffe does not provide guidelines as to the grounds of adjudicating between the legitimate and illegitimate differences.48 Resorting to principles of equality and liberty is only apparently a solution, as she strongly underlines that there cannot be any agreement regarding their interpretation and that they only function as empty signifiers.

Here we could probably turn to Mouffe’s recurring reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein and his separate language games, with different rules and norms guiding them:

It is always possible to distinguish between the just and the unjust, the legitimate and the illegitimate, but this can only be done from within a given tradition, with the help of standards that tradition provides; in fact there is no point of view external to all traditions from which one can offer a universal judgment.49

Within these language games the meaning of equality and liberty could be fixed. But such an understanding would lead to the vision of separate and consensual communities of the communitarian sort she rejects. Mouffe also clearly distances herself from

a certain type of extreme post-modern fragmentation of the social that refuses to give the fragments any kind of relational identity. By putting an exclusive emphasis on heterogeneity and incommensurability, such a view impedes recognition how certain differences are constructed as relations of

subordination and *should therefore be challenged* by a radical democratic politics.50

I am sympathetic to Mouffe’s rejection of the universal, applicable to all principles of adjudication, but if her theory is to be of any practical value, she needs to replace it with something else; she needs to adopt another form of universalism. Where does the imperative “should therefore be challenged” in the quote above come from? It seems like Mouffe is taking democratic subjectivity for granted.

In a similar vein Ilan Kapoor has reservations about Mouffe’s optimistic statements that “we need a hegemony of democratic values” and “all participants will recognize the position of others in the contest as legitimate ones”51, by asking “where do her imperative constructions – “all participants will recognize” and “we need” – come from? on what are they based? what will compel these groups to act democratically? what will guarantee or impel their legitimacy?”52 Kapoor concludes disappointedly: “In the absence of answers to these questions, it is difficult to interpret Mouffe’s “logic of equivalence” as anything other than voluntarism.”53 It is difficult to see how Mouffe could convince us that the political practices she favors will be democratic. And, pushing it maybe too far, some will be inclined to question that her agonistic pluralism is a theory of democracy. Mouffe’s objections to the consensually oriented procedures that Habermas puts forth result in her leaving out discussion about legitimating procedures altogether. I think that Kapoor is right in pointing out that this potentially opens for the same kind of inequalities and exclusions that Habermas’s deliberation has been accused for. Lack of institutionalized procedures in participatory politics could lead to the favoring of the stronger and privileged. “Thus, the lack of procedures and the absence of their institutionalization can weaken democratic politics.”54

Summing up, the two logics described above, equivalence and difference, are crucial for a vibrant democracy. The move from consensus to difference and back is a dynamic we witness in democracies, although pluralism is certainly more focal in Mouffe’s thinking. As mentioned above, plural-

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53 Ibid., p.473.
54 Ibid., p.474.
ism is here seen as conflictual and contaminated with (potential) antagonisms, which could possibly endanger peaceful coexistence. I will look more closely at the forms conflicts may take in Mouffe’s conception of democracy in the section dedicated to antagonism and agonism. This feature of her democracy vision translates directly into her vision of the subject. Under the name of ‘subject positions’ we encounter the same conflictual pluralism within a subject as on the societal level (see Chapter 6).

**Politics and the political**

Given her stress on conflictuality and difference, Mouffe needs to be explicit about what role violence plays in her vision. Let me approach her stance on the question of violence by recalling her statement that the political is our ontological condition. It is high time to explain the fundamental distinction for Mouffe, namely the one between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. By invoking these two she secures her place both in the field of more empirically oriented political science, which normally deals with ‘politics’, and in the field of political philosophy, which traditionally enquires about the nature of ‘the political’. This distinction stems from the belief that we cannot reduce the social to an empirical dispersion only. We also need to address the issue of conditions of possibility (recall the discussion in Chapter 3, that in Mouffe’s case they are always paired with conditions of impossibility):

> By “the political”, I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. “Politics”, on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of “the political”.

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55 Some critics miss the point accusing Mouffe of a slippage in her account of politics. Mark Devenney claims that Mouffe both wants politics to be about power and creating benign forms of power, compatible with democratic politics. However, such an accusation does not recognize the fundamental categories that Mouffe introduces: the political can be equated with antagonism, whereas (democratic) politics is about adjusting or taming these into more benign forms. Compare Devenney, *Ethics and Politics*, p.65.

Such a division on two aspects of what is usually called politics, that is, the ordinary, smooth one and the rare, disruptive and disquieting one, is not original to Mouffe; there are theorists of democracy who make a similar analytical move.\textsuperscript{57} There are, however, huge disparities as to the meaning ascribed to ‘the political’. Mouffe herself recalls Hannah Arendt who “envisage[s] the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation while others see it as a space of power, conflict and antagonism”.\textsuperscript{58} Mouffe clearly adheres to the latter perspective. In her view, the political forms the ontological condition of her vision of democracy; it is seen as constitutive of human societies. All relations, identities and boundaries are penetrated by the political with its related concepts of undecidability and conflictuality. It stands for the potentiality of antagonisms, which means that all relations can possibly turn out to be antagonistic. Andrew Schaap explains that “the political refers to an extraordinary moment – the potential resort to violence against an enemy – that conditions ordinary politics.”\textsuperscript{59}

Politics, then, stands for the more concrete set of practices and institutions that aim at creating order in the world of ever latent conflict. Democratic politics has a special role of making human coexistence possible by transforming the lethally antagonistic relations into agonistic ones, more suitable for a public sphere of democracy.\textsuperscript{60} As we see, Habermas’s concern is also focal for Mouffe. She acknowledges the necessity of drawing a political imaginary in which democracy does not allow for violence. However, she does not simply conjure away the scary element of violence. With the help of the concept of ‘the political’ she hopes to keep violence in sight and in this way possibly put it under control. It is a condition always latent, always searching its way to emerge and replace normal and peaceful forms of conflict in politics. The raison d’être of democratic politics is transforming those (potentially) violent forms of conducting politics into

\textsuperscript{57} See for example Hannah Arendt, Jacques Rancière and Sheldon Wolin. For a comment on that see Little, “Between Disagreement and Consensus”, p.154; and Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”, p.271. In the case of Wolin, he resorts to a similar distinction on politics and the political, the ordinary and the extraordinary, or episodic, but inspired by Arendt, he frames the political more in terms of solidarity than antagonism. See Wolin Sheldon S., “Fugitive Democracy”, [in:] Democracy and Difference, p.31.

\textsuperscript{58} Mouffe, On the Political, p.9. In this quote, I am not sure that the word ‘space’ was the best choice of Mouffe’s. It suggests a spatialization of politics, and what follows, some clear-cut divisions between different spheres. This clearly contradicts the ontological aspect of ‘the political’ that Mouffe so eagerly underlines.

\textsuperscript{59} Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”, p.268

\textsuperscript{60} Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.101.
more democratic ones, or as Mouffe puts it, it consists of “domesticating hostility.”\textsuperscript{61}

According to Mouffe, all politics centres around the formation of collective identities. Schaap elaborates on this point:

the concept of the political refers to a certain potentiality within politics according to which commonality emerges out of difference. In other words, the political refers to a dynamic inherent within political action by which a ‘we’ […] comes to be articulated.\textsuperscript{62}

This ‘we’ is articulated through a contrast with a ‘them’. The line of division is obviously always fluid and opaque as there are no stable identities. The task of democratic politics in this insecure environment charged with potential and actual conflicts is to reformulate the ‘them’ as our counterparts, and not enemies. Nevertheless, we cannot escape our ontological condition, and the we/them relation can always possibly turn into a relation of friend/enemy, which means that it can always become political. It happens when ‘they’ “begin to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence”\textsuperscript{63}.

We find the political in all spheres of society. Mouffe argues that “any form of us/them relationship, be it religious, ethnic, economic, or other [can potentially become] political.”\textsuperscript{64} In this vision, the political is given privilege over the social; it constitutes the ontological condition of the social. It cannot therefore possibly be located at a determinate level of the social, as it contributes to the very institution of it. In other words, any social objectivity is ultimately political; it always reveals traces of exclusion that govern its institution:

The social is the realm of sedimented practices, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted as if they were self-grounded. Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{61} Mouffe, “For a politics”, p.108.
\textsuperscript{62} Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”, p.271.
\textsuperscript{63} Mouffe, \textit{The Return of the Political}, p.3; see also Mouffe, “For a politics”, pp.107-8.
\textsuperscript{64} Mouffe, “Decision, Deliberation”, p.26.
\textsuperscript{65} Mouffe, \textit{On the Political}, p.17.
What follows, both the political and the social are inevitable parts of any social life. One consists in the obvious and the taken-for-granted context and the other in the ever latent disruption of that apparent stability. In result, Mouffe argues, “the frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents”\(^{66}\). The political is, at least potentially, ubiquitous. The background certainty provided by the social, which enables everyday functioning in any association, is only a temporary fixation that can be unraveled at any time. Whenever the rules, institutions, norms and values sedimented by the social are questioned, the political is re-activated. Later, when the active phase of challenging has passed and a new fixation (hegemonic meaning) emerges, the social takes over again. Politics is a practice of “creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations”\(^{67}\).

As we have seen, Mouffe tries to explain both normal, peaceful and smooth politics with its sources in the social, and its moments of disruption provided by the political. However, the conceptualization of ‘the political’ is the interesting contribution here. The political, consisting in the always latent threat of violence, is what propels democratic politics. Without this threat, there would be nothing to tame, which Mouffe defines as the primary task for democracy. Thus, the threat of violence is productive; it forms democracy’s condition of possibility, at the same time as it puts it at risk. Walter Benjamin underlines the importance of the kind of awareness Mouffe’s political brings forth: “When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay.”\(^{68}\)

I will now proceed to Mouffe’s concepts of antagonism and agonism in order to see in more detail what the political condition entails and to what extent it can be a threat to peaceful coexistence and community.

**Agonism and Antagonism**

Another expression of the dual division between politics and the political, or the ordinary peaceful and the threatening and dangerous (i.e., potentially violent) is Mouffe’s distinction between agonism and antagonism. Whereas ‘antagonism’ has been a part of her theory from the start, she only introduced the concept of ‘agonism’ as a specific form of antagonism in her

\(^{66}\) Ibid., p.18.


\(^{68}\) Walter Benjamin cited in Derrida, “Force of Law”, p.47.
1995 article *Politics, democratic action, and solidarity*. The source of inspiration has been traced to William Connolly and his concept of ‘agonistic respect’. This distinction has certainly nuanced but also complicated Mouffe’s position.

She claims that by shedding light on different forms of power and exclusion, their contestation is made possible. The aim of democracy in such an environment is to transform the lethal relations of antagonism into a milder form of agonism, to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations. According to Mouffe, antagonism proper occurs between enemies, persons who have nothing in common, whereas agonism takes place between adversaries, or ‘friendly enemies’, who share a common symbolic space and respect for the democratic rules of the game. In such a view, securing the sphere of commonality is crucial, otherwise antagonisms will take over.

Mouffe maintains that antagonisms outline the environment for agonistic democracy. She owes this inspiration to the Marxist tradition, which, however, exclusively locates antagonisms in class relations and foresees a possible future resolution of all antagonisms in the harmonious proletariat democracy. Both these points are incompatible with the agonistic pluralistic vision, in which the economic sphere of production loses its central role and antagonistic relations are seen as an ineradicable condition. That is why Mouffe eventually resorts to Schmitt in order to deepen her understanding of antagonistic relations. She owes to him the true recognition of conflict but at the same time wishes to avoid the notoriously sanguine and anti-pluralist implications of Schmitt’s concept of politics.

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71 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, pp.102-3. This analytical distinction is blurred by Mouffe herself when she in places uses the terms inconsequentially. See for example Mouffe Chantal, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy”, [in:] *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Mouffe Chantal, Routledge, London & New York 1996, p.8: “Many conflicts are antagonistic because they take place among conflicting interpretations of the ethico-political values embodied in liberal democratic institutions”. According to the distinction introduced by her, such conflicts should be named agonistic, as they only center around conflicting interpretations of values that are shared by both sides of the disagreement.

Schmitt against Schmitt” she wishes to widen the range of conflict by introducing antagonisms within the boundaries of the political community.

According to the Schmittian inspiration, the term antagonism draws attention to the fact that every (collective) identity implies an opposed other – the antagonist – who helps to define the very identity. However, in Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) version, as Thomas Brockelman explains, “the term takes on a very different meaning: the antagonistic Other also names the absence or void that emerges where we expect to find the term completing any identity”73. I will come back to this double understanding of the ‘Other’, that is, other as stabilizing my identity and other as a symbolic representation of Lack, further down in the thesis.

Mouffe pictures antagonism as a condition of impossibility of democracy, which implies an inscription of a limit into its very image:

Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy ‘to come’, as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization74.

or, “[p]erfect democracy would indeed destroy itself. This is why it should be conceived as a good that exists as good only as long as it cannot be reached.”75 Let me unpack this statement. The specific characteristics of Mouffe’s democracy are conflict and antagonism, the recognition of these aspects. However, when fully realized, they would indeed destroy democracy resulting in a war of all against all. As discussed above, the same aporia, or unsurpassable paradox comes forth in Mouffe’s discussion about pluralism. Pluralism is seen as the sine qua non of democracy, although unrestricted pluralism would contradict the democratic ambition (of equality and liberty for all). The moment of its full realization would also be the moment of its dissolution. This constitutes one of the paradoxes inherent to the project of agonistic democracy.

Hence, one could argue that antagonism is an extreme that can never be realized. Apart from the unwanted effects of full antagonism as war of all against all, a realization of antagonism would also require the elimination

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74 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.8; see also Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.137.
75 Ibid., p.137.
of difference." Antagonism is enacted through the polarization of society, through a successful formation of chains of equivalence. In effect, as discussed above, it implies suspension of differences within the chain. “Antagonism only exists as a discursive effect and only as one end of a spectrum that is never reached. If anything, there are tendential antagonisms, that is, frontiers and identities that are constituted as more or less antagonistic.” There is no full antagonism, we should rather qualify it and see grades of antagonism (parallel to the impossibility of full hegemony).

Moreover, despite the democratic transformation, enemies do not disappear from the radical democratic horizon. They are now identified with those denying the democratic framework/rules of the game and who thereby exclude themselves and are excluded from the democratic community. Mouffe states that antagonisms are external to society, constituting its limits, and the impossibility of its full constitution. Agreeably, this formulation is a bit confusing. It prompts a reading in which the antagonistic frontier would be definite, separating a unified ‘us’ from a ‘them’, the included from the excluded. However, this frontier rather masks the essential lack of an essence, that is, the inherently dislocated character of identity. What it points to is that not only do antagonisms dichotomize the social space, they also make both sides of the antagonistic relation necessary and hence cannot be simply equated with radical exclusion. The ‘Other’ constituting the point of reference for our identity is also the very condition of its existence. Contrary to Schmitt, an antagonistic confrontation is for Mouffe never a relation between clear-cut opponents. Just like

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78 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.4; Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.125. The concept of externality will be elaborated further on in the text, when I will discuss ‘constitutive outside’. For now, let it suffice to say that we can never speak of something totally external, as the outside is always already on the inside. This im/possibility condition of the we/them relation will be discussed in the next chapter.
79 Lasse Thomassen points to the ambiguous character of the concept of antagonism in Mouffe’s and Laclau’s writing. “[I]t is referred to both as a concrete discursive construction and as the limit of representation.” On the one hand, antagonism can be understood as the limit of discursive objectivity, that is, the suspension of the relations of difference by constituting a chain of equivalence, on the other hand, it can be understood as the irreducible tension between difference and equivalence. More on this in Thomassen, “Reading radical democracy”, p.635.
society, this relation is marked with fluidity and ambiguous borders, it is never entirely transparent.80

To be sure, agonism and conflict are not the only existing relations in Mouffe’s democracy vision. Collaboration and cooperation are admitted their place too. Mouffe underlines that “pluralist politics should be envisaged as a “mixed-game,” i.e., in part collaborative and in part conflictual.”81 She contends that a certain degree of unity, a common point of reference is necessary in order to keep any political association together. Therefore she allows for consensus in the form of allegiance to basic ethico-political principles ruling in democratic societies (i.e., equality and liberty for all) as well as its institutions. However, the content of these principles and the role of institutions are seen as an open question. The struggle for their interpretations is perceived as the very subject matter of politics.82 To distinguish her consensus from Habermas’s rational consensus, Mouffe names it democratic or conflictual.83 In her theory consensus might be interpreted as a hegemonic articulation; “Every consensus appears as stabilization of something essentially instable and chaotic”84 and is only possible as a temporary fixation.85

As we see, Mouffe’s project does not stop at the statement that we are conditioned by the political and antagonistic but also seeks to combine this condition with the possibility of peaceful coexistence. Critics underline that the distinction between agonism and antagonism enables Mouffe to think of the “conflictual character of politics without falling into a destructive war of all against all”86, it “does not point to the ‘inevitability of struggle’,

80 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.129.
82 See Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.188; Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, p.103; Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy”, p.756; Mouffe, Politics and Passions, p.10.
83 Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, pp.70, 103.
84 Ibid., p.136.
85 Mouffe resorts to Ludwig Wittgenstein in search of inspiration here and adopts his concept of Einstimmung, fusion of voices that is enabled by the common form of life, in opposition to Einverstand, that is a product of reason. Consensus is here seen as stemming from the practice and common experience and not from any kind of a rational process of convincing. For the sake of clarity, the opposition Mouffe sets up here is only partly in place. It is misguiding to equate Habermas’s rational consensus with Einverstand as he clearly speaks of Verständigung, which underlines the procedural aspects. However, Mouffe’s underlining of other than argumentative or rational sources of consensus is still relevant. See ibid., p.12.
86 Kalyvas, “The Democratic Narcissus”, p.35.
in a fashion pushing us in the proto-fascist direction of Schmitt and social Darwinists." Mouffe does see the necessity of ordinary, taken-for-granted social relations and tries to secure these by introducing the element of normal politics and the social into her theory. Again, democratic politics is supposed to transform or defuse the potentially violent political relations.

**defusing the radical potential**

This very point, that seems to save Mouffe from my Habermas-inspired objections, gives also rise to criticism at the other end of the theoretical spectrum. These critics find her definition of the task of democracy, that is, dealing with the political and antagonisms through 'domesticating', 'taming', or adjusting them to 'more civilized forms' insufficiently radical. Some of them hold that her agonistic democracy is too quietist, as in her view all conflicts can be transformed into more acceptable, less scary forms. Others, focusing on these very formulations, point out Mouffe’s problems with the redefined conception of antagonism.

The potentially most devastating critique targets the very analytical relevance of the distinction between antagonism and agonism. For example, it has been argued that Mouffe’s concept of antagonism is flawed when it comes to her stress on lack of any common ground that is supposed to characterize this ‘relation’. Admittedly, her distinction between agonism and antagonism rests on such a claim, which seems problematic. What kind of relations would they be, those antagonistic ones? What does it mean that the parties do not share a common symbolic sphere? Is it enough that they do not accept the rules of the game (weaker claim) or do they have *nothing* in common? I think Georg Simmel is right in pointing out that conflict is also a form of sociation and, additionally, that conflicts can be traced in almost any form of sociation:

To be sure, there are conflicts which seem to exclude all other elements – for instance, between the robber or thug and his victim. If such a fight simply aims at annihilation, it does approach the marginal case of assassination in

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88 For example Keith Breen, Andrew Schaap and Stanley Fish.
89 For example Eva Erman holds that even enemies, in order to be able to define each other as such, need some form of common understanding, and a presumption about each other as subjects. She argues further that there could be no conflict (either agonistic or antagonistic) without deliberation. Erman, “What is Wrong”, pp.1046ff.
which the admixture of unifying elements is almost zero. If, however, there is any consideration, any limit to violence, there already exists a socializing factor, even though only as the qualification of violence.\footnote{Simmel Georg, “Conflict”, \textit{in:} Simmel Georg, \textit{On Individuality and Social Forms. Selected Writings}, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago \& London 1971, p.81.}

In consequence, the only way for Mouffe to include this insight is to reserve the term antagonism for ‘relations’ of extermination. On this account, only pure violence can have \textit{no} common ground. Simmel continues:

It is almost inevitable that an element of commonness injects itself into the enmity once the stage of open violence yields to any other relationship, even though this new relation may contain a completely undiminished sum of animosity between the two parties.\footnote{Pierre Bourdieu is on the same track stating that: “It tends to be forgotten that a fight presupposes agreement between the antagonists about what it is that is worth fighting about”. Bourdieu Pierre, “Some properties of fields”, \textit{in:} Sociology in Question, Sage, London 1993, p.73.}

Hence, in this reading, agonism would stand for a quite defused and ‘calm’ form of politics, whereas antagonism would be equated with extermination alone. A consequence would be that there could be no ethics of antagonism.\footnote{Simmel, “Conflict”, p.81. Interestingly, Simmel’s ponderings about conflict can be applied to both Mouffe and Habermas. As we have seen, the objection to Mouffe would be that conflict is a form of sociation, which problematizes Mouffe’s distinction between agonism and antagonism, where antagonism is defined as lack of any relation. According to Simmel, every enmity is inflicted with some commonality. Simultaneously, the insights that can be applied to Habermas regard Simmel’s claim that conflict is a means of preserving the relation, and consequently that there is and should be conflict in any group or identity, as it is the drive responsible for change. See ibid., pp.70-83. We could also draw Simmel’s conclusions further and run them through a Derridian sieve. In effect, conflict is already inscribed in the very definition of a relation, not only a welcome addition to it.}

\footnote{By ‘ethics’ here I mean the recommended rules of conduct, in this instance towards enemies. This understanding obviously does not conform with Habermas’s use of ethics, where it regards the orientation of norms to what is good for me/us (in contradistinction to the moral, universal orientation towards what is good for all). More in line with my usage of the term is Keith Breen’s plea for ‘ethics of antagonism’ in Mouffe’s theory. “What is lacking in Mouffe’s thought, ultimately, is a defensible ethics of antagonism, an ethics to orient our actions in relationships of enmity.” Breen Keith, “Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care”, \textit{in:} Law and Agonistic Politics, p.140.}
and it could not possibly be put forth as a normative postulate for democratic theory.

A more tempered line of critique against the distinction between antagonism and agonism emphasizes that after the introduction of agonism, which opened up Mouffe’s theory for deeper insights about democratic intersubjectivity, her theory witnesses a paradox. She both wants to retain the original formulation from Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, in which antagonism was the ars specifica of her (and Laclau’s) project of radical democracy, and make it manageable under the democratic conditions. As we have seen, it should be kept at bay and transformed into a different kind of antagonism at the same time as it constitutes the very raison d’être of the political. Keith Breen maintains that

[although she believes antagonism to be ontologically constitutive of the political, her theory of agonistic democracy paradoxically suggests that this condition can largely be overcome. Indeed, the very purpose of democracy is said to be the keeping of ‘the emergence of antagonism at bay’.]

Breen argues further that such a view is only possible if we consider all antagonisms tamable. Indeed, Mouffe does underline the ineradicability of conflict in democracy, while she maintains that concrete antagonisms can be held in check, which however, does not equate with eradication. Here, the distinction between the ontological and ontical is helpful. Whereas antagonism forms our ontological condition, the ontic representations of concrete antagonisms can be managed (remember weak ontology). Aletta Norval’s solution to this problem is to keep analytically distinct the moment of institution of a regime (not exclusively democratic), where the common symbolic space is constituted, and the moments of agonism in the already constituted democratic regimes. But, as she points out, there still remain several problems.

In the first place, if we limit the use of agonism to ‘normal’ politics occurring within the already constituted democratic regimes, Mouffe runs the risk of severely defusing the radical potential of her democratic theory. As mentioned above, the ‘radical’ in her radical democracy stood for the possibility to question, disrupt and problematize the constitution and shape of the existing regimes, that is, the common symbolic space. However, such a

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93 Norval, Aversive Democracy, p.159.
94 Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism”, p.139.
95 Compare Norval, Aversive Democracy, p.159.
formulation of agonism suggests that contestation ought to take place only within such a shared space.

Within the community, among those who accept the basic principles of equality and liberty we would meet agonistic struggles between different interpretations of these principles. In consequence, properly antagonistic relations would be reserved only for those between the members of the community and those situated outside of it (those who do not accept the principles). It seems a rather odd move. If anything is in principle questionable, contingent through and through, Mouffe must allow for the possibility of questioning those higher-rank principles from within as well. This would be the full embrace of the openness of democracy, with its risky content, that is the possibility of some groups questioning the fundamental elements of democracy.

Thomassen argues similarly against Habermas’s hierarchical ordering of the right before the good. Despite Habermas’s commitment to open debate and the possibility of renegotiating the content and outcome of any particular deliberation, the basic distinction between the moral and the ethical, and their ordering, is not for debate.96 The same counts for the deliberative procedure. The openness of deliberation is here conditional upon accepting of certain principles as universal and unavoidable. As discussed in Chapter 3, Habermas tries to conceal this moment of political decision (that is contingent exclusion) through reference to rational reconstruction, but as shown earlier, it is not as solid as it might seem and the fallibility of concrete interpretations that Habermas admits of is not enough to enable a more open vision of democracy. Apparently, a similar critique targets Mouffe’s theory. If agonistic relations equate with contests about certain interpretations of the liberal principles, and only antagonistic relations include those who question these principles, then, in the end, Mouffe’s agonistic version of politics does not allow for radical change.

Another common critique against Mouffe is that she does not elaborate on the most interesting part of her vision – the relation to the enemy. Andrew Schaap argues:

Since she presumes that all antagonistic conflict can be sublated into agonism, Mouffe does not provide any guidance as to how we should deal with intractable conflict in which the other remains our enemy.97

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96 Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?”, p.446.
Indeed, Mouffe does not conceptualize enough the relation to the enemy. All participants in her agonistic democracy are adversaries, and the enemy is only latently present. Neither does she theorize the transformation from enemy to adversary, which is supposed to be the central task for her democracy. As we have seen, Mouffe defines the scope of democratic politics as taming antagonisms and subordinating them to democratic ways of conduct, i.e., redirecting actions from extinction to co-existence. However, she does not elaborate on how this transformation is supposed to happen. She explains that it will not take the form of any kind of rational persuasion, but rather a kind of ‘conversion’. But what this conversion is motivated by remains unclear. Mouffe writes:

To come to accept the position of the adversary is to undergo a radical change in political identity, it has more of a quality of a conversion than of rational persuasion (in the same way as Thomas Kuhn has argued that adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a conversion).98

We can infer that by creating multiple and differing democratic subject positions, that is, many options for being and living in a democracy, we diminish the risk of antagonisms taking place. This, though, does not explain how the antagonisms that are already there are to be transformed into democratic agonisms.

According to me, the critical interventions in Mouffe’s theory do point to serious problems with her distinction between antagonism and agonism. As I see it, some of the objections can be explained by reference to the two-fold meaning of antagonism. The criticism that Mouffe presents every antagonism as tameable, which would indeed significantly blunt her radical edge, is only adequate with regard to the enemy/antagonism as a concrete Other (and the ontic level), the one that helps stabilize my identity. Whereas the second understanding of enemy or antagonism, i.e., the imaginative, symbolically represented Other is always there as the representation of the void, of the essential Lack, which helps me realize the impossibility of any positive and full identity. This conception of the Other will be introduced in more detail in the next chapter. Moreover, the tameable antagonism as concrete Other will only be marked by the threat of pure violence. And this possibility or threat of antagonisms should mobilize advocates of democracy to create new subject positions compatible

with democratic politics. The challenge of antagonisms, the latent possibility of their new forms is always there as a threatening and alerting force that shapes politics.

Thus, we can say that the critique is only partly justified. Indeed, there is a gap between Mouffe’s declared focus on the antagonistic dimension, the political and the radical Other, at the same time as she argues for a transformation of these disquieting elements into agonisms and normal politics. It is also true that she does not theorize this transformation. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the second meaning of the Other, or antagonist as a representation of Lack, is an important contribution to the way radical democracy can be thought. Antagonism as an expression of the unsuture of the social (Lack) helps understand the drive of hegemonic politics. In the context of the previous discussion about the entwinement and mutual dependence between undecidability and hegemony, antagonism would here even more strongly underline this linkage. Antagonism works exactly at the intersection of undecidability and hegemony. Through organizing the social in opposing representational entities, it helps constitute hegemony and in this way covers up for the dislocation of the social. Lack as antagonist stresses the threatening character of this imaginary, its powerful influence on collective and individual identities. This form of antagonism is not erasable; it is, on the contrary, constitutive of Mouffe’s conception of the subject. And it is here, that is, in the definition of subjectivity, that Mouffe’s radicalism should be sought.

**Passions**

Another characteristic of Mouffe’s vision that might counteract Habermas’s plea for peaceful coexistence is the central role ascribed to ‘passions’, by which she means “the various affective forces which are at the origin of collective forms of identifications”99. Passions refer thus to collective mobilization. It is one of the grounds for her critique of the deliberative and the aggregative models, which either concentrate on rational deliberation or institutionalized political choices, but leave aside passions as an important condition of politics. She, on the contrary, recognizes passions as one of the main moving forces in the field of politics.100

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One could say that passions stand for the uncontrollable (or unaccountable) force that might turn politics into a battlefield. However, for Mouffe they are rather a safety valve for agonism as opposed to antagonism. If passions are left no democratic outlet, we risk experiencing the emergence of antagonistic relations of friend/enemy, which could take the form of conflicts about non-negotiable moral values (the borderline between ‘us’ and ‘them’ would be reframed in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’). Mouffe invokes this thesis to explain the recent appearance and success of right-wing populism in Europe. The consensual politics (as well as consensual theories) that Mouffe identifies for example with the ‘Third Way’ politics erases alternatives that give people possible objects of identification in politics. In effect, the catch-all politics, and the merging of the political party programs open the space for extremists that can discursively present a clear alternative option. Mouffe maintains that

right-wing populism is the consequence of the post-political consensus. Indeed, it is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the ‘voice of the people’.101

And more generally:

When the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered because of a lack of democratic forms of identifications, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet and the ground is laid for various forms of politics articulated around essentialist identities of nationalist, religious or ethnic type.102

Such confrontations most probably lead to violence. Consequently, the solution Mouffe proposes is to let passions onto the stage of politics. Relegating them from politics will not make them disappear but rather force them into undemocratic forms. This is because passions form one of the conditions of possibility of collective identity, and by extension, politics.103

However, even Mouffe seems to be anxious about the role they should

103 Mouffe, “Politics and passions”. 

138 | KATARZYNA JEZIERSKA Radical democracy redux
play. She sees the need of controlling them, and steering them in the right direction:

In the agonistic model the prime task of democratic politics is neither to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere; it is, rather, to ‘tame’ these passions by mobilizing them for democratic ends and by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives.\(^\text{104}\)

The formulations in the quote above are strikingly similar to Mouffe’s discussion about antagonisms that, as we have seen, should be transformed into agonisms by democratic politics. Even though Mouffe nominally stresses the importance of passions in agonistic politics, at the same time, she situates them closer to the antagonistic relations. She does not judge it possible or desirable to eliminate passions from politics, but calls for mobilizing the right kind of passions. When talking about ‘taming’\(^\text{105}\) the antagonisms and transforming them into more civilized agonisms that should rule within the confines of democracy (not eliminating the enemy but respecting the adversary) it is hard not to see it as a move from uncontrollable passions to some kind of milder form of politics.\(^\text{106}\) By the same token, Mouffe states that the Habermasian deliberative idea about consensus is “profoundly antipolitical because it ignores the crucial place of passions and affects in politics.”\(^\text{107}\) Even in this case, ‘passions’ in this quote could as well be (and actually are in places) exchanged with ‘antagonism’. In effect, Mouffe gives antagonisms and passions a similar role in democratic politics – they are the stimulating force, the ‘drives’ that make politics li-

\(^\text{104}\) Mouffe, Politics and Passions, p.9.

\(^\text{105}\) Note that she speaks of ‘taming’, and not ‘domesticating’. The latter approach has been ascribed to Rousseau. Arash Abizadeh argues that Rousseau recognized the importance of passions for politics, and deemed the elimination of passions impossible and undesirable. At the same time he argued for their literal ‘domestication’, that is the relegation of passions to the ‘domestic’ sphere of women, whose task it became to coin those unruly passions into republican virtues, that is, the love of the republic. See Abizadeh Arash, (2001) “Banishing the Particular. Rousseau on Rhetoric, Patrie, and the Passions”, Political Theory vol.29, no.4, pp.570-1.

\(^\text{106}\) The terminology chosen by Mouffe is slightly bizarre here. As noted, she speaks of ‘taming’, ‘civilized’ etc., which does not ring true in a postcolonial ear.

\(^\text{107}\) Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.115. One more example of lining up passions with antagonisms: When discussing liberal theory’s failure to recognize the political, Mouffe in places states that they treat passions as archaic and belonging to a bygone age. In other places she uses the same formulations for describing their attitude toward antagonisms. See Mouffe, Politics and Passions.
velier. At the same time, they are scary and ought to be tamed or at least steered in a certain direction. Such a reading is reinforced by Mouffe’s usage of “passions and antagonisms” in one line. The critical question is how do passions go together with agonism? And, how can passions help us in the democratic task of taming the political?

Here, following Spinoza, Mouffe distinguishes between two kinds of passions: fear and hope, which result in different ways of conducting politics. Fear would for example be mobilized by right wing extremists and would more probably lead to antagonistic forms of expression, whereas hope would be fully compatible with agonism as an indispensable element of any emancipatory politics.

Once again, just as in the case of antagonism, Mouffe seems to forego the potential objections stated at the beginning of this chapter (the role of violence in her theory). After initial strong claims for passions’ place in politics, she ends up putting restraints on her concepts and defusing this potentially violent and unpredictable element of her vision. A similar point has been made by Stanley Fish: “Taming politics is finally what Mouffe has in mind, despite her pronouncements to the contrary”. He summarizes the difference between Mouffe and the theories she criticizes (Habermas’s and Rawls’s) as a “family difference”, which is due to the fact that she believes the political (which Fish by the way calls ‘politics’) can be managed, while the criticized theorists think it can be eliminated.

**Commonality and Social Cohesion**

Having discussed the potential germs of violence in Mouffe’s conception of politics, let me now proceed to the second question posed in the beginning of this chapter, namely the one about grounds for commonality and social cohesion in Mouffe’s vision. Under what shape and how does commonality occur in the undecidable, plural and conflictual terrain identified by Mouffe?

Searching for motivation for sociability, Mouffe still finds some potential in Aristotle’s classic definition of political community as aiming at the good of all. It is certainly not the idea of a substantive common good that

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108 Mouffe, “Politics and passions”, p.615.
109 See Mouffe, “From antagonistic politics”.
110 Fish Stanley, *The Trouble with Principle*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2001, p.236. William Connolly makes a similar observation: “There are other places, too, where Mouffe first states the logic of antagonism in strong terms and then softens them to make room for her positive alternative”. Connolly, “Review essay”, p.130.
keeps the political community together, rather a common bond or public concern. Obviously, she rejects a single formulation of such good and accepts it only as politically (or hegemonically) formed. A ‘we’ is organized in relation to a ‘them’ and with reference to a common good that is conceived as a “vanishing point, something to which we must constantly refer but that can never be reached”.¹¹¹ Political community is seen as a discursive surface.¹¹² As such it has by necessity no definite shape and is in continuous re-enactment. Mouffe states that “[p]olitics is about the constitution of the political community not something that takes place within it.”¹¹³ Aletta Norval explains this standpoint well:

*the very possibility of commonality* and, hence, of political community is what is in dispute in political argumentation and disagreement, and what gets constituted through such argumentation.¹¹⁴

So, in this perspective, the shape (and existence) of community, the demos, is at the very heart of political engagement.

The elements constitutive of a democratic community that Mouffe enlists are allegiance to the liberal institutions and rules of the game as well as the common symbolic space formed by the ethico-political principles of liberty and equality. They all form a kind of democratic ethos constituted by the mobilization of passions and sentiments, multiplication of practices, institutions and language games (in place of rational arguments).¹¹⁵ In other words, commonality is based on lived experience that contributes to the formation of shared identity, i.e., citizenship. For Mouffe citizenship is not only a legal status but foremost a political identification with the norms of conduct or rules of the game specific for a community (inspired by Oakeshott’s *respublica*).¹¹⁶ The distinguishable liberal democratic re-

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¹¹³ Ibid., p.81; in almost exactly the same wording Mouffe, “Citizenship and Political Identity”, p.30.


¹¹⁵ Mouffe, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism”, p.5.

**spublica** consists of the political principles of equality and liberty. These norms are obviously seen as a “product of a given hegemony, the expression of power relations”\(^{117}\). In effect, they can be subject to different interpretations and are always open to challenge. Such an understanding of the contingent grounds for commonality is not very far from Habermas’s. He argues that:

> those belonging to a state are also not simply members of an organization. Rather, they share a political form of life that is articulated in a corresponding self-understanding. [...] The question how “we” want to understand ourselves as citizens of a particular republic – is essentially contested. Also, with shifting contexts, the discourses of self-understanding remain in flux.\(^{118}\)

Hence, in both cases, citizenship is something to be constructed, and is not just empirically given. It requires acts of identification and interpretation by the members of the community; citizenship is a form of common political identity and as such requires continuous articulation on the part of the subjects. Both Habermas and Mouffe underline that citizens should not be perceived as passive recipients of rights who enjoy the protection of law, they must engage in law-formation through deliberative or agonistic debates, in order to secure the legitimacy of the law.

It is important to underline, that in agonistic democracy citizenship is seen as one among many identities, although some primacy is ascribed to it. In Mouffe’s words: “It is an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the agent [...] while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty.”\(^{119}\) The agonistic interpretation of equality and liberty will emphasize the unjustified relations of domination. Consequently, different groups and belongings should gather around the common concern of eliminating such relations. If these groups succeed in creating a chain of equivalence\(^ {120}\) (a minimal common denominator) among the demands of different democratic movements, they

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\(^{117}\) Ibid., p.78. She speaks of “competing interpretations of the ‘respublica’” in Mouffe, “Liberal Socialism and Pluralism”, p.83.


have constituted a common political identity, a ‘we’ as radical democratic citizens, or a radical democratic hegemony. This forming of a common front with the aim of winning power necessarily suspends the differences between the aligned subjects (collective or not). However, in line with the example from Poland presented earlier in this chapter, Mouffe holds that it by no means erases the differences between those movements.\textsuperscript{121}

This is generally the crux of an agonistic understanding of community – the cohesion necessary for its existence, understood as adherence to the democratic principles, does not override the multiplicity of other belongings.\textsuperscript{122} Here a link to Mouffe’s view of the subject comes forth – the combination of this limited and temporary unity and difference is made possible by the concept of the subject as constituted by multiple and often conflicting subject positions.

We can also discuss this underlining of unity without elimination of differences in light of Habermas’s distinction between ethics and moral. As discussed earlier, Habermas differentiates between the uniting, moral norms which delineate the scope of diversification allowed for in the particular conceptions of the good (ethical norms).\textsuperscript{123} Mouffe makes a similar move, when stating that the adherence to principles of equality and liberty is the uniting force within a community. And that multiple interpretations of these principles are possible. Another similarity can be traced in the character of the uniting bond. In the case of Mouffe the principles act as empty signifiers, as uniting terms that are filled with meaning only in the context of specific groupings, and it is precisely this emptiness that enables commonality (as in the case of Polish workers and intellectuals before 1989, who gathered under the labels of democracy, justice and freedom). Habermas refers to proceduralism, which entails that the norms are arrived at and substantialized in a process of deliberation and this very process, if conducted properly, provides legitimacy for the norms arrived at. This

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., p.32.
\textsuperscript{123} Mikael Carleheden interprets Habermas’s position, arguing against the interpretation of moral norms as limiting the diversity of ethical forms of life. He holds that there are only few questions which need to be solved on the moral level and also that these commonly accepted moral norms are necessary in order to shield ethical differences from the domination of the stronger (which he, by the way, calls ‘hegemony’). See Carleheden, “Social ojämlikhet”, pp.185-6.
could be interpreted that even for Habermas there is no given meaning of
the norms before deliberation, however, as discussed earlier, the norms
steering the procedure are to be accepted in the process, not only as a result
of it.

So, the grounds for solidarity or identification with a community are
based on the recognition of common values. However, there need not be
any consensus about the ordering of these values, about what values
should be preferred before others. Such a ranking belongs, according to
Mouffe, to the field of politics, or hegemonic practices that constitute it.
Those disagreeing on our preferred ordering of values and their interpreta-
tion are by Mouffe called adversaries. This is one aspect of the conflictual
in the dimension of solidarity – the struggle for how the values should be
ordered (agonism). Another is found in the relation with the outside, with
those having a different set of preferred values (antagonism). The distinc-
tion of Mouffe’s conceptualization of commonality is its aspect of negativity. We cannot speak of solidarity, common values, common
belonging or identity without taking into consideration its constitutive
outside, the exclusionary aspects. Any cohesion, any form of commonality
is always dependent upon an outside that is already on the inside. Mouffe
argues:

The ‘we’ cannot be limited to the positive aspect of shared values, since it
implies the tracing of a frontier with an exterior that is the very condition of
possibility for the existence of a collective identity.

The notion of constitutive outside helps us understand that this frontier
is absolutely necessary for us to define our identity, or values, and cannot
be perceived as simple exterior. Traces of it are present already in the defi-
nition of who we are, which means that they are always already on the
inside. This aspect of negativity, the drawing of the border to the outside,
explains the political aspect of solidarity. Solidarity is not only about inclu-

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125 Ibid., pp.104-105.
126 ‘Constitutive outside’ is a term coined by Henry Staten, now frequently used by
‘différance’. “Its aim is to highlight the fact that the creation of an identity implies
the establishment of a difference.” Mouffe, “Democracy in a Multipolar World”,
p.550. The concept of constitutive outside will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.
sion, positive definition of common identity and shared values, but also necessarily consists of exclusions and drawing of borders.

The logic of democracy always implies a moment of closure – a constitutive definition of the ‘people’. Just as in the process of identity formation, this definition requires raising a frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’. For Mouffe, the collective determination of a demos is always relational and builds on difference, consequently, it involves processes of inclusion and exclusion. The necessary we/them relation has important consequences for the entwinement of solidarity and politics. It introduces an agonistic element in the view of solidarity. In this way, Mouffe unites the commonality perspective with her specific conflictual one. Internal, always agonistic, cohesion is conditioned upon and cannot be detached from antagonistic orientation to the outside, the drawing of a border.

Such an understanding of community is obviously at odds with Habermas’s conception, which is guided by the ideal of full inclusion. Even though he undeniably sees the collective determination of a ‘we’ as something negotiable and not simply given, inclusion is for him not as clearly as in the case of Mouffe paired with exclusion. And the conflictual aspect of community is not sufficiently underlined, neither on the inside nor on the outside.

**Concluding Remarks**

The composition of this chapter was guided by two Habermas-inspired questions posed to Mouffe’s theory of democracy. Searching for the role of violence and grounds for social integration I discussed central themes in Mouffe’s theory.

In the course of the chapter it became clear that in spite of Mouffe’s focus on conflict and inscribing it in the very definition of pluralism (agonistic pluralism), violence is even here seen as a threat to democracy. This threat, though, has a constitutive role to play. Mouffe presents a vision of democratic politics as a plurality of agonisms with constant threat of antagonism that is welcome as it mobilizes us to even further questioning and revisions of the status quo. Violence is always there on the horizon (the ineradicability of antagonism), even though concrete instances or ontical articulations of antagonism should be tamed and kept at bay. Mouffe’s theory witnesses a bifurcation between her postulated radicalism and several theoretical attempts at civilizing these elements. Examples of such

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127 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p.43.
tendencies surfaced in the discussion about Mouffe’s conception of antagonism and the role of passions. At the same time there is an apparent lacuna of theorizing devoted to the passage from antagonisms to agonisms.

When it comes to social cohesion or commonality, contrary to the Habermas-inspired concern, it is compatible with Mouffe’s vision of agonistic democracy. Community is here inscribed in the context of agonistic pluralism. The democracy she puts forth as desirable does not entail peaceful coexistence without disruptions. According to Mouffe, inherent to democratic forms of community are contingency and conflict that are necessary corollaries to pluralism. In effect, the grounds for community are minimalist, confined to a sense of belonging grounded in common concern about certain (empty) values: equality and liberty. Common good so defined is not substantial but forms only a frame within which multiple conflicting interpretations are possible. The shared identity as citizens does not override plurality, which is made feasible by Mouffe’s concept of the subject as composed of multiple and contradictory subject positions (see Chapter 6). In consequence, Mouffe’s version of community is agonistic or conflictual on the inside and potentially antagonistic on the outside (having in mind the always blurred line of division) to be distinguished (excluded) from us.

In the course of this chapter I have pointed to seeming parallels between Mouffe’s and Habermas’s conceptions of politics. I have discussed and problematized the apparent similarity between Mouffe’s chains of equivalence and the Habermasian universalizing demand for arguments in use in deliberation. In both cases, the particular is supposed to somehow transform into the universal. However, in Mouffe’s case, this transformation consists in searching for the minimal common denominator and presenting the outcome as universal. Habermas, on the other hand, holds that the outcome, or the effect of transformation, is a genuine universal standpoint that has managed to transcend the particular. Moreover, for Mouffe, creating a chain of equivalence is intrinsically linked to antagonizing the public sphere, as the equalizing attempts to form a common front are always conducted against some ‘Other’. In effect, the exclusionary element is absolutely necessary in order to create any identity. That is obviously not the case for Habermas, who wants to see a universal standpoint, and designs the normative direction to consensus that is fully inclusive.

Having introduced Mouffe’s understanding of logics of equality and difference, we could say that the discrepancies (or aporias) in Habermas’s theory of democracy discussed in Chapter 4, the two incompatible directions encountered, are inherent to the very concept of democracy. In Mouffe’s vocabulary we could view the consensus and universality trait of
Habermas’s thinking as an expression of the logic of equality, whereas the undecidability and openness trait identified in deliberation would stand for the logic of difference. Democracy necessarily comprises both of them. In Mouffe’s vision, however, democratic politics witnesses a never-ending dynamics between these logics where none is given priority, whereas in Habermas’s imaginary, they are instead ordered diachronically – the differences are necessary at the outset of deliberation, but the very process is oriented at consensus, which implies a move from differences to consensus.

What I find compelling in Mouffe’s conception of democracy is the conceptualization of politics as a hegemonic practice that offers strategies to cover up the ontological contingency. I also concur with Mouffe’s agonistic ethos, her focus on the disruptive elements of the political. The most problematic points are connected to her definition of antagonism. These elements will be drawn upon in the third position on democracy outlined in the final chapter of the thesis.
In the two preceding chapters I focused on the internal construction of the theory of democratic politics as articulated by Chantal Mouffe and Jürgen Habermas. The basic conclusion is that, despite many differences, they both subscribe to the importance of politics understood as the practice in which the ordering of the society is constantly redefined. This ordering is either a result of contestation or deliberation, but certainly not a necessary, determined structure. As we have seen, they even share the view of democracy as not only a form of government, but also a mode of being, which leads to another common position, most important for this chapter. Namely, both Mouffe and Habermas depart from the liberal aggregative view of democracy, where the primary role was to aggregate the pre-political interests of the people (mostly expressed by voting) at the same time as they coincide in rejecting the communitarian view of a substantial community. A direct consequence of such a distancing is the attention given to the processes of subject-formation. This is what I will explore in this chapter – Mouffe’s and Habermas’s respective ideas about the constitution and functioning of democratic subjects.

The theories of democratic politics they present have clear implications for the theory of the subject and vice versa. I concur with Tracy Strong in his claim that these issues are intertwined, what he calls “the codetermination of the self and the order”\(^1\). Mouffe puts it this way: “It [her and Lac-lauf’s approach] was concerned with how to conceive politics when you start from fragmented social identities.”\(^2\) That is, Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s)

\(^2\) Angus, “Interview”.

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Batman: “Why do you want to kill me?”

Joker: “I don’t want to kill you. What would I do without you?!

No, no, no, you complete me!”

_The Dark Knight_, dir. Christopher Nolan

Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.

Michel Foucault, _What Is an Author?_
starting point is the rejection of a unified subject, mostly understood as the privileged agent of historical change (such as class), from which a specific conception of politics emerges. Whereas here she points to the link between the conceptualization of collective subjectivity and the conception of politics, it is equally applicable to the link between individual subject and the conception of politics. Laclau makes it clear when he, in the next sentence of the same interview, refers to psychoanalysis. Also in Habermas’s version the theorizations of democratic politics and subjectivity are closely entwined. As I will show below, his deliberative politics presupposes a certain kind of subjectivity.

To start with, agonistic and deliberative theories unite in their critique of the modern subject, sometimes framed as the critique of the Cartesian subject, or the critique of the philosophy of the subject. Peter Dews observes that “[o]ne of the least noted features of the strife between Habermas and his postmodernist opponents over the ‘philosophical discourse of modernity’ is the number of assumptions which both sides share in common”. For example, they coincide in the view “that the era of the philosophy of the subject, which is also the culminating era of metaphysical thinking, is currently drawing to a close”\(^3\). Dews further points out that Habermas endorses the famous Foucaultian account of the ‘death of man’ from *The Order of Things*. Namely, Habermas states that the paradigm of the ‘philosophy of the subject’, and ‘philosophy of consciousness’ which he tends to equate, is exhausted and that we should move to an intersubjective paradigm instead. Mouffe also subscribes to the critique of the Enlightenment subject and seeks to get rid of the essentialist formulations of the subject.\(^4\)

In this chapter, I will focus on the agonistic and deliberative ideas of subjectivity and subject formation. I will test Stephen White’s thesis that there is an “asymmetry between the systematically developed character of many of the critiques and the subsequent, very sketchy claims about think-


\(^4\) It has been argued that the critique of the subject in full control of itself – the Enlightenment subject – is commonplace among political theorists, however, as Mark Devenney argues, it still remains the assumption of much empirical research in political science, “which for the most part still relies on the doxa of behaviourism, as a modus operandi”. Devenney, *Ethics and Politics*, p.182 fn 2.
ing in the aftermath”\textsuperscript{5}. Who is the subject for Mouffe and Habermas? Who is their Other and what role does it play? I argue that the vision of the subject and its relations to the Other are decisive points in judging the radicalism of democratic theories. I would even argue that the theorization of the relations with the Other can be seen as a litmus paper of radical democracy. As we will see, the two visions differ in many respects. Both the process of becoming a subject, with its constitutive moment of meeting the Other, and the result of such a process – the subject, diverge significantly in the theories of Mouffe and Habermas.

A clarification is necessary here. In this chapter I use the term ‘Other’ to denote the human other in its specificity. In consequence, I occasionally substitute the ‘Other’ with personal pronouns such as ‘s/he’. Especially in Mouffe’s case, the Other can be understood more broadly, as anything distinct from me that helps me define my identity. It could hence be an inhuman other (such as aliens or animals) that help me define my humanity, or a specific discourse or power-structure (for example the discourse on feminine/masculine) that helps me define my identity (as female/male/queer).\textsuperscript{6} Let me wait with a more in-depth discussion about the different uses and understandings of the Other applied by both authors till later.

I have organized this chapter thematically with subsequent sections dedicated to Habermas and Mouffe under each topic. This parallel and thematic composition is obviously not equally heavy on both sides (the Mouffean and the Habermasian). The ambition, though, is to make the comparisons easier and to shed more light on their respective strengths and weaknesses. After some introductory remarks on the deliberative and agonistic subjects, I discuss the composition and formation of the subject in Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories respectively. Next I bring up the question of the unity of the subject, and finally the kind of intersubjectivity they employ and the way they picture the Other. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the political and democratic implications of the two versions

\textsuperscript{5} White, “After Critique”, p.211. With the “philosophy/thinking in the aftermath” White alludes to the aftermath of the modern/liberal subject.

\textsuperscript{6} The example Jenny Gunnarson Payne gives in her dissertation \textit{Systerskapets logiker. En etnologisk studie av feministiska fanzines}, Umeå universitet, Umeå 2006 is at hand here. For the queer feminist movements described by her the Other is constituted by heteropatriarchy, which does not mean that concrete men or heterosexuals are necessarily seen as adversaries, or enemies. See also Wenman Mark Anthony, (2003) “What is Politics? The Approach of Radical Pluralism”, \textit{Politics} vol.23, no.1, p.60.
INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Habermas repeatedly marks his relinquishing of the philosophy of the subject and the philosophy of consciousness. By these terms he means the standpoint that rationality and reason are located in a (particular kind of) subject, e.g. the proletariat or the enlightened individual. Instead, he resorts to the philosophy of language, which underlines intersubjectivity and communicative rationality.7 In his conception the self is created in interaction with others. Thus, all the fundamental philosophical concepts shift from the basis of consciousness to that of language.8 This is the proclaimed change of paradigm9 from the individualistic Cartesian, with its instrumental rationality and atomistic ‘I’ in the center, to the intersubjective self created in interaction with others (the Meadian interplay between ‘I’ and ‘me’) with the help of communicative reason. In the latter, language gains primacy over consciousness and access to self or self-knowledge is guaranteed not by self-reflection but by participation in linguistic interaction.10

Mouffe’s vision of the subject is influenced by broader discourse theoretical traits. She identifies her intellectual allies with advocates of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis.11 As discussed in Chapter 5, her start-

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7 “Habermas’s fundamental conviction is that the move to the paradigm of mutual understanding will defuse the self-destructive totalization of the critique of reason, by showing the possibility of a more far reaching and comprehensive reason.” Dews Peter, “Communicative paradigms and the question of subjectivity: Habermas, Mead and Lacan”, [in:] Habermas: A Critical Reader, ed. Dews Peter, Blackwell, Oxford 1999, p.90.


9 Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol.1, p.390. Peter Dews doubts that Habermas’s proposition can amount to a ‘paradigm shift’, as he argues that Habermas’s philosophy is still much rooted in the dominance of subjectivity. Dews, The Limits of Disenchantment, p.170. Dews also observes that Habermas often speaks of “philosophy of consciousness” or “philosophy of the subject” but “theory of communicative action”, which he interprets as implying “the possibility of obtaining more stable and generally acknowledged results” and “evok[ing] overtones of a ‘completion’ of philosophy, a resolution of its problems”. See Dews, “Communicative paradigms”, p.99.


11 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.12.
ing point is the emphasis on the ultimate contingency of all social identity at the same time as temporary fixations of meaning are acknowledged as not only possible but even necessary. To make it clear, even though undecidability is conceived as the underlying condition, it is not a vision of pure flux or ceaseless change, undecidability is always accompanied (or interrupted) by fixations. These could be of various sorts, and their temporality could be quite long-lasting. Striving for hegemony demands a striving for fixity, which basically means that all identities or meanings are in principle unstable, but can be experienced as quite fixed. As we will see, this basic ontological assumption described in previous chapters can be recognized at the level of the subject as well. Contingency permeates all actions.

Mouffe has developed her thoughts regarding subjectivity throughout the years. Originally, in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy she (and Laclau) referred to ‘subject positions’ only. After Slavoj Žižek’s critique12 she (and Laclau, however disjointedly from now on) introduced the psychoanalytical concept of subject as Lack.13 Mouffe (and Laclau) has also added the concept of ‘identification’ to prevent the statist connotations of ‘subject positions’. In her recent publications, these notions appear side by side.

**COMPOSITION AND FORMATION OF THE SUBJECT**

Let me start with the basic question of how the subject is composed, or what defines it as subject in the two theories respectively. In this section I will even discuss the process of subjectivation or becoming a subject in Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories as this provides interesting comparisons and sheds light on important aspects of their versions of democratic subjectivity.

Habermas

subjectivation or the developmental ladder

In older texts, Habermas refers to stages of development (inspired mostly by Lawrence Kohlberg) in explaining ego’s progress towards more universal and critical moral orientation as the process of becoming a subject. Johanna Meehan explains it this way:

Only a subject [by Habermas named post-conventional] that has acquired the specific cognitive and communicative skills needed to recognize and redeem normative claims can take up the moral and reflective point of view required by Habermas’s deliberative democracy.

In short, an individual develops along stages of development and goes through socialization (adaptation of the ruling norms in society) to individuation (distance to those rules and a more autonomous stance which

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14 I have chosen to focus on the developmental perspective here, as Habermas has not fully abandoned it. Although he does not discuss it as frequently in recent publications, he still refers to the “post-conventional level” in Between Facts and Norms: “discourse principle that merely expresses the meaning of postconventional requirements of justification” in Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.107 (emphasis added). He does not discuss the content of this “postconventional level of justification” any further. Hence, I assume that it implies a postconventional level of moral thinking of the Kohlbergian style, which Habermas used to refer to in his older writings.

Another example from recent writings in which Habermas recalls the postconventional level is in an interview conducted after the German publication of Between Facts and Norms: “Of course, a liberal public sphere requires a free form of association, domesticated media power, and the political culture of a population accustomed to freedom; it needs to be met halfway by a more or less rationalized life-world. To this correspond, on the side of personality structures, postconventional ego-identities.” Carleheden & Gabriels, “A conversation”, p.249 (emphasis added).

15 Habermas incorporates findings from developmental psychology on both individual and societal level. In his account, the individual’s stages of development are aligned with “changes in the kinds of reasons that the maturing individual considers acceptable. Analogously, societies develop through similar changes in the rational basis of legitimacy on the collective level.” See Bohman & Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas”.

leans back on universal principles). The final stage of development is called post-conventional, and is characterized by the individual’s acquirement of a critical capacity. This aspect is also underlined in Allison Weir’s explication of Habermas’s developmental thought:

At the center of Jürgen Habermas’s account of the development of self-identity is the capacity to question and criticize conventions. This requires a capacity to conceptually abstract from given contexts through the internalization of social and linguistic norms.

This process at the individual level clearly corresponds to the (U) principle discussed in Habermas’s conception of moral discourses. Weir goes on: “For Habermas, the development of self-identity is predicated in the development of moral identity.” With the capacity for critique, another parallel to Habermas’s democratic theory comes forth, where Das Nein Sagen Können is absolutely crucial for deliberation. As participants in linguistically mediated social interactions, we are expected to take yes/no positions to the validity claims raised, in response to the speech acts of the others. The basis for critique stems from the orientation to the validity of norms, the recognition that norms deserve to be valid only insofar as they take into account the interests of everyone affected (the (D) principle). If anyone’s interests are excluded, then the morally mature individual has grounds to object to the norm, or regard it as not valid. Foregoing slightly the discussion from subsequent sections, another form of critique is also required from the Habermasian post-conventional subject – it needs to be self-critical, able to question its identity and recover a coherent whole from the differing, often conflicting, positions it has taken throughout its life history.

Here again, Habermas recalls his reconstructive method and argues that despite obvious evidence to the contrary (even in our Western societies we


19 Ibid.

have not reached the post-conventional level, and the support for populist parties is taken as an example), Habermas maintains time and again that all he does is

reconstruct the Ought that has immigrated into praxis itself, and we only need to observe that in positive law and the democratic constitutional state – that is, in the existing practices themselves – principles are embodied that depend on a postconventional grounding, and to that extent are tailored to the public consciousness of a liberal political culture.

Just as in all previous discussions about Habermasian reconstructions, the postconventional seed is claimed to be already there in our everyday practice, but it is Habermas’s normative and political (in the sense of contingent and questionable) decision to make it an ideal, at the last stage of the developmental ladder. The ideal individual Habermas envisions, with his orientation towards universal values and consensus (the characteristics of the post-conventional level), is seen as the objective and telos of evolution. Hence, not only is language teleologically oriented towards consensus, the individual’s development is supposed to go in this direction too.

It cannot be left without comment that there have been many objections to the kind of evolutionary developmental perspective that Habermas presents. It is not my intention to give a detailed account of these discussions here. Let it suffice to say that the most famous critique came from Carol Gilligan, whose charges against Kohlberg provoked subsequent exchanges between Habermas (and Seyla Benhabib) and Gilligan. The latter claimed, on the basis of an empirical study on young girls, that the stages of development presented as universal were in actual fact particularistically male. Eventually, she put forth an additional dimension to the model, that would comprise women’s development as well, i.e., the ethics of care. The main criticism is hence directed


22 The famous exchange between Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg has direct implications for Habermas’s application of the developmental ladder, as he is quite faithful to the Kohlbergian model. For his reply to Gilligan see for example Habermas, Justification and Application, p.174.
at the exclusive focus on cognitive aspects of development at the cost of the emotional ones.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{self-determination and self-realization}

Moving ahead to the effects of subjection, I will now discuss the composition of the deliberative subject. From the previous section, we need to keep in mind Habermas’s evolutionary perspective, which entails that the deliberative (post-conventional) subject discussed in the remaining parts of the thesis is a normative direction that Habermas outlines.

Inspired by George Herbert Mead, Habermas speaks of two aspects of the subject (or ego-identity); self-determination and self-realization. The former is connected to “the ability to act autonomously on the basis of universalistic action orientations”, the latter to “the ability to realize oneself in a life history to which one lends continuity by responsibly taking it over”\textsuperscript{24}. These are expressions of ‘I as universal’ and ‘I as individual’ (or particular). The subject is self-determined if it is capable of autonomous actions. In Habermas’s interpretation, this means that the subject abides only by those rules that it has actively created. It is an expression of the idea of autonomy according to which human beings act as free subjects only insofar as they obey just those laws they give themselves in accordance with insights they have acquired intersubjectively.\textsuperscript{25}

As we see, in this conception autonomy is conditional upon the subject’s active participation in deliberation. In this way, autonomy is not a nat-

\textsuperscript{23} Gilligan later made revisions of her original objections, softening the sharpness of her critique. What remains still in force is the claim that Kohlberg’s and Habermas’s models are insufficient (and not as universal as they claim them to be), as they omit an important aspect of psychic development. Habermas’s answer to these charges was quite abrupt. He claimed that Gilligan missed the distinctions between different levels of development. For an account of the debate see Benhabib Seyla, “The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited”, [in:] \textit{Feminists Read Habermas}, and Dean, “Discourse”.

Johanna Meehan in a more recent publication still claims that “although he [Habermas] acknowledges the significance of the emotional/psychic relations of attachment as prerequisites for the ability to take up social roles, his emphasis on linguistic socialization makes it difficult to theorize the physical, affective, and psychic aspects of identity”. Meehan Johanna M., “Into the Sunlight: A Pragmatic Account of the Self”, [in:] \textit{Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn}, p.230.

\textsuperscript{24} Habermas, \textit{The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol.2}, p.106.

\textsuperscript{25} Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms}, pp.445-6.
The self-realization aspect serves to highlight the individual peculiarities, i.e., that which individualizes the individual. The subject is self-realized only insofar as s/he has an unmistakable life history and life-project attributed to him/her. In other words, self-realization is about taking responsibility for one’s biography and getting clear about who one wants to be.

The two components of agency or ego-identity that Habermas proposes – self-realization and self-determination – could otherwise be framed by his concepts of ethical and moral autonomy. Through self-realization the self contextually defines her/his conception of the good (ethical autonomy), as well as integrates it into a coherent narrative of the identity. S/he also provides arguments and reasons in defence of this conception, which will be used in interaction with others. Through self-determination, or moral autonomy the self is inscribed into the universal. Agents act morally autonomously if they act and judge in accordance with morally (universally) valid norms and principles that they accept as such. Moral autonomy is thus clearly linked to the post-conventional level of development discussed above. Following the evolutionary logic and in accordance with what has been said in the previous chapter, Habermas gives priority to the right before the good, which here means that moral autonomy defined as reference to the universal principles, is given priority over the particular, ethical understandings. Even if Habermas recognizes the two components of the subject, it is self-determination, the universal component that gives ground for his normative vision of subjectivity and democracy.

Let me now discuss the composition and the process of becoming a subject as articulated by Mouffe to see the differences in perspectives.

**Mouffe**

*abundance of subject positions*

According to Mouffe, we should perceive the subject as split into multiple and politicized (not unitary and homogeneous) subject positions. In this vision there is no central core or essential nucleus of the subject’s identity.

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26 On this point see Borradori, “Reconstructing Terrorism”, p.59.  
29 Ibid., p.195.
Every identity is exposed to the influence of its discursive surrounding and hence never fully sutured; instead, subjects are seen as constituted by a set of subject positions, not necessarily accommodated to each other. In Mouffe’s own words:

We can thus conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of ‘subject positions’ that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but rather a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement. The ‘identity’ of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification.30

The concept of ‘subject positions’ aims to capture the positioning of subjects within a discursive structure. In other words, subject positions correspond to the multiplicity of social relations that the subject is involved in. “Identity cannot, therefore, belong to one person alone, and no one belongs to a single identity.” 31 Subject positions (such as woman, father, employee) are shared by a number of individuals, and any individual is split between a number of subject positions. An important aspect in Mouffe’s conception is the emphasis on conflictuality between these components. According to her, there is no necessary homogeneity or consistency in this composition. Subject positions intersecting in one subject may well be conflicting. On this point Stefan Jonsson’s interpretation of Ulrich, Robert Musil’s main character in The Man without Qualities is very close to the Mouffean subject:

[T]hese [subject] positions, rather than being integrated with the normative narrative of a particular social order, may be bound together as a dynamic entity of differences, multiplicity, and conflict. [...] Only ever half-integrated with itself, the Musilian subject exposes the human being as a passionate patchwork.32

30 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, p.77; in exactly the same wording Mouffe, “Citizenship and Political Identity”, p.28; compare Mouffe, “Radical Democracy”, p.35.
31 Mouffe, “Decision, Deliberation”, p.27.
However, it would be wrong to perceive subjects as a mere collection of subject positions. The multiple subject positions do not simply coexist, but undergo a constant dynamics of overdetermination and subversion of one by the others, making possible ‘totalizing effects’.\(^{33}\) Through dynamic interaction with others, the ordering of subject positions within one subject shifts. For example, the subject position ‘mother’ might be dominating in a woman’s interaction with her children, while her subject position ‘academic’ comes to dominate during a university seminar.

‘Subject positions’ also brings to light the complex problem of subordination. Within the same subject both relations of domination and subordination are possible.\(^{34}\) One subject position (say, a white man’s) might represent a dominant position while another (say, this man’s homosexuality) might represent subordination. When coinciding within the same individual, they give him a complex pattern of identifications that comprises both domination and subordination. In this way Mouffe manages to maintain the tension that the word subject connotes – of one who is both subjected to something/someone and one who subjects.\(^{35}\) In other words, an individual is both an object and a subject, a subject-object. This hybrid concept aims to evade the simplistic dichotomous logic opposing power to lack of power, or subjectivity to subjection.

To complicate it even more, every subject position is a discursive position and thus it is also influenced by the unfixity of discourses.\(^{36}\) Hence the subjectivity of any social agent is \textit{in principle} unstable. Another consequence of the choice of subject positions as the discursive constructs of the subject is the impossibility of seeing subjects as origins of social relations.\(^{37}\) No subject precedes the moment of articulation, it comes into being through, or by the means of, articulations – in the practice of discursive being with (or against) others.

\(^{33}\) Mouffe, \textit{The Return of the Political}, p.77.
\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.77.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p.115.
Such a radical fragmentation enables the recognition of the centrality ascribed to antagonisms in this vision and, Mouffe argues, paves the way for a pluralist and democratic conception. With the help of the multiplicity such an understanding of the subject highlights, the truly radical and pluralistic aspects of democracy become comprehensible. One example is the redefined line of division between private and public. It can no longer be conceived as a spatial divide. The identity as individual and the identity as citizen are present in every subject in the form of her different belongings.

**Lack of ‘identity’**

Mouffe’s other concept, the psychoanalytically inspired subject as Lack aims to explain that the subject has no original identity (is in this sense dislocated), although it always attempts to establish one. This ‘filling’ that we engage in is otherwise called identity formation and is conducted through acts of identification. It entails that the experience of Lack is something that we share throughout our lives, as we always strive for, but never succeed in filling the gap. This, in turn, implies an identity that cannot ever be fully established, and that always includes a certain degree of openness and ambiguity. Such a conception of subjectivity applies both to the individual and the collective subjects.

As mentioned above, the Lacanian subject as Lack was first introduced into Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) writing after Žižek’s critique. Žižek argued that the conception of subject as subject positions implicitly suggested “a master ‘viewpoint’ of the social itself, a viewpoint from which all the discourses of the ‘subject-positions’ are exposed as limited and ideological. Antagonism, on the other hand, disallows the constitution of society as substantial.” That is why he maintained that ‘subject position’ does not suffice to explain the subject. According to Žižek “every identity is already in itself blocked, marked by an impossibility” and this impossibility is due to the fundamental construction of subjectivity as Lack. Foregoing somewhat the questions that will be dealt with in subsequent sections, we can observe the two different limits to the subject’s presence, to the full

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38 Ibid., p.166.
41 Brockelman, “The failure”, p.190.
constitution of any subject/identity. As Žižek, and Mouffe after him, contend, full identity is prevented by the experience of Lack which is symbolically represented by an Other. On the other hand, the concrete other helps me realize this Lack, articulates the impossibility of any positive identity. Even if the concrete Other disappears (for example by elimination) we will still fail to achieve identity with ourselves.

In order to better understand Mouffe’s conception of the subject let me yet again resort to Jonsson’s rich analysis of Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*. Jonsson claims that Musil is the first writer to systematically examine how the identity of the subject is constituted by an irreducible Lack and otherness, which results in a structure of subjectivity characterized by internal difference and negativity.43 Most importantly, this negativity that defines the subject does not equal nothingness and passivity, but rather is the very source of possibilities. The Lack can be filled in many different ways breeding multiple possibilities of shapes and actions: “The lack of identity does not equal “nothing”, it is rather an indeterminacy that implies an infinity of possibilities waiting to be awakened by the voice of the other.”44

In her post-*Hegemony* writings, Mouffe introduced the concept of ‘identification’ in order to capture the active sense of identification as distinct from assuming a given subject position. This shifts the focus from more static and structural connotations of subject positions to the activity of choosing specific positions. That would be the intuitive distinction between identity and identification. David Howarth & Jason Glynos explain that the ‘subject of identity’ is linked to the sedimented practices, while the ‘subject of identification’ is linked to the acts of active questioning or supporting, or actively choosing.45

The concept of identification also points to the processual aspect of subjectivity. That is, the observation that subjects come into being in a continuous process of articulation of different subject positions, and through acts of identification. Mouffe claims that “no centre of subjectivity precedes the subject’s identifications”46. Additionally, this process is never completed, the subjects are never fully constituted, they are always subjects in becoming.

44 Ibid., p.172.
45 This is a distinction primarily elaborated by Ernesto Laclau but present also in Mouffe’s writings. See Glynos & Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation*, p.130.
46 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p.76.
The individual pattern of identifications with specific subject positions forms the history of a subject. It is by no means a coherent and linear history. It always entails a dialectic movement between fixations around some nodal points and an opposite movement of decentering which prevents any stabilization of such fixations. As mentioned before, unfixity remains the ontological condition, but it is always challenged by attempts at partial fixations\(^{47}\) or, Jonsson again, “identity and selfhood are enabled by temporary identifications that compensate and cover the originary lack”\(^{48}\).

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Summing up the discussion about Habermas’s and Mouffe’s conceptions of subject formation and composition of the subject, there appeared some significant differences. Habermas presents the process of becoming a subject teleologically. In his vision subjectivation is supposed to lead to a post-conventional subjectivity, characterized by the ability to abstract from and question the local norms as well as the ability to relate to the universal principles. Habermas, with the help of ‘self-determination’ underlines the subject’s inscription in the universal dimension (moral autonomy, reference to universal norms in putting forth validity claims). His reference to the particularistic ‘I’ of ego-identity hints at the normative expectation of coherence of a subject’s life-history, or the narrative about it.

In Mouffe’s case, the most important point is the underlining of the fundamental Lack as a condition for any subject, as well as its being scattered between multiple subject-positions that do not constitute a homogeneous whole. Moreover, the process of identification has no defined telos. The mechanism driving it forward is the endeavour of subjects to fill the fundamental Lack that defines their being, without any further specification of what direction these concrete identifications should take.

**Unity of the Subject**

In this section I will focus on the way Habermas and Mouffe perceive the unity of the subject. How do they present the subject as a distinguishable social entity?

\(^{47}\) Ibid., p.76.

\(^{48}\) Jonsson, *Subject without Nation*, p.265.
Habermas - transparency and coherence

The evolutionary perspective adopted by Habermas serves to highlight his ideal of a (self)transparent and autonomous individual. Habermas’s idealizations reveal the normative vision of the subject in his theory:

The analysis of the necessary conditions for mutual understanding [idealizations] in general at least allows us to develop the idea of an intact intersubjectivity, which makes possible both a mutual and constraint-free understanding among individuals in their dealings with one another and the identity of individuals who come to a compulsion free understanding with themselves.49

As we see, idealizations serve to make clear a vision, in which individuals come to a transparent (full) understanding with each other and of themselves. The transparent understanding is hence to be found both on the interpersonal and the intrapersonal level. We should, Habermas argues, be authentic in the presentation of ourselves, 50 which presupposes a self transparent to itself, a self conscious of its own identity. He purports that “[a] concept of individuality that points beyond mere singularity can only be possessed by one who knows before himself and others, who he is and who he wants to be”.51

What we need not forget is that these are idealizations and hence, as explained in Chapter 3, they have a normative status with constitutive impact on reality. Just like other idealizations, this is not a vision Habermas thinks is fully realizable, but anyway a direction he finds recommendable and to some extent already in force in everyday practice. What this means for the concept of the subject is that this is not the way subjects always are, rather how they should be, and to certain extent, that we actually do presuppose such a construction of ourselves and others (the as if approach), which Habermas claims is a precondition of communication.

Apart from transparency, another ‘quality’ Habermas ascribes to his post-conventional subjects is coherence. He argues that incoherence violates the norms of accountability (or rationality); behaving inconsistently is an extreme thing to do for a subject, as it obscures the intelligibility of her

50 Habermas, “Individuation”, p.168.
51 Ibid., p.169.
utterances and actions. As we see, communication is the recurring reference. The subject should strive for transparency and coherence in order to be a reliable communication partner. It is quite clear that Habermas speaks of an idealized vision here. On the empirical level, there are multiple examples of inconsistencies and opaqueness, which surely are part of our everyday experience. In effect, inconsistency is often intelligible. Put otherwise, common sense knowledge often comprises inconsistencies, making them naturalized, or normalized, which, however, does not refute Habermas’s reconstructions of the consistent and transparent way of being a subject. Again, we can only object to ascribing the status of normative ideals to them.

In spite of putting coherence as the ideal for post-conventional subjects, identities in Habermas’s theory are seen as fluid and moldable. He argues that

\[ \text{the ego-identity of the adult proves its worth in the ability to build up new identities from shattered or superseded identities, and to integrate them with old identities in such a way that the fabric of one’s interactions is organized into the unity of a life history that is both unmistakable and accountable.} \]

The subject in deliberative democratic theory is not pictured as linked to a stable, fixed identity, but still one that is supposed to be coherent and transparent to the self and its others. Multiple and changing identifications are admitted of, but they should be ordered into a coherent (hence accountable) and transparent narrative. It is important not to overlook the word ‘narrative’ here. The coherence Habermas asks for is a construct.

Even if I object to Habermas’s strong accent on coherence in discussing subjectivity, I have to agree that some kind of unity is nevertheless required in the moments of interaction with others. The communicative processes necessitate that we are, at least to a point, coherent in our utterances and actions, in order to be recognizable and credible. Thus, Habermas’s focus

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54 This link between interaction and coherence of the self is also studied by Erving Goffman. He too sees coherence as constructed through the negotiations with the others. Goffman’s concepts of ‘face’ and ‘line’ serve to explain the necessity of recognition from others which is only granted if we stick to the expected, predictable options of behavior, drawn from our previous interactions (and the social conventions structuring the concrete interaction). See Goffman Erving, Interaction ritual: essays in face-to-face behavior, Aldine Transaction, New Brunswick 2005, esp. pp.5-8.
on developing a theory of communicative action explains his focus on coherence, even though, I think we need to theorize it differently. I will now turn to Mouffe in search of a different conceptualization of unity or coherence of the subject.

Mouffe – dislocation and opacity

One could argue that one of the aims of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy was to theorize possibilities of unity on the collective level. Through the concept of hegemonic politics Mouffe (and Laclau) aimed at questioning “the class subject as the unifying subject” and replaced it with a different kind of common political identity. “[W]e began to insist on the fact that this critique of the class did not mean that we were going to ask some kind of extreme postmodern diversified position in which we were putting into question any need for some kind of common identity.” At the collective level, Mouffe (and Laclau) put much effort into theorizing the form of unity compatible with her vision of radical and plural democracy. However, when we take a look at the individual level, Mouffe’s psychoanalytical inspiration has led her to almost exclusively discuss the split, scattered subject. She only mentions that the subject conceived of as Lack is preoccupied with the filling of this Lack, that the subject is driven by a constant struggle to cover up for its dislocation. This process of subjectivation entails that the subject seeks to establish for itself a position as a speaking ‘I’ with a recognizable identity. Jons-son’s reading of the Musilian subject yet again provides a parallel here: “Identity” equals the more or less permanent stabilization of subjectivity caused by the subject’s recognition of itself as “the spoken subject.” This recognition is imposed upon the subject by the surrounding symbolic order and concrete others. Total self-unification is nonetheless impossible (which Habermas would agree with even though he puts it as an ideal); the subject will always discover the incompleteness and false stability of the constructed unity. The meeting with the Other is always partly an illumination in this respect and partly an aid in the task of filling the gap (finding some identity with oneself). Thus unity is here seen as the promise, the never acquirable horizon. We identify with subject positions, which give us some identity, but never suture the desire for fullness.

I would argue that Mouffe pays too little attention to the role of unity in the intersubjective meetings. Here I converge with Seyla Benhabib’s observation that “[o]n the contemporary theoretical playground, where fragmenta-

55 Angus, “Interview”.
56 Jonsson, Subject without Nation, p.155.
tion and multiplicity prevail, questions about the unity of the self are never posed”57. Aletta Norval is also attentive to this problematic: “while it [Laclau and Mouffe’s theory] provides us with a conception of identity as an articulated ensemble of elements, it does not provide us with the tools with which to think the unity of that ensemble.”58

At the same time, I believe that some unity of the subject is required by human interaction and it deserves more place in theorizing political subjectivity, as the norm of coherence is hegemonic in our societies. In this text, I mostly focus on the subject and its Other creating an apparently dyadic scene, however, as Michel Foucault teaches us (recall the Foucaultian question: What can I become, given the contemporary order of being?), and Judith Butler reminds us anew, social norms are crucial here too. They condition both subject production and intersubjective exchange.59 Erving Goffman puts it as follows:

The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves. As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however […] a certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time.60

The composition of a subject is by necessity scattered and disjointed but what Mouffe does not focus on is the moment of interaction, which requires that we as individuals present ourselves as coherent wholes. This “bureaucratization of the spirit”, or techniques of the self as Foucault would have it, consists of processes of (self-)disciplining which in this case entail conforming to the demands of unity. It might be argued that, just as

60 Goffman Erving, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Anchor Books, New York 1959, p.56. Claude Lefort makes a similar comment on the need for (the representation of) unity at the societal level. “A society can relate to itself, can exist as a human society, only on the condition that it forges a representation of its unity.” Claude Lefort cited in Norval Aletta, “Frontiers in Question”, p.53.
in the case of a democratic society, even here full pluralism is not desirable. Individuals’ engagement in interactions demands some kind of representation. Even though subjects are split in multiple subject positions, they must present some form of unity.

One thing is clear, Mouffe’s focus on the moment of opposition and the role of conflict in identity formation (the Schmittian influence), invalidates certain formulations of the unity of the subject. However, even if we abandon non-agonistic forms of unity, there should still be some alternative way of theorizing unity of the self. There are some glimpses in Mouffe’s writing that point to the kind of unity she admits of. Sometimes Mouffe describes the process of subjectivation as one of “permanent hybridization and nomadization”\(^\text{61}\), although she does not put much effort in explaining these concepts. ‘Nomadization’ here would be another expression of the subject’s unsettledness, as it highlights lack of reference to a certain place or property specific for an identity – its formation takes place within the unclear confines of society.\(^\text{62}\) The nomad is never settled, always searching for new places and alternative subject positions. ‘Hybrid’, on the other hand, would stand for the multiplicity of identity (the intersection of many subject positions) with simultaneous gluing together of them in a whole that is not rupture-free. The pieces, themselves not clearly defined, can be put together in different constellations.\(^\text{63}\)

Some further conclusions about the kinds of unity Mouffe allows for can be drawn from a translation of her theorization of the collective level of identification to the individual level. In the former, some groups were temporarily granted the leading role of organizing others in a chain, and together, despite the internal differences and contradictions, they maintained a common line or strategic unity. At the level of the individual subject, for

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\(^\text{62}\) This point should be understood in relation to Mouffe’s discussion with Marxists and feminists, some of whom, contrary to Mouffe, privilege a certain position or experience (worker, woman). She obviously does not downplay the import of women’s or workers’ experience, but does not pose it as *the* position in her theory. Instead, she argues that the democratic struggles against different kinds of subordination should form a chain of equivalence. Such equivalent articulation between the demands of e.g. women, workers, blacks, gays would have a chance of constituting a new radical and pluralist democratic hegemony. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p.77.

\(^\text{63}\) Aletta Norval, referring to Homi Bhaba, explores different meanings of the word ‘hybrid’. See Norval Aletta, “Hybridization: The Im/Purity of the Political”, [in:] *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*. 

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the sake of interaction, the multiple subject positions are organized in such a way that some of them provisionally gain a dominant position. As I see it, Mouffe’s general view of a fragmented, or dislocated subject is necessarily accompanied by fixations and hegemonic orderings. Again, Mouffe does not explicitly focus on these aspects, even though I think her theory does provide tools for theorizing them. Pursuing this line, in the intersubjective meetings, subjects present themselves with a hegemonic subject position, which temporarily gains the right to present the interpretation of the subject as a whole (synecdoche).

One important point in Mouffe’s vision of the subject is her renunciation of the category of subject as a transparent entity. Here, the Habermasian ideal of transparency is contrasted with opacity. This fundamental psychoanalytical claim stands for the belief in some kind of primary opacity of the self that springs from its early relations that are not always available to conscious knowledge. These processes are crucial for (self)understanding. In effect, opacity should be stressed as an important ingredient of intersubjectivity, or the relation to the Other as well.

These observations about opacity rather than transparency as constitutive of the subject force a reformulation of the concept of accountability. Habermas frequently uses ‘accountability’ in the sense of being able to rationally and coherently present a narrative of oneself. Here it would still denote the ability to give an account of (oneself or others) but without the additional qualifications. Judith Butler divagates on this point: “I am authored by what precedes and exceeds me, [but] this in no way exonerates me from having to give an account of myself.” An indispensable element of the acknowledgement of self-opacity is the impossibility of a full account. Any account of oneself, and hence accountability, is always partial, always marked by limits of knowledge. Butler resonates further in Foucault’s footsteps: “Our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability.” Consequently, when we engage in giving accounts of ourselves, we present one ‘truth’ which is in concert with the present order of being, or truth regime. Butler again: “So telling

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64 Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony, pp.166, 115, see also pp.190-1 where they reject the idea of a transparent (and rational) society.
65 Compare Butler, Giving an Account, pp.19-20.
66 Ibid., p.82.
67 Ibid., p.121.
the truth about oneself comes at a price, and the price of that telling is the suspension of a critical relation to the truth regime in which one lives.”

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Above, with the help of Goffman, I argued that unity or coherence of the subject is a dominating social norm. This was linked to the interactive moments, which are central to any theory of democratic politics. I would argue that coherent selves are the currently ruling ideal and that such an ideal functions as a hegemonic imaginary that defines our way of seeing ourselves and others. Accordingly, the self is thought of as a unified being and the process of subjectivation consists of the attempts at producing such a unity in a subject. Even though the united subject is a dominating picture, there are obviously counter-tendencies. The figure of a split identity or conflicting subject positions is well established in literary fiction (just take the extreme but paradigmatic example of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde). The psychoanalytic tradition with Lacan follows this track and presents subjects as marked by lack of unity and wholeness, as always striving to fill this Lack with different identifications. In the context of this thesis, Habermas’s conception of the subject can be seen as conforming to the hegemonic picture of a unified subject, whereas Mouffe supports the Lacanian counter-tendency with her idea of a disrupted and split subject.

I argued that Habermas’s focus on coherence is an effect of his object of study – intersubjective communication. I also criticized Mouffe for not taking onboard this fundamental aspect in her conception of the subject. I think that Mouffe’s presentation of an unfixed subject split on multiple subject positions should be complemented by an explicit theorization of unity necessitated by interaction. Nevertheless, I tried to show that her theory offers tools to theorizing unity in a direction that diverts from Habermas’s, a direction I find more convincing. In this view, coherence is indeed necessary, but it is only a temporary, strategic alliance that enables understandable and successful performance in given interactions.

Concluding, I argue that Habermas overemphasizes the requirement of coherence, while Mouffe remains almost ignorant of it. The lack of explicit ponderings about the unity of the subject in Mouffe’s case calls for theoretical interventions, the possible directions of which I have tried to sketch above. I have also contrasted Habermas’s ideal of transparency

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68 Ibid., pp.121-2.

69 Compare ibid., p.59.
with the focus on opacity where I complemented Mouffe’s scarce comments on this topic with Butler’s arguments. These interventions point in the direction of the third position outlined in Chapter 7. Pursuing further Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories, their conceptions of the subject (coherent and transparent versus split and opaque) are closely linked to the way they theorize intersubjectivity.

**INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND THE OTHER**

So far, I have left the interpersonal aspect out. As hinted above, it is fundamental for both Mouffe’s and Habermas’s thinking about the subject. I start with some more general comments about the role of intersubjectivity and move on to the analysis of the nature of the meeting with the Other in Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories respectively. The parallels to the theorists’ conceptions of politics will be obvious here.

**Habermas**

Some argue that intersubjectivity is “the basic argument underpinning Habermas’s consensus theory of epistemology and ethics.” From George Herbert Mead he borrows the idea of a socially produced ego. Habermas explains: “Individuality forms itself in relations of intersubjective acknowledgement and of intersubjectively mediated self-understanding.” Hence, subjectivation is for him a process of “recognizing-onself-in-the-other.” We get to know ourselves in the meeting with others and through communication with them we define our identity (self-realization). Habermas uses intersubjectivity as an antidote to the possessive individualism of the philosophy of consciousness:

> The ego […] does not “belong” to me. Rather, this ego always retains an intersubjective core, because the process of individuation from which it emerges runs through the network of linguistically mediated interactions.

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70 Keohane, “Central Problems”, p.156.
72 Habermas, “Individuation”, p.175.
73 Ibid., p.170.
In effect, we cannot get to know ourselves through mere introspection, the others (also imaginary but these are secondary) are absolutely necessary.

Habermas underlines that ‘subjects’ are not central and wants to shift the focus to intersubjectivity. It is an attempt to depart from the atomistic understanding of the subject on the one hand, and the subject writ large e.g. the proletariat or the Hegelian Spirit/State on the other. On the macro level, Habermas distances himself from the overly concretistic way of conceptualizing ‘the people’ as a homogeneous whole. On the micro level, the focus is now on the in-between, the process and result of communication between the subjects and not the subjects as such. It is in this context he even speaks of “subjectless forms of communication”. This perspective also makes itself visible in the concept of shared understanding that is supposed to transcend every participant’s lifeworld horizon or in the concept of rationality that, as mentioned in Chapter 4, is not located in the subject, but in the intersubjective relations of communication.

The intersubjective focus surfaces also in the idea of transformation that deliberation is supposed to lead to. In the process of deliberation subjects are forced to redefine their identities and self-understanding. In effect, as Stefan Rummens argues, deliberation can be seen as a double process; firstly, it has a “heuristic purpose of tracking the relevant circumstances, needs and values of the people concerned” and secondly, after the perspectives of the deliberating parties are defined, deliberation also entails confronting these preferences with the preferences of others. Habermas explicitly underlines that the participants in deliberation need to be ready to transform their preferences and their self-perception in deliberation:

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74 In spite of his declared alternative position, some critics hold that Habermas is still caught in this picture. Nancy Fraser argues that Habermas’s early work was faulted in this respect. See Fraser, “Rethinking”; James Bohman also holds that Habermas’s Between Facts and Norms remains inadequate on this count. See Bohman, “Complexity, Pluralism”.

75 See for example Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.486. Here, in the context of a discussion about sovereignty, “subjectless forms of communication” serve to underline the role of procedures in its attainment.

76 Habermas, “Reply to Symposium”, p.414.

Generalized reciprocal perspective-taking requires not just empathy for, but also interpretive intervention into the self-understanding of participants who must be willing to revise their descriptions of themselves and others.\(^7^8\)

The subjects (ideally) hold an open attitude, are always ready to let themselves be convinced by arguments. What is noteworthy, is that Habermas does not only ask for a principal openness, but specifies the direction as well. As discussed in the section about universalizability in Chapter 4, the arguments in use in deliberation should undergo a change from self-interested to generalizable:

One way to capture the epistemic character of practical deliberation is through a precise description of how, from a moral point of view, individual interests that provide the input for deliberation in the form of rational motives change their role and meaning in the course of argumentation. In practical discourses, only those interests “count” for the outcome that are presented as intersubjectively recognized values – only generalizable value orientations.\(^7^9\)

In a Habermasian perspective, the rules of deliberation make all but universalizable arguments irrelevant.\(^8^0\) In consequence, we can say that the transformation that Habermas has in mind is a teleological one. Deliberative politics and the intersubjective meetings that form its core are not only about (re)defining identities of the participants, they are also about a concrete direction of this (trans)formation, namely, towards universally

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\(^7^8\) Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, p.42.

\(^7^9\) Ibid., p.81.

\(^8^0\) Iris Marion Young argues similarly that different social positions and standpoints, as well as partial interests are to be allowed in communication, but in the course of deliberation they are transformed into more reflective and ‘objective’ ones. See Young, “Difference as a Resource”, p.402.
framed attitudes, or interests. Obviously, just as in the discussion about consensus, we cannot ascribe any deterministic tendencies to Habermas’s thought. This direction of transformation is just what he normatively argues for, and something that he claims is anchored in the logic of the linguistic medium, as well as in the logic of the evolutionary development of moral and ego-identities.

One presupposition of intersubjectivity and the relational character of the subject – its dependence on others in the formation and transformation of ego-identity – is Habermas’s recognition of the unfixity of any subject. The subject meets the Other and in the process of communication positions herself towards the Other’s validity claims with ‘yes’ or ‘no’. However, Habermas underlines that “[w]hich answer ego will give in any instance, what position he will take, cannot be known in advance - either by him or by anyone else”82. He speaks of “almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity, an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb.”83 What we find here is a recognition of contingency as an effect of intersubjectivity. The question is whether this “almost constitutional insecurity” can be understood parallel to Mouffe’s radical contingency, or whether it is still, just as in the case of political relations described in Chapter 4, an ontic contingency, a mere empirical observation in contrast to a deeper ontological claim. The answer must be sought in Habermas’s understanding of the Other, which will shed more light on intersubjectivity beyond his declarations of its indispensability.


83 Habermas, “Morality and Ethical Life”, p.199.
As stated above, Habermas pictures the Other as necessary in order to confirm and help explicate my identity (recognition). Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 4, the Other (the counterpart in deliberation) must be ascribed autonomy and accountability as a condition for our accepting her yes/no position;

The one must have recognized the other as an accountable actor whenever he expects him to take a position with “yes” or “no” to his speech-act offers. In communicative action everyone thus recognizes in the other his own autonomy.84

The Other must be an equal partner, whose constitution mirrors mine. Consequently, the relation is to be marked by symmetry;

For irrespective of cultural background, all the participants intuitively know full well that a consensus based on insight is not possible if the relations between the participants in communication are not symmetrical – that is, relations of mutual recognition, of reciprocal perspective-taking, a shared willingness to look at one’s own traditions through the eyes of a stranger, to learn from one another, and so on.85

In Habermas’s idealized deliberation (what he used to call ‘ideal speech situation’), the Other is not only accountable, transparent and respectful, s/he is also symmetrical to me. What Habermas refers to here is an absence of power-relations. Neither of the deliberating parts is to dominate over the other.

Moreover, he argues that for recognition to take place, the Other must be separate and different from me: “[O]nly with a consciousness of their absolute difference and irreplaceability can the one recognize himself in the other.”86 Habermas underlines the possibility and normative relevance of the inclusion of the Other in his otherness, that is, leaving the Other the right to remain an Other.87

Gathering together Habermas’s comments about the relation with the Other, what comes forth is a normative vision of equal, symmetrical and

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84 Habermas, “Individuation”, p.190.
86 Habermas, “Themes”, p.48.
87 Habermas, The Inclusion of the Other, p.40.
power-free intersubjectivity, which is in perfect congruence with the idealizations described as preconditions for rational deliberation. Habermas’s normative idea of (inter)subjectivity is a prerequisite for his theory of democratic politics to work. For Habermas, intersubjectivity, the core of democratic politics, is only a subject-subject relation. The Other mirrors my construction, shares with me the qualities of transparency and coherence, but at the same time constitutes a separate and irreplaceable subject distinct from me. And inclusion does not erase the specificity of the Other.

However there is a dissonance here. Lasse Thomassen effectively argues that this right to remain Other is conditional upon acceptance of some fundamental distinctions in Habermas’s conception of politics, that is, the ethical-political distinction. As discussed earlier, different ethical conceptions of the good are allowed and welcome in a deliberative community only if these do not work against the general moral principles that have been agreed to rationally. A good test for Habermas’s thought about inclusion is provided by his recent turn to theorizing religions’ place in post-conventional societies. Indeed, he does allow a place for religious beliefs, but only providing that they accept their relative position against other (for example atheistic) worldviews. As Thomassen points out, this imposes a Habermasian rationalistic perspective that is totally foreign to the religious ones. A religious perspective demands a holistic view of the subject and an indivisible link between the right and the good. In effect, including a religious Other in Habermas’s deliberative community would entail a violation of her otherness, would require a fundamental shift in her identity and stepping away from her beliefs.

It must be stated, however, that this is not only a Habermasian problem. As I will discuss further on, this is rather the very nature of inclusion, or the fundament of the relation to the Other. The thing is, though, that Habermas does not acknowledge it and he tries to convince us, that a fully rational and impartial process of inclusion, a genuine subject-subject relation, where both parts keep their otherness, or at least have the right to do so is a viable ideal.

In Habermas’s vision, the Other only has a positive role to play. The Other constitutes the condition of possibility of any subject’s identity and development. With the stress on linguistically mediated interaction, the Other (the ‘you’) is indispensable. There are, though, different ways of conceptualizing the necessity of the Other. One alternative that will serve to show another direction of the same fundamental focus on communica-

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88 Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?”, p.444.
89 See for example Habermas, Between Naturalism and Religion.
tion is provided by Emile Benveniste and his comments on (linguistic forms of) identity formation. He underlines the linguistic aspects of the constitution of ‘I’, ‘you’ and the intersubjectivity arguing that the subject is actualized in the instances of intersubjectivity (or communication), which makes the ‘you’ (or the Other) indispensable;

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use I only when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of person.

However, contrary to Habermas, Benveniste further states that this polarity between ‘I’ and ‘you’ “does not mean either equality or symmetry”, nevertheless marking mutual interdependence. Habermas, as mentioned above, pictures the meeting with the Other as (ideally) symmetrical and as having only affirmative effects on the subject’s identity. In this respect, Benveniste’s comments are closer to Mouffe’s perspective, which will be dealt with below.

**Mouffe**

Mouffe also sees identity as relational, although, as we will see, her conception of intersubjectivity differs a lot from Habermas’s. She does not only focus on subject-subject relations, because, as discussed earlier, the subjects of her theory are seen as subjects/objects. Hence, the relations between the members of her democratic theory are relations between subjects/objects-subjects/objects, with power as the fundamental tissue.

**constitutive outside**

Mouffe insists that identity is always built on difference and, in order to explain this, she avails herself of the concept of ‘constitutive outside’. Henry Staten, who coined this term in his interpretation of Jacques Derrida’s work, explains it as follows: “Derrida [...] takes the outside to be

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90 Even though Benveniste speaks of language and grammar, he purports that these conclusions and the mechanisms described are not limited to language. See Benveniste Emile, “Subjectivity in Language”, [in:] Problems in General Linguistics, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables 1971, p.227.
91 Ibid., p.224.
92 Ibid., p.225.
93 Mouffe, On the Political, p.15.
necessary to the constitution of a phenomenon in its as-such, a condition of the possibility of the “inside”” and further on:

Let us schematize Derrida’s concept of constitution in this way: X is constituted by non-X. X here means essence or self-identity as conceived by philosophy, and non-X is that which functions as the “outside,” or limit, to the positive assertion of this self-identity, that which keeps ideality from complete closure, yet in limiting it remains the positive condition of the possibility of the positive assertion of essence.94

Derrida uses this figure to conceptualize the constitution of concepts.95 Mouffe (and Laclau) has transposed it to politics. In this application it is supposed to visualize the constitution of identities through difference. It is by a relation to an ‘Other’ who is exterior to me that I can define who I am.96 Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) contribution is the inscription of this rather widely accepted standpoint into the perspective of contingency and the impossibility of full positivity of any identity. That is to say, the border between X and non-X is never clear-cut. The Other is never fully fixed, and neither is my identity. Or, in yet another formulation, it is impossible to draw an absolute distinction between the interior and the exterior;97 between me and the Other. In Kieran Keohane’s interpretation:

The problem of relationality with the Other is that the Other is always already part of the One. This is so because without the Other there is no One: the One is the original Lack.98

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95 “The notion of a constitutive outside is the deconstructive alternative to the fundamental philosophical concept of form or essence – that is, of unity and self-identity as the most general and inviolable boundaries […] of being and knowledge.” Ibid., p.23.

96 ‘Constitutive outside’ need not simply relate to the human Other, the ‘not me’, but could also denote futurity, the ‘not yet’, the unspeakable, the unrepresentable, the socially unintelligible. I believe this insight made by Judith Butler is compatible, even if not explicitly underlined in Mouffe’s writing. Compare Butler Judith, “For a Careful Reading”, [in:] Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions*, pp.142-3.

97 Mouffe, “Decision, Deliberation”, p.27.

98 Keohane, “Central Problems”, p.159.
This unclear exterior is also constitutive, which means that it is the very condition of possibility of my existence – without the Other I would have no identity. At the same time it constitutes the condition of impossibility of a complete identity. Mouffe states clearly that “[t]he ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself.”\textsuperscript{99} Hence, the Other is both necessary and disruptive; it enables existence (self) but prevents totality (fully itself). Mouffe’s meeting with the Other is not a meeting between two full totalities, but unsutured and blurred (to themselves as well) that cannot possibly constitute themselves finally. This questions every essentialist conception of the subject. Moreover, it also forecloses the belief in ‘natural’ or ‘original’ identities, as every identity is here seen as a result of a constituting process. Mouffe explains:

It is because every object has inscribed in its very being something other than itself and that as a result, everything is constructed as difference, that its being cannot be conceived as pure ‘presence’ or ‘objectivity’. Since the constitutive outside is present within the inside as its always real possibility, every identity becomes purely contingent. This implies that we should not conceptualize power as an external relation taking place between two pre-constituted identities, but rather as constituting the identities themselves.\textsuperscript{100}

Such a conceptualization has important implications for Mouffe’s radical democratic project. Denying the naturalness of any identity it opens up for emancipatory, disrupting politics. For example, it enables women to rebel against their ‘natural’ role as care-takers only and prompts the politics of gender equality, or it might contribute to the overthrowing of regimes based on racial principles, such as South Africa before 1994.

Lasse Thomassen points to an ambiguity in the concept of ‘constitutive outside’ originated by Staten and taken onboard by Mouffe and others. On the one hand, it refers to the general condition of contingency of meaning (Staten calls it “the general law”\textsuperscript{101}). In this sense, it is close to the structural indeterminancy discussed earlier, standing for the infinite possibilities of signification (everything could be otherwise). Thus, it is a constant threat to any identity, expressing an undecidable excess that must be dealt with, for instance by excluding the Other.\textsuperscript{102} One could say that it is a

\textsuperscript{100} Mouffe, \textit{The Democratic Paradox}, p.21.
\textsuperscript{101} Staten, \textit{Wittgenstein and Derrida}, p.16.
\textsuperscript{102} Thomassen, “In/exclusions”, p.110.
symbolic representation of abundance or excess. There is also a second use of ‘constitutive outside’, in which it refers to the particular outside that a particular discourse or identity may have.\textsuperscript{103} In this sense of a determined outside, it does not threaten my identity but is reassuring. Here the example from the quotation at the beginning of this chapter might be recalled. Batman is the Joker’s ‘reassuring Other’, helping him to define and stabilize his identity (and vice versa).

Serious objections to the concept of ‘constitutive outside’ have been directed by Aletta Norval, who argues that it wrongly associates with a separable inside and outside and a clearly demarked frontier. That is obviously incompatible with Derrida’s theorization of identity/difference, where the identity of each sides is reliant on that of its Other and the frontier separating them is always impure and blurred. This leads her to conclude that we should abandon the term altogether in our discussion of the processes of identity formation. “It is for this reason that the idea of a ‘constitutive outside’ as developed by Staten in his reading of Derrida and extended to political analysis by Laclau [and Mouffe], should not be taken as a model for the theorisation of political identities.”\textsuperscript{104} Norval’s concerns are shared by Thomassen who argues that:

\begin{quote}
As a matter of fact, ‘constitutive outside’ is in a certain sense a misnomer, because we do not start with a pure inside with a constitutive outside. The constitutive outside dislocating the inside is not an outside of the inside, it is not a determined outside beyond a fully constituted inside, but rather an internal limit, thus subverting the inside/outside distinction.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

I definitively agree with Norval and Thomassen that we should perceive the frontier as impure and never clear-cut. The outside obviously always infects the inside. Nevertheless, I still regard the concept of ‘constitutive outside’ as useful (and so does Thomassen). I believe that the original Staten formulation can be read more in line with the proposition of its critics, and congruent with my interpretation of Mouffe. Constitutive outside, in this reading, puts more stress on constitutive than on outside. The emphasis is then more on the indispensability of the Other for the self and does

\textsuperscript{103} Staten, \textit{Wittgenstein and Derrida}, p.16.

\textsuperscript{104} Norval, “Frontiers in Question”, p.71. Norval admits that she has previously used this figure of thought in her explication of identity formation but explains it as a mistake. It is praiseworthy that she consistently avoids this term in her subsequent writings.

\textsuperscript{105} Thomassen, “In/exclusions”, p.111.
not need to refer to a fixed frontier, the latter would contradict the other theorems introduced by Derrida. It is neither a plea for total flux (remember the distinction introduced above between uncertainty and undecidability, the latter standing for indeterminacy between options circumvented by tradition etc.). Staten again: “Deconstruction is not a defense of formlessness, but a regulated overflowing of established boundaries, and Derrida has formulated the most general principle of this overflowing as the principle of a constitutive outside.” 106 Thus, the boundaries are susceptible to being overflowed, transgressed. Constitutive outside is “the admission of the not-itself into the citadel of the as-such”. 107 In effect, I believe the term ‘constitutive outside’ can be productive when these aspects (already there in the original Staten formulation) are underlined. No concept derived from Derrida should fall into simplistic dualism and either/or thought.

In the context of Mouffe’s theory, ‘constitutive outside’ expresses the precariousness of any identity, the impossibility of any fixed identities or subject positions. The Derridian way of framing intersubjectivity invites the questioning of any such positions, encourages tracing ways of transgressing the frontiers between one and the Other (for example between the dominating and the subordinated). In this sense, it is an important precondition of her emancipatory politics.

**confronting the Other**

In Mouffe’s vision the Other is also necessary for my identity. However, it cannot be seen as something distinct from the self, because the Other (or otherness) is always already inside me. 108 The relation to the Other is ambiguous, he is absolutely necessary for my existence, but at the same time obstructs it, prevents me from being totally myself. This dual role springs from the distinction between two meanings of the Other, both present in Mouffe texts. In the first, more general sense, the Other is a symbolic representation of Lack. Such an Other constitutes a threat to my identity, as

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107 Ibid., p.23 (emphasis added).

108 Amarpal K. Dhaliwal criticizes Mouffe for the risky use of ‘other’ that can easily become ‘othered’ and especially racialized othered. She asks: How do we avoid that the other be simply othered? How do we prevent identity-formation conceptualized with the help of boundary-drawing from ending-up in othering certain groups, for example in a racialized manner? I do not think there can be any such guarantees in Mouffe’s theory. One thing is clear though, Mouffe’s theory of democratic politics helps us disrupt, and in this way precludes, any sedimentation or naturalization of boundaries but, as far as I see, it does not ensure that the Other will not be identified in a discriminatory manner. Dhaliwal, “Can the Subaltern Vote?”
it demonstrates its limits, the impossibility of its full constitution (the Lack
is primordial). The second understanding is that of a *concrete* Other that
helps me stabilise my identity (like Batman for Joker). In this sense, the
Other is positive and indispensable to me.\textsuperscript{109} Here it is important to re-
member that constitutive outside is not reducible to one single Other. That
is, the fragmented subject will have different others that have the constitut-
ing effect for its different subject positions. This multiplicity of relations
with different others is very important. In line with the post-colonial criti-
que of Amarpal Dhaliwal, one-sided oppositions are risky. She takes the
example of the misleading focus on the opposition between women and
men only, which does not correspond to experiences of many women living
in societies where race and class relations are a central organizing principle.
There women are defined (and define themselves) is opposition to other
women. Generally, Dhaliwal objects to essentialising or fixing others, and
Mouffe’s theory expresses the same concern.\textsuperscript{110}

In the context of the relations to the Other, Mouffe’s distinction be-
tween antagonism and agonism is relevant. As discussed in the previous
chapter, agonism and antagonism entail two alternative ways of relating to
the Other as well as two different kinds of others. Adversaries are others
who share with us the commitment to some fundamental principles of
liberty and equality but differ in their interpretation. Such an agonistic
relation takes place within a shared symbolic space, and in this sense is
shaped by some vestigial consensus. Politics is here about establishing he-
gemony for one or the other interpretation. The enemies, on the other
hand, question these very principles and thus, Mouffe argues, place them-
selves outside the community, they become the illegal others.\textsuperscript{111} Here, the
problems with this distinction are actualized once more. Norval argues:

There is in discourse theory a tendency to privilege the moment of negativ-
ity, of frontier construction and of the development of antagonisms. No-
where is this clearer than in the fact that the ‘friend/enemy’ relation is
treated as constitutive of politics as such.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{109} As mentioned before, this distinction originates in Žižek’s critique of limiting the
understanding of the subject to ‘subject position’ and the subsequent introduction
of ‘subject as Lack’ into Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) theory.

\textsuperscript{110} Dhaliwal, “Can the Subaltern Vote?”, p.46.

\textsuperscript{111} See for example Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, pp.101ff; Mouffe, *The Re-
turn of the Political*, pp.2-3.

\textsuperscript{112} Norval Aletta, “Trajectories of future research in discourse theory”, [in:] *Dis-
course theory and political analysis*, p.223.
Indeed, in Mouffe’s conception identity is produced only in so far as it is opposed to that which it is not, as a relation of difference. As discussed in Chapter 5, properly antagonistic relations (as opposed to agonistic) are always only a possibility or threat. In a recent publication Mouffe makes it clear that the relation of difference

does not mean of course that such a relation is by necessity an antagonistic one. But it means that there is always the possibility of this relation us/them becoming one of friend/enemy.  

This possibility shapes our experience of agonistic politics. It is an important shift in Mouffe’s theory which leads to a more nuanced account of the relation with the Other.  

Another answer, or defence against the worries of some critics, who fear that Mouffe pre-defines the nature of the meeting between ‘me’ and ‘the Other’, can be found in the kind of ontology she employs. As discussed in Chapter 3, in weak ontologies, there is no necessary link between postulates of some entities’ ontological status and direct action recommendations. In the same way as it is flawed to accuse Habermas of equating all social relations with consensus-seeking, it would be an undue simplification to state that Mouffe equates the relation to the Other with antagonism. In both cases, these tendencies are only extracted from the ontic


114 Compare the critique that Aletta Norval directed at Mouffe’s (and Laclau’s) earlier writings, in which antagonism had a more prominent role. “The critique of essentialist forms of theorizing identity [in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy] is conflated with the further proposition that the only manner in which identity can be thought of in a non-essentialist fashion is through negativity.” See Norval, “Frontiers in Question”, p.57, and “A critique of essentialism may be developed which does not conflate the general logic of individuation of identity, and the specific logic of political frontiers.” Ibid., p.68; see also Norval Aletta, “Trajectories”, p.223. Again, these charges are only in place with regard to Mouffe’s earlier writings. Arash Abizadeh is hence unjust to still formulate similar critique claiming that Mouffe conflates “the Schmittian language of alterity with the Derridean language of difference” and maintaining that Mouffe wrongly defines all intergroup conflicts as antagonistic. See Abizadeh, “Does Collective Identity”, p.46.
level, reconstructed or retroducted, and put forth as the most fundamental ones that, in their perspectives, define us as political subjects.

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Summing up the sections dedicated to intersubjectivity and the role of the Other in Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories, it is obvious that both Habermas and Mouffe underline the importance of the Other in identity formation. There are, however, differences already at the outset in the discussion of this meeting. With his focus on communication, Habermas privileges intersubjectivity, through which subjects gain rational insights and self-knowledge (self-determination and self-realization). The interesting aspect that comes forth here is Habermas’s awareness that from intersubjectivity springs some insecurity, some question mark regarding the result of the meeting with the Other. However, after the analysis of Habermas’s conception of the subject, it becomes clear that there is not much place for contingency. The Other is here presented as transparent and coherent, it is also ascribed autonomy and rational capacity, thus reflecting the constitution of the self (it is sometimes even called ‘alter ego’\(^\text{115}\)). In consequence the intersubjective meeting is ideally marked by symmetry, equality and the absence of power.

For that very reason I have to answer negatively to the suggestions posed in Chapter 4 about intersubjectivity and, by extension, deliberation as the possible site of contingency in Habermas’s theory. Indeed, Habermas does recognize a moment of insecurity and unpredictability in the instance of communication, which is expressed by the never fully predictable ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers the subjects give to the validity claims raised. “Which answer ego will give in any instance, what position he will take [yes or no], cannot be known in advance – either by him or by anyone else.”\(^\text{116}\) This is the admission of unexpectability that Habermas allows for, which, nonetheless, is placed within discursive procedures and, in effect, is rather circumvented. Hence, when we take a closer look it only confirms that Habermas stands for a weak ontology, that no direct and binding action recommendations follow from his ontological claims. Moreover, the answers cannot be known in advance because the others will put forth some arguments that will possibly change my own position. So, the only question mark comes from the simple fact of not yet having acquainted oneself with the position of the Other. In effect, Nein Sagen Können does not erase the

\(^{115}\) See Habermas, “Individuation”.

dominating picture of direct access to the Other and the ideal of a fully transparent communication.

I concur with Amy Allen who claims that in order to be really critical Habermas’s critical theory “will have to be able to make sense of the role that power and subordination play in the constitution of the subject. That is to say, it will have to enable us to understand what Foucault called subjection”. She puts forth a justified charge that Habermas “fails to appreciate that destruction and negation are necessary elements of the dynamic of intersubjectivity”\(^{117}\). Now, in Mouffe’s Foucaultian perspective power is not something we can choose to ignore in our theorizing of democracy, even in its ideal or ‘to come’ versions. Power is the condition of possibility of human relations. As discussed above, subjects are more properly understood as subjects/objects, which consequently marks the concept of intersubjectivity. However, as mentioned before, Mouffe is sometimes accused of focusing exclusively on the element of negativity. Indeed, in her earlier writings she overemphasized the status of antagonism, even though this has changed after her introduction of the concept of agonism. Mouffe endorses a Derrida-inspired insight that the Other is both constitutive of our identity and disruptive. The meeting is marked by negativity in the respect that the Other prevents me from being totally myself but, providing a contrast, it is also a condition of possibility of my identity. The Other is pictured more like a subaltern, a radically Other that is rather opaque to the one (and partly to itself too). There are obvious consequences of such discrepancies for the view of communication. Here the accent is more on obscurity than on transparency and in effect, intersubjectivity is soaked with contingency.

**Political and democratic implications of subjectivity**

To conclude this chapter, I collect and make more explicit the connections between the concepts of (inter)subjectivity developed by Habermas and Mouffe and my earlier discussion of their conceptions of democratic politics.

Let me deal with Habermas first. His deliberative politics presupposes and necessitates a certain kind of subject. His ideal of the orientation towards consensus in politics implies a coherent and transparent subject, which makes him/her predictable and trustworthy in communication (accountability). Just as in politics, Habermas wants to see understanding and agreement on the intrapersonal level as well. Both interpersonal and in-

trapersonal (or as Habermas names it intra-psychic) levels are steered by the same ideals of transparency and accountability. The deliberative subjects must also be reflective and self-critical to match with the demands of the deliberative procedure.

In this chapter, explaining the processes of identity formation I also discussed intersubjectivity. Translated into Habermas’s democratic theoretic concepts, deliberation is the political instance of intersubjectivity, and is assumed to be significantly constitutive of the subject. Intersubjectivity is here understood as a dual activity, i.e., an exercise of autonomous agency, of self-determination, and simultaneously of self-interpretation (or self-realization). In the course of the intersubjective meetings the subjects become clear about their interests and preferences; they define themselves as irreplaceable individuals (self-realization). At the same time, in the meeting with others they seek understanding and connection to some principles that surpass their particular self-interpretation (self-determination). This makes clear the transformative impact of the deliberative politics that Habermas puts forth – it entails the formation and transformation of the preferences, interests and identities of the subjects involved. However, as has been shown, such a change is not open-ended; it is supposed to follow the direction from self-interest towards a universal orientation.

When it comes to Mouffe, she claims that

\[\text{[r]enunciation of the category of subject as a unitary, transparent, and sutured entity opens the way to the recognition of the specificity of the antagonisms constituted on the basis of different subject positions, and hence the possibility of the deepening of a pluralist and democratic conception.}\]

We could say that the vision of a fragmented and disharmonious subject is the condition of possibility to apprehend the radical pluralism of Mouffe’s vision of democracy. Agonisms are to be found not only at the interpersonal but also at the intrapersonal level, where more often than not the different subject positions clash with each other. The element of negativity is always there.

Mouffe’s subject as Lack is driven by the (always partly failed) attempts to cover up this Lack, to fill it with some identifications that will provide partial fixations, stabilizations of identity. This is also its mainspring in politics. Hegemonic politics is guided by a logic similar to identity formation. The empty place of power needs to be filled with concrete (hegemonic) projects

\[^{118}\text{Laclau & Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p.166.}\]
that temporally provide stabilization. To match with the undecidability of politics, the subject has to be unsettled too, and its opaqueness to itself is explained and justified by the vision of politics as driven mainly by passions and not rational deliberation. In consequence, we can never ‘know ourselves’ or others, as we/they are not stable or clearly distinguishable units to be acquainted with. Moreover, as discussed above, the anti-essentialist vision of the subject is a precondition of Mouffe’s radical emancipatory project. It enables questioning any identity or subject position as natural, which opens up the possibility of new orderings of the social.

As stated above, both Habermas and Mouffe can be read as representatives of the ‘death of the subject’ thesis. After the discussion presented in this chapter we can conclude that “this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had.” The route Habermas and Mouffe have chosen is to underline the relational aspects of subjectivity, the role of the Other. However, what I have tried to show in this chapter are the different possibilities of thinking about intersubjectivity, the more harmonious and consensus-oriented kind and the latently antagonistic and disruptive kind. In Mouffe’s case, the relation to the Other always comprises both a dependence on him/her and at the same time the element of threat of the Other, expressed in his/her dislocating my identity, preventing me from being fully myself. Whereas Habermas avails himself of the concept of intersubjectivity in a smooth, rupture-free vein (though we could say that taking a ‘no’ position would be a rupture), Mouffe sees it as Janus-faced. She recalls the notion of the constitutive outside to highlight the threatening but necessary character of the Other.

I would argue that intersubjectivity in Habermas’s take does not really provide a way out of the flaws ascribed to the philosophy of the subject/consciousness, a perspective he wants to renounce. He is still caught in the image of the subject in control of itself and its surroundings. Even though it now is a relation of mutual dependence between subjects and not a one-way dependence of subject-object. The ideals of (self)transparency and coherence seem to be remnants of this older vision of the subject as the master of objective reality (subject-object relation) and able to control both oneself and everything around (interactions with others included). Here I think we can profit more from the post-structural insight about the obscu-

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rity and contingency involved in all processes of (self)understanding and all intersubjective meetings.

So, what lessons can be drawn from these two different visions? Keeping the focus on the agonistic spirit of democracy I think we need to retain the Mouffean post-structuralist account of the split subject, the subject as Lack. However, this needs to be supplemented with a more explicit theorization of the unity of the subject in interaction. In this context I find Habermas’s focus on intersubjectivity convincing, even though I see a need to radicalize it, to introduce a moment of constitutive negativity in the form of the threat of the Other. This is also linked to the basic admission of contingency as permeating the intersubjective meetings, which Habermas fails to give a sufficient account of. Moreover, I contend that the demands he makes on the subject are too heavy. Transparency and coherence cannot be salient ideals for a subject conscious of its limits. Not only on the empirical grounds.

A more proper account would be one of a subject partly opaque to itself, not being able to fully account for its origin, or the norms setting the stage for its being. Mouffe shares this post-structural stance, even though other thinkers elaborate its implications for democratic politics in more detail. In the discussions above Derrida and Jonsson offered a helping hand, explicating the vision of the subject that Mouffe draws on. Judith Butler is another theorist who complements Mouffe’s perspective. She asks for

a theory of the subject that would not give it grand and overwhelming powers to found its own experience but that would understand that the subject comes always with limitations, is always made in part from something else that is not itself – a history, an unconscious, a set of structures, the history of reason – which gives the lie to its self-grounding pretensions.\(^\text{120}\)

Behind every speaking ‘I’ there are the institutional histories of subjection and subjectivation that ‘position’ the subject. I find this sense of inherent limitations fundamental for a conception of the subject aspiring to match with radical democracy. Moreover, I concur with Norval who argues that

the experience of undecidability marks the subject constitutively, such that a relation to an other is constituted which encompasses an awareness of contingency. In my view, this relation stands at the core of a democratic ethos.\(^\text{121}\)

\(^{120}\) Ibid., p.116.

\(^{121}\) Norval, “Hegemony after deconstruction”, p.142.
In line with Butler and Norval, I think such a vision of the subject (closer to Mouffe’s than Habermas’s) can constitute grounds for an ethical relation to the Other. The acknowledgement of my own opacity can be a starting point for a more generous relation to the Other. “It would be, perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves.” The same goes for the requirement of consistency. If we suspend the ideal of self-identity or total coherence, we can adopt a more humble relation to the others and ourselves. What the arguments above boil down to is an admission of the very limits of knowing. Mouffe argues that “the relation between social agents becomes more democratic only as far as they accept the particularity and the limitation of their claims.” We have to be aware that the account of ourselves will never be complete, and when asking the Other who s/he is, we have to leave the question open and cannot demand any definite answer. In this way we let the Other live. Forcing oneself and others to present a coherent and transparent account of their life history (even in the forceless force version cherished by Habermas) is to prompt levelling over all the breakages and ruptures that are constitutive of the subject. Moreover, the recognition of the limits and dislocation of any identity (the identity of the subject included) guides political practice in the direction of provisionality. It helps reveal the political, constructed nature of the ruling hegemonic positions underlining the revisable nature of our political solutions.

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CHAPTER 7  CONCLUSIONS. TOWARDS A THIRD POSITION

The rebel must not be confused with the criminal, though society may often stigmatize the rebel as a criminal, and though the criminal may sometimes pose as a rebel. The rebel stands alone: the most faithful son of that society which is the target of his hostility and rejection, he sees in the world he combats a totality of living relationships whose threads have merely been tangled in confusion, and it is his chosen task to disentangle them and order them according to his own better ideas.

Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*

The aim of this thesis was to clarify and critically assess Chantal Mouffe’s and Jürgen Habermas’s versions of radical democracy in order to clear the ground for a third position. This was done in two steps, that is, through a close reading of Habermas’s and Mouffe’s respective theories of democratic politics and subjectivity and through a (re)construction of the debate between them. The result is an outline of a position that to some extent transcends the two, at the same time as it draws inspiration from the agonistic spirit of Mouffe and the Habermasian stress on political communication. Let me first shortly summarize the findings from the previous chapters, in the form of a juxtaposition of the similarities and differences I found, and only later proceed to the last remaining task – the sketching of the third position.

SIMILARITIES AND DISPARITIES

One methodological strategy applied in this thesis was to read Mouffe’s and Habermas’s theories as a kind of textual ‘others’ for each other. This approach turned out to be fruitful and helped highlight their specific concerns, strengths and weaknesses. In order for the two approaches to be read this way a serious debate, serious treatment of both of them is required. We need to move past what James Wiley called “the exaggeration of the philosophical claims of opponents and the refusal to engage oppo-
ments in arguments beyond initial exchange of assertions”¹. We have to give them a serious on-a-par treatment.²

What I presented in the previous chapters can be summarized as an extended critique of Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories as representatives of different choices made in regard to theory and politics. In the Introduction I set out the discussion between Habermas and Mouffe by pointing to some basic common traits that their perspectives share (broad scope of democratic politics, positioning between liberalism and republicanism, transformative vision of politics, self-identification as radical democrats). These and other similarities that surfaced in the course of the analysis often turned out to be not so similar after closer scrutiny.

Starting with methodology, both Habermas and Mouffe aim to trace the conditions of possibility of democratic politics. In order to do this they resort to rational reconstruction and retroduction respectively, which in both cases entails interpreting the existent, ontical relations in search of some fundamental (quasi-transcendental) aspects of these relations. What distinguishes Mouffe is that she is interested in the paradoxical working of the identified mechanisms or drives, which often condition democratic politics in two ways. They make democracy possible but at the same time constitute limits or impediments to its positive realization. In this respect I would say that Habermas’s fundamental question is “How is democratic society possible?”, while Mouffe also, and maybe predominantly, investigates “How democratic society is impossible”.

Mouffe’s and Habermas’s different interpretations of the ontological ‘entities’ form disparate versions of democracy and subjectivity. In Mouffe’s case, democracy and subjectivity are conditioned by the fundamental Lack, the non-suture of social objectivity. This Lack both calls for a specific kind of democratic politics (i.e., hegemonic) and a particular kind

² A negative example in this respect is provided by Andrew Knops who, despite his many insightful critical comments about Mouffe’s theory, fails to recognize her position. Even though he seemingly tries to build in a symmetrical dependence between the theories, he stands clearly on deliberative theory’s side and can also be interpreted as a hegemonic attempt to incorporate Mouffe’s theory by the dominant deliberative approach. The alternatives he puts forth to Mouffe are either to stick to the critique of consensus and, by extension, to abandon her own position or to reevaluate and incorporate the idea of rational consensus (for instance by acknowledging its fallibility) which would amount to erasing the alternative she proposes. Either way is a dead-end for Mouffe. See Knops, “Debate”. Similar interpretations of the merging approaches, which attempt at a synthesis between the deliberative and the agonistic theories can be found in Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”; Gürsözlü, “Debate”.

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of subject (i.e., dislocated and split). Moreover, it also articulates the ultimate impossibility of these constructs, expressed as ‘democracy to come’ and subject as Lack. On the ontological level, besides contingency, Mouffe places antagonism. She argues that antagonism is an (observable, retroactively accessed) unavoidable part of our human relations and we should not deny it. We will be better off making it visible and thus enabling confrontation with it. Hence, the aim of democracy is to transform antagonism proper into its democratic forms, i.e. agonism. The same line of argumentation was found in the case of passions. Because humans are passionate animals, because the affective drive is there, we should not design our theories of democracy and democracies in a way that omits or negates these drives. As they are there, they will find their way out anyway, maybe in a form less desirable to us. In effect, Mouffe’s vision of democracy, in which conflicts and differences flourish, antagonisms and passions are recognized and given a democratic (that is non-violent) outlet, is an outcome of her observations. Her definition of the ontological as antagonism and the political leads her to a vision of hegemonic politics which best captures this ontological condition and one that in the best possible way conforms to these aspects of being human.

In what way is it different from Habermas? The significant difference is the content of the recognized ontological (by Habermas called quasi-transcendental) condition. From this premise that he has acquired through rational reconstruction, and through several theoretical steps, Habermas designs a vision of democracy that is the best possible match. Hence, the orientation towards consensus, that he identifies as a quasi-transcendental mechanism present in language and communication, through his theorization of different kinds of action and different kinds of reason and discourses, results in Habermas’s ideal of deliberation oriented at consensus as the most appropriate and fundamental way of conducting politics. This, in turn, requires a specific vision of the subject as transparent and coherent, someone who is accountable in communication with others.

In effect, Mouffe and Habermas make a similar methodological move which, however, results in disparate conclusions about the nature of the ontological and by extension, different normative propositions. They view antagonism and orientation to consensus respectively as the fundamental aspect of democracy. My critique in the previous chapters pointed at an attempt to attenuate both these claims. I tried to show that we can find traces in Mouffe’s and, to a lesser extent, in Habermas’s writings that stress contingency. This leads me to the conclusion that consensus and antagonism can be viewed as ontic possibilities that should not be ontologized or inscribed into human actions as any kind of telos. Instead, I pro-
pose we stick to the fundamental Lack (or radical contingency) as a condition of (im)possibility of democracy and subjectivity.

Another seemingly common point was found in Habermas’s and Mouffe’s picturing of democracy as a process. Democracy for both of them means ‘democracy-in-the-making’. This is closely connected to the shared presupposition of active and critical subjects. In Mouffe’s case this presumption is rooted in the lack of closure and prevailing undecidability of democratic politics. Since there are no fixed points of reference, and everything is in principle open to redefinition, the political subjects are forced to engage in this enterprise. Fixations are possible (and necessary) in the form of stabilizations of the social, which provide a kind of map that temporarily helps subjects orient somehow in this overwhelming fluidity. The agonistic subjects are forced to transform, which is an effect of the agonistic and antagonistic meetings. This transformation, for Mouffe, is not linked to a fully self-conscious and reflexive process. It can just as well be a product of unconscious powers of discourse, of the ‘contemporary order of being’.

For Habermas as well the democratic (deliberative) process constitutes a never-ending challenge. Hence constant vigilance and a willingness to engage in this enterprise are required. The subjects need to actively exercise their subjectivity, they need to engage in mutual reason-giving which is the only way to establish their autonomy. The transformation that takes place through deliberation goes all the way down to a readiness to question one’s own identity. However, in contradistinction to Mouffe, Habermas links transformation to reflexivity and rationality.

Some of the disparities that I have highlighted in the thesis might be explained by the choice of emphasis. Louis Althusser puts it neatly:

[some objects and problems are] necessarily invisible in the field of [... a] theory, because they are not objects of this theory, because they are forbidden by it [...] they are invisible because they are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible, and that is why their fleeting presence when it does occur [...] goes unperceived.3

The strategy I applied in this thesis was to construct a dialogue between Habermas and Mouffe in order to highlight these elements that otherwise easily go unperceived. Applying a Mouffean lens to Habermas’s theory exposed its difficulties in representing sociocultural pluralism, whereas

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applying a Habermasian lens to Mouffe’s theory revealed its underestimation of the role of unity of the self and insufficient elaboration on democratic intersubjectivity. Mouffe’s scarce theorisation of the role of unity might be explained by her focus on the disruptive aspects of democracy, such as antagonism and frontiers. There is certainly more to be said about the conception of the subject in democratic interaction, which I have tried to frame as the problem of unity of the subject in her theory. Similarly, but with a reversed content, Habermas downplays or under-theorizes certain aspects of social life, most importantly difference and conflict. He is certainly aware of the pervasiveness of plurality, heterogeneity, and difference and even declares that his primary question is how to respond to this intensified pluralization. Simultaneously, he fears unconstrained and uncritical celebration of difference and otherness. I am not convinced though that his solution to this particular dilemma is adequate. By putting the search for consensus in the limelight, the differences that he recognizes are moved to the shadow.

I believe Mouffe’s theory is more adequate to accommodate pluralism and differences, but at the same time it does not help us in the task of adjudicating between these differences. She does not provide the guidelines for judging between the differences that are not acceptable in a democracy, even though she sees the problem. Her declaration that there are unacceptable differences does not lead to any directions in how to discern them. Here, I think some kind of a reformulated version of Habermas’s deliberative procedure (with the circumvention of consensus) could be useful.

In short, just as I argued that difference and dissent is a belated and under-theorized concession for Habermas, so is unity never fully integrated into Mouffe’s theory. At the same time, I contend that these are the points that cannot be omitted, or underdeveloped if the theories are to have bearing on our theoretical discussion about democracy and democratic subjectivity today. I think that those who want to follow either Mouffe or Habermas need to engage seriously in the topics that are traceable but somewhat disregarded in the two theories, that is, forms of unity and the status of difference respectively. Instead, my dissatisfaction with how the two theorists treat this conjunction was one of the main inspirations for sketching out a third position. Before I present this outline or a direction for the in-between position there is one more aspect that can be treated as a simi-

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5 This is also the trend of the usual amendments or critical comments from Habermas’s sympathizers. See for example Dryzek, Young, Benhabib.
larity and/or disparity in Habermas’s and Mouffe’s theories and that will lead on to the different stance I take. It is the question of radicalism.

**RADICALISM REDUX**

In the Introduction I framed the theories of Habermas and Mouffe as two versions of radical democracy and one of the leitmotifs of the previous chapters has been ‘radicalism’. Let me now gather up these scattered comments that appeared throughout the thesis.

Both Habermas and Mouffe agree on the view of radical democracy as one where the sphere of politics has a broad range. They concur when it comes to the need to further spread democracy to fields hitherto not democratized. To these general claims, they add some specifications of what their particular conceptions of radical democracy entail. Habermas’s own measure of radicalism is to be found in the amount and scale of deliberation involved in the decision-making processes. Hence, in order to judge how radical he is, we need to refer to the discussion about the role of deliberation in his theory. As we have seen, Habermas argues that our complex societies require multiple ways of pursuing integration (such as the means of power and money). In effect, public opinion with its informal deliberations does not rule but only steers administrative power in particular directions. There have been voices raised from within the deliberative tradition that identify this stance, mainly expressed in Habermas’s *Between Facts and Norms*, as defeatist. They argue that Habermas has severely blunted his radicalism. In this respect, one could point to the ambiguous status Habermas ascribes to the communicative type of power. On the one hand, there are formulations that underline the primacy of communicative before other forms of power; on the other hand, Habermas is clear that communicative power cannot rule on its own. This second line of argumentation diminishes severely the role of deliberative processes in Habermas’s theory of democracy. For the same reason, a somewhat disappointed James Bohman enunciates: “He never clearly shows why […] he is still a radical democrat”. Habermas seems to limit the range of participatory democracy to certain spheres. Thus Bohman concludes: “Radical democracy no longer means the total transformation of society, but is rather a piecemeal project of reform that builds on the constitutional and institu-

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Habermas’s theory of democracy is clearly situated within modern liberal institutions.

Let me now focus on Mouffe, for whom the dimension of antagonism is decisive in judging whether a theory of democracy is radical or not. Radicalism for her contains “the acceptance of the ineradicability of antagonism”9. In Chapter 5 I discussed the different meanings of antagonism in Mouffe’s work and the problems attached to her distinction between antagonism and agonism. The conclusion we could draw is that the ineradicable form of antagonism concerns the admission of a fundamental contingency (the originary Lack), at the same time as Mouffe underlines that concrete antagonisms should be tamed and transformed into agonisms. Democratic politics is marked by the awareness of this fundamental Lack as well as constant threats of concrete antagonistic forms of conflict.

Besides the stress on antagonism, Mouffe defines radicalism as heading for profound transformation of social relations and proposing a candidate for hegemony. Slavoj Žižek challenges her on this point and argues that her agonistic approach is unable to question the status quo and ends up accepting liberal democracy in its present stage.10 Mouffe demurs to his objection and explains that

What an agonistic approach certainly disavows is the possibility of an act of radical refoundation that would institute a new social order from scratch. But a number of very important socio-economic and political transformations, with radical implications, are possible within the context of liberal democratic institutions.11

She continues:

This is, in my view, the effective way to challenge power relations, not in the mode of an abstract negation but in a properly hegemonic way, through a process of disarticulation of existing practices and creation of new discourses and institutions.12

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8 Ibid., p.926.
12 Ibid.
What becomes clear from these passages is Mouffe’s opposition to some more revolutionary solutions and her opting for reformist ways of challenging the existing power relations. As discussed in previous chapters, she wants to retain both liberal institutions (as existing in our contemporary representative democracies) and the principles of equality and liberty, and instead redefine them in order to use their radical potential to a greater extent. In consequence, we cannot speak of a new order in her case, but rather a renegotiation of the existing liberal solutions.

In Chapter 5 I brought up the problems connected with Mouffe’s distinction between antagonism proper and agonism which could lead to an analytical separation between the relations internal to a community, in which agonistic struggles for *interpretations* of the shared symbolic space take place (such as principles of liberty and equality), and antagonism as reserved for external relations, and only there would *questioning* of the symbolic space be possible. As discussed earlier, such a separation precludes radical challenge to power relations from within the system.

Now, moving away from Mouffe’s and Habermas’s own definitions, and following Aletta Norval, I would like to propose a different standard of radicalism. In this account, a radical democratic theory distinguishes itself by putting problematization in the center. Norval states that radical democracy may be characterized as an ethos of contestation, or the openness to revision; “both the everyday aspects of politics, and the very principles ordering a polity must be open to contestation”\(^\text{13}\).

What can we say about Habermas’s deliberative democracy in this respect? Obviously, openness to discussion and critique lies at the very core of his theory of democracy and subjectivity. Most indicators to this effect can be found in the conceptualization of deliberation, with its openness to revision, and Habermas’s underlining of the transformative impact of deliberation. Recall also Habermas’s characterization of the post-conventional stage of development, which consists in a critical stance towards the local norms of the society. Hence, both at the level of politics and at the individual level, critique and self-critique are underlined by Habermas. Additionally, he builds in some openness to contestation at the level of theory construction by admitting fallibility of his own interpretations. Here it is important to once again recall the distinction between fallibility and contingency. Whereas Habermas argues that his reconstructions are fallible due to empirical imperfections, Mouffe holds that her reconstructions are contingent (strongly fallible) due to the very logic of their formulation. Just like Habermas, Mouffe sees the intrinsic element of in-

interpretation in the process of putting forth her ontological claims. However, Mouffe, in contradistinction to Habermas, sees interpretation as necessarily political, whereas Habermas seems to allow the possibility of perfect interpretations, which would give us access to the fundamental quasi-transcendental mechanisms. For Mouffe these very mechanisms are also constructed through our interpretations.

Hence, after closer scrutiny, contingency in Habermas’s theory is reduced to the ontic level and springs from the fact of social complexity and empirical imperfection. Thus, it is never an admission of radical, or ontological contingency, one that cannot be accommodated. That is why I think Patchen Markell is too benevolent in his interpretation of Habermas’s approach as “a democratic politics for which open-endedness is not a failure but a necessary and constitutive feature”\(^{14}\). In my reading, open-endedness is for Habermas only an ontic occurrence and not an ontological, constitutive feature. Contingency for Habermas is surmountable as long as some ideal conditions are met (a more accurate interpretation, more rational procedure).\(^{15}\)

With the problematization standard in mind, Mouffe not only allows for contestation, but puts it as the ideal for democracy. While Habermas relates problematization to open-endedness of the political process, for Mouffe, this ethos of contestation is also intrinsically linked to the acknowledgement of radical contingency. The non-necessity of any political order or any identity is the key to understanding Mouffe’s approach. She perceives contingency as the condition of possibility of democracy.\(^{16}\)

Let me rephrase Mouffe’s position through reference to other post-structuralist thinkers. Simon Critchley underlines that

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\text{only those societies that are self-conscious of their political status – their contingency and power operations – are democratic. [...] If all societies are tacitly hegemonic, then the distinguishing feature of democratic society is that it is explicitly hegemonic. Democracy is thus the name for that political form of society that makes explicit the contingency of its foundations.}\]

\(^{14}\) Markell, “Contesting Consensus”, p.394.

\(^{15}\) We should obviously remember the discussion from Chapter 3, where the status of Habermas’s idealizations was dealt with. However, even if the ideal conditions are never fully met, through the definition of them, this state of superseding contingency is imaginable.

\(^{16}\) Also Mark Devenney, in his analysis of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory inscribes it in the stream of thought that sees the institutionalization of a principle of uncertainty as a condition of possibility of democracy. Devenney, Ethics and Politics, p.144.

\(^{17}\) Critchley, “Is There”, p.115.
Here it is important to keep in mind that in the very logic of operation of hegemonies there are inscribed efforts to conceal their contingent status. A hegemonic position will always be presented as obvious. Nonetheless, in a democracy, the disruption of such a claim is purportedly easier as there are plenty of other counter-hegemonic claims. Additionally, the provisionality of any political solution is underlined by the consciousness of limits inscribed in every identity. Hence, I would say that in a democratic society the hegemonic position is more likely to be revealed as hegemonic.

To this understanding of democracy, we can add Glynos & Howarth’s specification of radicalism. They distinguish between radical political demands and hegemonic political demands:

A *radical* political demand would be one that publicly contests a *fundamental* norm of a practice or regime. In this view, only demands and struggles that contest the fundamental rules of a practice and seek to institute new rules and institutions could count as radical political demands. [...] A *hegemonic* political demand, on the other hand, is a demand – whether radical or not – which comes to represent a challenge to aspects of a *regime of practices* by successfully *generalizing* its relevance to other institutions and practices. [...] A demand that is both radical and hegemonic may thus have the effect of reconfiguring an entire regime of practices in the name of a new order.¹⁸

The above criterion for radicalism can obviously be applied to other than democratic demands as well. But, when taken together, the two quotations above amount to a definition of radical democracy. *Democracy* would distinguish itself by providing several alternatives to the hegemonic position which opens for the debunking of the ruling hegemony as contingent (i.e., politically constructed). *Radical* democracy would include the possibility or openness for contestation of its fundaments.

Even though the terminology used in the quotes bears a resemblance to Mouffe’s, in light of what has been said above, both Habermas and Mouffe appear as more cautious. They are both more deeply rooted in the liberal democratic state institutions and principles and aim more at transformation than a thorough-going change.

In the context of the above discussion about the questioning or problematization as the radical component of democracy, I would say that a truly radical democracy needs to embrace the possibility of its own aboli-

tion. Derrida calls this possibility or threat ‘autoimmunity’ and links it to his concept of ‘democracy to come’.

The expression ‘democracy to come’ does indeed translate or call for a militant and interminable political critique. [...] ‘democracy to come’ takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility. Democracy is the only system, the only constitutional paradigm, in which, in principle, one has or assumes the right to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name.19

It is an inherent paradox of democracy that, following its radical promise, it needs to allow for not only power shifts but also the shift of the system, that is, it needs to allow for its own suicide.20 As Glynos & Howarth argue in the quote above, a radical political demand contests a fundamental norm of a practice or regime. It might entail the questioning of the principles that constitute democracy as we know it.

**Towards a third position on democracy and subjectivity**

The reformulated conception of radicalism presented above serves as a good entrance point for the last remaining task set out for this thesis. What I will outline below is a direction for a third position that I would find compelling. Aletta Norval, with her project of ‘aversive democracy’ is probably the nearest approximation of this orientation.21 She resorts to late Wittgenstein, Derrida and Cavell in the search for a position that draws inspiration from both deliberative (more deliberative than Habermas’s) and post-structuralist democratic theories. She elaborates on alternatives to rational argumentation, such as rhetoric, keeping the focus on the centrality of communication in democratic politics. Her other contribution, that I also want to pursue is the stress on perfectibility (thereof ‘aver-


20 Derrida’s concept of ‘autoimmunity’ derives from biology and the mechanism of the immune system attacking its own body, destroying it from within. He explains it as “taking account within politics [of] what psychoanalysis once called the unconscious”. Ibid., p.110. Derrida also provides empirical examples of autoimmunity recalling the broken off elections in Algeria in 1992, when the leading party interrupted the second round of elections in order not to let the Islamic party into power. Ibid., p.30; see also Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, p.151.

21 Ibid.
sive’, from aversion to conformism), the constant aspiration for better, more adequate democratic politics.22

Hence, the third position I aim at will start with an ethos that affirms problematization, contingency and openness of political life. Here I take ‘ethos’ to mean “a political ethic linked not to the positivity of a concrete project or policy, but rather to the manner or modality with which it is advocated”23. Glynos explains:

Democracy is better approached as a function of ethos, not institutions. This approach highlights the need to focus on informal practices that buoy up formal-institutional structures […], and has the merit of foregrounding questions of motivation and ethics. The issue of institutions is displaced by the issue of subjectivity and modality of interaction.24

As observed above, the radical democratic ethos would connote temporality, oscillation, critique, disturbance, denaturalization, and problematization. Such a conceptualization is close to Mouffe’s understanding of democracy; it could even be labeled an agonistic ethos. Indeed, I think that her insights here cannot be underestimated. However, such a framing also bears consequences for the status of the proposed theory. Let me explain this with the example of Mouffe’s theory. Namely, due to her framing of democracy as ethos, her claim to offering an alternative to the deliberative model of democracy is undermined. I am not the first to dismiss her ambitions in this regard. For example Ilan Kapoor points out the lack of an alternative “rule-making system” in place of the rejected Habermasian legitimating procedures in Mouffe’s theory.25 Kapoor disapproves of

22 “A rethought conception of democracy that will do justice to certain of the central insights of both deliberative and post-structuralist conceptions of democracy will have to give renewed attention to, first, argumentation and persuasion in contradistinction to deliberation; secondly, the relation between agreement and disagreement in the reaching of democratic decisions; and thirdly, to the way both of these are related to underlying conceptions of democratic subjectivity.” Ibid., p.53.
24 Ibid., p.191; see also Schaap, “Agonism in divided societies”, pp.258, 270.
Mouffe’s lack of discussion about the institutional design and argues that she needs it in order to counter-prove the voluntarism charge. How are the agonistic ethos, and the chain of equivalence to be included in the democratic system? And without institutionalization, how is it going to secure equal participation?

In this context let me once again refer to the parallel hinted at in the Introduction, between the debate now taking place among deliberative and agonistic brands of democratic theory and the liberal and communitarian exchanges in the 1980s. Michael Walzer defined the communitarian critique of liberalism as transient but certain to return. The transience of communitarianism was, according to him, due to the fact that it did not provide an alternative to liberalism but only a corrective to certain problematic tendencies within it towards instability, disassociation and depoliticization. Liberals are now widely understood to have ‘won’ the debate with their communitarian critics of the 1980s due to liberalism’s accommodation of communitarian concerns in autonomy-based theories such as Will Kymlicka’s. The effect of the encounter is that the communitarian critique succeeded in pushing liberalism in a more political direction.

When we return to the exchanges between the deliberative and agonistic theories, Andrew Schaap also defines the agonistic critique of the more mainstream deliberative democratic theory as transient, due to its choice of discussing democracy in terms of an ethos, and disregarding the institutional changes it would entail;

The agonistic critique of dialogical liberalism [deliberative democracy] is unavoidably transient because it understands democracy not in institutional terms but as an ethics that affirms indeterminacy, the openness of political life and the never-ending play of the agon. [...] This agonistic ethos is important to the extent that it draws attention to what is excluded and occluded in the representation of legitimate politics as dialogue. As transient ethos, however, an agonistic theory of democracy does not amount to an alternative model of democracy as Mouffe sometimes seems to suggest. [...] without an adequate conceptualization of the implication of an agonistic politics for democratic institutions, agonistic theories of democracy can be too easily dismissed as failing to offer a real alternative to dialogical liberalism.

26 See comments on that in Schaap, “Political Theory”, p.56.
27 Schaap, “Political Theory”, p.72.
I agree with Schaap that Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism does not offer a fully-fledged alternative to the deliberative democratic theory. However I also object to framing her theory as a corrective to the deliberative theory. And this is because it is impossible to simply add an agonistic ethos to Habermas’s theory.28 Endorsing it would necessitate serious changes to the original model. Some of its fundamental assumptions, such as deliberation’s orientation towards consensus, and the requirements of universalizability and rationality would have to be bracketed. That is why I have chosen to speak of a third position. I do not claim to present a totally new version of democracy, it is quite clearly influenced by the deliberative and the agonistic theories discussed in the previous chapters. However, the putting together of some of the elements and omitting others disqualifies this version from being called either Habermasian or Mouffean. Let me now draw the contours of this third position.

**beyond deliberative and agonistic democracy**

I take the embracement of contingency as the main inspiration from Mouffe’s theory, which is obviously linked to the ethos of problematization discussed above. The open-ended, contingent relations and identities invite problematization and redefinition. However, I do not see it as a clear theoretical choice between contingency and closure, but rather, again, a question of navigating between them. “Affirming the way in which democracy is constituted around a tension that is impossible to reconcile fully or finally, radical and plural democracy would be the name for a politics of openness, questioning, and contestation, struggling against all forms of political closure.”29 Radical democracy cannot be equated with the sole affirmation of openness. Openness must always be paired with closure and the negotiation between these two is at the core of radically democratic politics (remember the discussion of inclusion as always paradoxically coupled with exclusion). Even if I subscribe to contingency (or Lack) as the ontological ground for politics, on the ontical level politics will necessarily

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28 Aletta Norval presents this as a mistake that some theorists sympathetic to deliberative democracy make. They correct the Habermasian model by adding some aspects to it, like other forms of communication allowed for in deliberation. She argues, and I agree, that any such additions necessarily involve changes to the original model. To explain this she resorts to the Derridian term ‘supplementarity’. See Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, p.32.

29 Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, p.106. In this book Keenan forcefully argues that the specificity of radical democracy lies in the recognition and even enhancement of tensions between openness and closure.
be driven by strategies oriented at covering up or concealing this contingency. Democratic politics is conducted through decisions, that is, through hegemonic fixations, or closures. Michael Freeden underlines this dimension as “the inevitable tension between the desire for decontestation [or closure] and its impossibility.”30 Hegemony can be interpreted as just such an attempt or desire. As discussed in Chapter 5, full hegemony is impossible, it is always partial, it always includes some remainders, some traces of the negation that enabled its appearance. These form the ground for questioning the hegemonic position, that is, they institutionalize the contingent dimension. Hegemonies constitute provisional closures in the contingent surrounding. Glynos & Howarth argue that “practices are governed by a dialectic defined by incomplete structures on the one hand, and the collective acts of subjective identification that sustain or change those incomplete structures on the other”31. The radical democratic project I want to outline should be capable of accounting both for the contingent, unstable foundations and the stabilizing efforts.32

Taking seriously the role of contingency in democratic politics I think we need to state the direction Mouffe herself has hinted at more clearly and tone down the role of antagonism. It must be underlined that antagonism is merely a possibility. Violence needs to be accounted for in theories of politics, just as Mouffe writes, in order not to be conjured away. However, violence (or antagonism) cannot possibly be put forth as a normative direction for a democratic theory. It should rather be thought of as a threat that shapes the boundaries of democratic politics. I believe we can still keep the disruptive element, difference and conflictual aspects of democracy in sight, without ontologizing antagonism. Instead, it could be seen as one of the strategies to handle (or mask) undecidability,33 which “would require recasting antagonism as a precise type of ontical political logic.”34 Antagonism would occur sometimes, especially in the case of constructing

32 Here, William Connolly’s version of agonistic democracy can be instructive. He focuses on both aspects of democratic politics; sedimentation (that he calls ‘normalization’) and denaturalisation (or ‘politicalisation’). In effect, Connolly, to a much greater extent than Mouffe, is aware of the need of both contestation and consensus in politics. He proclaims that “It is possible to construct a democratic theory appropriate to late-modern states that combines a critique of consent and consensus when they are absent with critical engagement with them when they are present.” Connolly, The Ethos of Pluralization, p.102.
33 Thomassen, “In/exclusions”, p.108.
34 Norval, Aversive Democracy, p.162 (emphasis added).
political boundaries, but other political logics would not be precluded. The
ontological in this view would be the very questioning, disruptive attitude
(or ethos) without further specification of what form it would take.

I think that this ethos of questioning can be combined with a Habermas-
inspired focus on communication and argumentation as a central political
practice in democracy and a basic legitimating procedure. Here I think
with Habermas against Habermas, as there are major changes I want to
make with respect to Habermas’s conception of deliberation. Firstly, pas-
sions should not be seen as opposing reason but as its intrinsic element, as
Sharon Krause argues.35 The legitimating procedure Habermas proposes
loses its motivating force without reference to passions that account for the
attachments of the participants. Affective attitudes and desires must be
included in democratic theories as these drives animate (political) action.
Here, Mouffe’s comments are instructive as well. Secondly, along with
other critics I believe that deliberation should be reformulated to include a
variety of forms of communication such as storytelling, testimony etc.
Hence, the restrictions of universalization and rationality that Habermas
puts to deliberation would be relieved. Norval has investigated the role of
rhetoric in democratic argumentation and I think this is a good starting
point for discussing the centrality of communication in a different manner
than Habermas’s.36

Stated more positively, the radical democratic project I want to move
towards will start with communication, including its bodily, passionate
and other particularistic forms. A broad admission of utterances, including
those particularistic, springing from local, even individual experiences, and
those emotionally tainted can only contribute to fostering a democratic
ethos – a true commitment to democratic values, that is not exclusively
formed by rational discourse, but is rather an effect of emotional and ha-
bital bondage. Such a process of communication, fully acknowledging
difference and plurality must reject the telos of consensus in its strong
Habermasian formulation (the assent of all, for the same reasons). This is
the third point with which I depart from Habermas’s position. I believe
that we need to decapitate Habermas’s conception of deliberation, that is,
sever it from consensus.37 The question is what consequences such a de-

35 Krause, Civil Passions.
36 See Norval, Aversive Democracy, esp. Chap. 2.
37 James Bohman, driven by the will to improve deliberative democracy, claims that
“[o]nly if he revises his principle of democracy itself and removes its strong condi-
tion of unanimity can Habermas solve the problems of complexity he sets for him-
capitation will have for the concept of deliberation. In my view communication as a political tool should not be understood as enhancing consensus and agreement but rather as highlighting differences, bringing them to the fore. Here, we can once again recall Georgia Warnke’s parallel between the interpretive practice and the practice of communication. Following the way differences are valued and seen as resources in reading, we could view democratic communication as a source of knowledge and insight conditioned upon the multiplicity of perspectives involved in it.

This transgressing of the original Habemasian model cannot possibly be called deliberative, but it retains the commitment to communication. Communication (if we restrict the term ‘deliberation’ to Habermas’s understanding of it) would here become the ruling concept and consensus, as a mere possibility, would be undercast its rules. Obviously, such a shift would necessitate a reformulation of consensus in a much more porous direction than Habermas admits of. Although it is my contention that we cannot get rid of consensus altogether in discussing democratic politics, what I believe has to be left behind is its inscription as telos of communication. What would this reformulated concept of democratic communication entail? I think it still must be thought as the source of legitimization in democratic politics, as public will and opinion formation. In this context the basic principle of self-determination is crucial: Decisions are democratic (or valid) only insofar as those affected had a chance to make their voice heard in the process of constituting them. In contrast to Habermas’s principle of democracy I do not think that we need to add unanimity, or the consent of all affected as a requirement for legitimacy. Instead of orientation towards consensus, such communicative decision-making processes would be oriented towards forming a majority. In line with James Bohman, I welcome a combination of participation, i.e., the possibility to affect the outcome, with majority rule, even thought I would interpret it in more hegemonic terms than Bohman is inclined to.

Following William Connolly, I think we must make our conception of politics ready to accommodate both consensus and conflict and both should be seen as mere possibilities (not ontological conditions and/or te-

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38 Warnke, “Discourse Ethics”.
39 Compare Habermas’s democratic principle discussed in Chapter 4, which states that “only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.” Habermas, Between Facts and Norms, p.110.
40 Compare Bohman’s idea of ‘deliberative majority’ presented in Bohman, “Complexity, Pluralism”.
Democratic politics is always a matter of negotiating between these two poles. In short, I seek a version of democracy that allows for expressing differences without losing sight of what can possibly be common. That is, what is common is never given, and it is not even given that we will agree upon something that can count as common. Nevertheless, I understand democratic politics as the very combination of these two seemingly incompatible tasks. In Chapter 4 I argued that consensus and conflict in Habermas’s theory are two opposing logics, here I want to reframe this binarity. We cannot lose sight of either of them. Provided that we leave the strong Habermasian understanding of consensus behind, they are both necessary in a democratic politics. Paraphrasing Ernesto Laclau’s comment about the incompatibility of universalism and particularism – these imperatives “ultimately exclude each other, but as we are not living in an ultimate environment these can be played out in a variety of ways”41.

beyond deliberative and agonistic subjectivity

In this thesis I have combined discussions about democracy and subjectivity. It is my conviction that the relevance of theorizing about subjectivity and intersubjectivity in democratic theory cannot be overstated. Democratic politics, abstracting from more specific formulations still means a relation between subjects. This entails that the focus on intersubjectivity, and the conception of the subject that undermine it, are crucial.

The contours of radical democracy I sketched above necessitate a specific conception of the subject. First of all it needs to be theorized as a deeply rooted, thick self. The reformulated understanding of communication I put forth upgrades the role of particularistic anchorages which define the subject. It is only from this horizon of understanding that the subject can speak. The subject’s entwinement in complicated identity patterns leads to another constitutive aspect of my perspective on subjectivity – opacity. The subject cannot make all its components, motifs, desires and so on, visible to itself, and even less so, to others. Although engagement in self-criticism and self-scrutiny is the distinguishing feature of democratic subjectivity, it can never be fully realized. We need to undertake a task that we can never complete. As discussed above, transparency is not only empirically impossible, but also undesirable. Opacity can be the very source of the ethical relation to the Other, and should not only be reluctantly accepted as an ontic occurrence, but rather a deeper condition of possibility of a radically democratic ethics.

41 Zournazi, “Hope, passion, politics”, p.132.
Moreover, I incline towards Mouffe’s vision of the subject as split. Here, I endorse Žižek’s corrective to Mouffe (and Laclau) that full identity is prevented by the experience of Lack which is symbolically represented by an Other.\textsuperscript{42} I understand identity or selfhood as enabled by identifications that the subject engages in, temporarily covering the originary Lack, even though these attempts are always already failed. The irreducible Lack and otherness that constitute the subject result in a structure of subjectivity characterized by internal difference and negativity. This negativity, as the Musilian subject witnesses, opens up a palette of possibilities. According to Jonsson’s reinterpretation of the paradigmatic figure of Ulrich from Musil’s novel, the lack of qualities characterizing the protagonist does not equal ‘nothing’, but rather implies a multiplicity of subject positions that can be assumed.\textsuperscript{43}

My main amendment to the Mouffean model of subjectivity is probably the more explicit formulation of the question of unity of the subject. That is, in order to evade the accusations of voluntarism and atomism, the subject as Lack must be located within the net of social norms. One of these that I have discussed in the previous chapter is the norm of unity. As Goffman convincingly argues – no matter how scattered the subjects are, the intersubjective meeting forces a presentation of themselves as to some extent coherent. This enables recognition by the Other. Our present societies (perhaps only as an effect of still being under the influence of a vernacular interpretation of the Cartesian subject) demand that we are at least to some degree consistent. Otherwise we are doomed schizophrenic or deviant in some other way. As discussed in Chapter 6, it is Habermas who explicitly discusses unity of the self as fundamental (a prerequisite for accountability). In spite of my accent on unity here, the inspiration for theorizing it cannot be taken from his theory. The strong Habermasian formulation of a requirement of coherence is not tenable. Instead, some idea of non-contradiction in the performative moment of presenting the self is needed. Thus, the kind of unity I propose is limited to temporary representations of the whole. More precisely, one of the identifications exhibited by a particular subject position gains the dominating position in a particular context, but it is impossible (and undesirable) to organize all the subject positions a subject shares in harmony, at least not during any considerable period of time. Some consistency as a speaking ‘I’ is needed, but it is unfeasible and undesirable to adjust all the indentifications that compose a subject into a fully consistent one. In sum, I believe that we should both affirm unity (as

\textsuperscript{42} Žižek, “Beyond Discourse-Analysis”.

\textsuperscript{43} Jonsson, \textit{Subject without Nation}, p.172.
a necessary component of interaction) and call it into question. Put in other words, full incoherence would dissolve the subject while full coherence would deny the need of the Other, and thus make intersubjectivity redundant.

The discussion about democratic subjectivity or the subject in democratic theory must center around intersubjectivity and the relation to the Other. As we have seen, intersubjectivity is also focal for both my discussants in this thesis. Both Habermas and Mouffe explicitly describe their subjects as relationally formed. However, in my view, intersubjectivity should not only be pictured as auxiliary in the process of striving for consensus or coming to political decisions. I would even say that the intersubjective meeting is the litmus paper of democratic politics. Here too the ethos of problematization and questioning applies. Subjects need to take on a self-critical stance and the intersubjective relation is helpful in this regard. Exercising democratic subjectivity necessitates intersubjective meetings, in which we and the others become aware of who we/they are as well as that we/they undergo changes, or transformations. The questions ‘who am I?’ and ‘who are we?’ are answered in politics. However, this striving towards self-understanding (collective and individual) must be put in the context of the fundamental opacity. Partial obscurity results in the undecidable element of the meeting with the Other. Contingency should be the grounding imaginary for intersubjective relations and could even serve as the grounding idea for democracy, or ethical commitment to the Other.

In this context, Derrida’s basic insights about the relation to the Other are useful. He argues that any intersubjective meeting necessarily requires a host, someone who sets the stage, controls the conditions of hospitality, and hence gains a privileged position. In spite of this privilege, the host is nevertheless dependent upon the guest – here lies the conceptual necessity; there cannot be a concept and identity of a host (oneself) without a guest (an Other). Additionally, the relation to the Other is always marked with hostility, which, as Derrida teaches us, soaks into hospitality resulting in a strange mixture – hostipitality. This highlights the troubling “common origin between hostis as host and hostis as enemy, between hospitality and hostility”44. Thus, the intersubjective moment, or the relation to the Other, is never symmetrical. However, the asymmetry inscribed in the relation to the Other does not only burden one side. Since both the host and the guest

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are conditioned by it, it thus rearticulates their subjectivity.\textsuperscript{45} The host sets the terms of the relation/debate, but the guest accepts him/her as having the authority to do so, it requires recognition which can be withheld. The host does not have full control of the intersubjective meeting. The upholding power is in different ways in the hands of both.

Hence, the intersubjective meeting reveals mutual dependence between the subjects involved and shows the intricate working of power relations. It also forces them to renegotiate (transform) their identities. Obviously it is an understanding of intersubjectivity that is at odds with Habermas’s. Primarily because the subject and the Other are both seen as subjects/objects. The Derridian figure of hospitality also refutes Habermas’s ideal of including the Other in his/her otherness.\textsuperscript{46} It is my contention that the very consciousness of the element of violation of the otherness of the Other in intersubjective meetings is a better starting point for an ethical relation. We must simply admit that the access to the Other (or the inclusion of the Other in her otherness) is ultimately an impossible ideal.\textsuperscript{47} From this standpoint we should start organizing relations with others that are guided by the postulation that we can only recognize the Other as non-recognizable. Instead of striving to take the perspective of the Other, or to see with the eyes of the Other, we can and should only hope for the admission of the Other’s presence.

I think that we need to abandon the ideal of mutual perspective taking that leads to consensus portrayed for us by Habermas. The Other will and to some extent should always remain an enigma to us. Instead, a more modest aim should be posed for democratic intersubjectivity. Not consensus (or fully transparent mutual understanding), that permeates to the deepest motivational level of reasoning (accepting claims for the same reason), not even broadened understanding that also entails the possibility of access to the Other. What I think we should limit our ambitions to is the mere insight that there are different perspectives than ours and that our own subjectivity is partly marked by otherness. Political communication should lead to this relativization of one’s standpoints. Such a conception of

\textsuperscript{45} Compare Lasse Thomassen’s argument about the way tolerance works, which applies to the more general discussion of the relation to the Other as well: “Therefore, although tolerance (re)produces the sovereignty of the tolerating, it also produces the sovereignty of the tolerated. The sovereignty involved in the exercise of tolerance is not a one-way relation.” See Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?”, p.455.

\textsuperscript{46} Habermas, \textit{The Inclusion of the Other}, p.40.

\textsuperscript{47} Thomassen, “The Inclusion of the Other?”, p.454.
intersubjectivity contributes to the ethos of problematization and to the debunking of hegemonic positions as political. As discussed above, radical politics is about the questioning of the obvious. It applies equally to the matters of big-politics (shaking the naturalness and unquestioned status of certain directions of politics as well as its basic presuppositions) and to the matters of the small-politics of identity formation. Intersubjectivity is absolutely necessary in this respect. The meeting with the Other, the experience of different kinds of reasoning, arguing, and showing affection, disrupt our customary ways of being.\textsuperscript{48} This mutual dependence, the indispensability of the Other and its disrupting influence on my identity should be understood more broadly than Mouffe’s focus on negativity allows. The indeterminacy of the meeting with the Other, the multiplicity of shapes this relation can take, needs to be stressed even more.

Summing up, the direction I sketched out above mainly draws on Mouffe’s theory of subjectivity, or my reading of her theory presented in the previous chapters. However, I think that it should be supplemented with an explicit theorization of the role and forms of unity that the intersubjective meetings require. It is from Habermas I take the appreciation of intersubjectivity as constitutive of democratic politics, even though I push it in a direction very far from Habermas’s.

\textbf{(IN)CONCLUSION}

This thesis was an attempt at transgressing the dominant axis around which the deliberation-agonism debate has been set, that is, the binary opposition between consensus and conflict. I have argued that the theorists analyzed have chosen to focus on one of these, while leaving the other much under-theorized. The outlined third position proposes a productive tension between those two by removing both orientation towards consensus and antagonism from the ontological level. Instead contingency is advanced as the fundamental condition of (im)possibility of democratic politics and subjectivity. The contours of the third position I have sketched need to be developed further to provide a fully-fledged account of radical democracy. In this text I have only showed some directions on the way. One point which certainly needs elaboration is the institutional design for radical democracy. The first question that begs an answer is how to foster and institutionalize the ethos of questioning.

One of the aims of this thesis was to construct a debate between Habermas and Mouffe. As stated earlier, I do not believe that a merging

\textsuperscript{48} See Norval’s discussion of the risk of conformism in her \textit{Aversive Democracy}.  

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between their theories is possible or desirable. In the thesis I pointed to some similarities and differences as well as strengths and weaknesses of the Habermasian and Mouffean approaches to democracy and subjectivity. There is certainly more to be said on this topic. Any such endeavours need to take the form of a serious discussion between them, a communication without the aim of consensus. To be sure, this book does not provide any decisive conclusions to the debate; it should rather be seen as a possible direction this encounter can take. Using Derrida’s formulation “I hope in any case that this encounter will leave us with the memory of disparities and disputes at least as much as it leaves us with agreements, with coincidences or consensus.”

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