

# IS ANTAGONISM A GOOD NAME FOR RADICAL NEGATIVITY? REVIEW OF OLIVER MARCHART'S *THINKING ANTAGONISM*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Marchart's *Thinking Antagonism* is, systematically following one of the leads of Laclau's theory – the radical reading (or rather *thinking*) of antagonism and the Political – to their final conclusions: antagonism lies at the root of every social being – *qua being*. Despite Marchart's explicit renunciation I argue it seems more promising to follow the other. It involves accepting radical negativity defies any apprehension, that any action – including antagonizing – always already is a specific articulation. This is better grasped through the concept of dislocation and through Derridean hauntology. De-ontologizing antagonism also means de-ontologizing politics which re-introduces ethics as an 'ethics of politization'.

## **KEYWORDS**

Radical negativity; dislocation; hauntology; ethics of politization.

Oliver Marchart's (OM) book *Thinking Antagonism* is a great achievement. As always it is a pleasure to read him, the book is well argued, clearly written, displaying insights in left Hegelian and left Heideggerian intellectual history which is simply impressive. Engaging with the broader 'ontological turn', he manages to move from the deepest ontological (un-)ground of the political to micro politics as it is enacted in our everyday lives.

The book shows OM being more Laclauian than Laclau himself. To me this is a positive thing. Pushing the logics of a theory to its final conclusions is an exercise, which no matter how we judge the actual conclusions, sheds light on it, providing the ongoing debates and interrogations with the theory a stronger basis. There can be no doubt that OM's *Thinking Antagonism* does just that.

The book starts by observing the debate after Laclau has been split between two positions. One, OM's, in which antagonism equals (radical) negativity, and another, to which there is an even 'deeper ontological layer', i.e. dislocation, of which

antagonism is but one possible way of articulating. According to OM Laclau was mostly inclined to follow the dislocation path but should have followed the antagonism path. To my reading, Laclau never made up his mind. Even though OM quotes Laclau at passages where he seems to favour dislocation, it is quite easy to find several other passages in Laclau where the opposite appears to be the case.

This is the first sense in which OM is more Laclauian than Laclau himself: he actually chooses. Antagonism it is! To OM Laclau's question – the ontological question – is *What is antagonism?* Answering this question should be the leitmotif of 'Thinking after Laclau'. Following the path of dislocation leads to passivity and is ultimately a sign of "neglect, denial, disavowal" (213). Secondly, he wants to draw the full consequences of this choice. There is to be no restrictions to this ontological enterprise. The ontological status of antagonism should not be restricted to regional questions, an ontology for the political. Even if he never stated it himself, Laclau's theory entails a 'full ontology' – a universal theory of *being-qua-being*. I.e. "ontological in the sense of constituting a claim about the antagonistic nature of social being *as such*, not merely about the nature of political affairs in the narrow sense of politics as a particular sphere or form of action." (23) In this way *Thinking Antagonism* nicely follows the paths set out in OM's former *Postfoundational political thought* (2007) and can be seen as the conclusion of the issues raised there.

Apart from the obvious theoretical/ philosophical issues at stake – and OM displays an impressive overview over and insight into left Heideggerian thought – the stakes are also political. *Thinking Antagonism* is written with one clear message: our world is political, and so it can and should be changed. To OM ontology and ontological questions are not remote and ultimately futile (over)intellectual exercises but have profound and immediate effects on our thinking of and therefore also our actions in that world. Thinking – in the radical sense OM presents – is not distant contemplation, but (one dimension of) active engagement, acting in and changing our world:

"The ontology of the political to be proposed in this book places a bet on the political nature of social being-qua-being. This will be not only an intellectual bet, but, more than that, a political one in itself. Our interrogation, therefore, must be conducted in a political mode. Rather than constituting a quest for true knowledge, untainted by the political, ontological questioning becomes a way of implicating ourselves in the field of actuality. ... thinking, more than being an 'existential' act, is a political one." (10)

Of course, there are no blueprints of how the Left can change the world. But the urge to make us see (or rather think) that the 'shivering' of everything is due to its 'innermost' political being, its *political* ontology, has a clear activist mark: the world can be changed – let's go and do it! *Thinking* antagonism, i.e. situating one within a truly political ontology "will lead to a dramatic change in perspective. The social world starts to appear in a strongly political light." (23)

As will be clear I'm not persuaded by the book. I (still) don't think antagonism can occupy the place for radical negativity, and I therefore (still) think discourse theory after Laclau should follow the path of dislocation as the fundamental ontological category. But at the same time, I agree with OM's overall political message, and I share the concern about 'post-politics'. For a moment I was not completely certain whether my critical comments should be made openly. There is far too widespread sense that we can't change anything. But we can and we should act more politically. And can we maintain a hope for political activism without believing in antagonism? Probably OM will say no. Let us look into some of the reasons why.

## ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

To start his ontological interrogations OM situates himself in the Heideggerian shift "from questions regarding being-qua-*understanding* to questions regarding being-qua-*being*." According to OM this distinguishes ontology clearly from "the dominant paradigm of epistemology", based on a "disembodied position of an otherworldly calculating mind" seeking to establish "the conditions of true knowledge" (8-9)

However, neither discarding the question of understanding, nor linking epistemology to true knowledge are obvious. Self-reflecting on granting antagonism ontological status, OM observes:

"For someone working in an entirely different paradigm – say, a rational choice theorist – it does not make sense at all. But then again, 'rational choice' does not fare any better from the perspective of political ontology." (167)

This is no doubt true. Should a rational choice theorist come across *Thinking Antagonism* she would find it very difficult to accept the arguments and presumably even to see the relevance. Should she hold a concept of antagonism, its meaning would be entirely different. Different 'particular politico-theoretical contexts and traditions' construct their world differently: antagonism is something completely different for rational choice than it is for political ontology.

This observation is the starting point for Luhmann's systems theory (one of few regrettable omissions from OM's otherwise impressive tour through philosophical and theoretical strands of thought). Interestingly, regarding ontology, Luhmann draws the opposite conclusion (Luhmann 1990, 1994, Thyssen 2004). Ontology is an 'old European' way of thinking. Systems theory therefore is beyond ontology, and only holds an epistemology. But it does not define the conditions of truth, but rather general conditions for recognition – including science and philosophy. Luhmann's epistemology is radical constructivist, since any observation of 'the world' is made from a specific system, drawing on its own resources (its own distinctions). Whatever a system observes the environment to be, it is the system's own

construction. Making ontological claims is therefore ‘substance metaphysics’ apparently made from nowhere and denying the necessary ‘particular’ system-specific observation.

Whether we talk about systems or paradigms the conclusions are similar: it is impossible to imagine a final universal truth, concepts are always constructed within a certain horizon. I presume OM would agree. One might charge Luhmann for seeking a disembodied position – at least when it comes to moral and politics – but hardly “an outer-worldly calculating mind”. Can we really answer ‘Laclau’s question’, ‘what is antagonism?’ without situating ourselves within being-qua-*understanding*? Within a post-foundational position, answering the question “What *is* antagonism?” involves a specific positioning (‘systemic’, ‘paradigmatic’, ‘discursive’ or whatever we choose to call it).

## LACLAU’S QUESTION

As we have seen, according to OM the ontological interrogations are situated around *Laclau’s question*, which was posed in the following terms:

“I am not asking myself what are the actually existing antagonisms in society, but something more fundamental: What is an antagonism? What type of relations between social forces does it presuppose?” (Laclau 2014, 102)

However, OM wants to ask a more fundamental question than ‘what is *an* antagonism?’. He wants to ask, “what is *antagonism*?”, an inquiry “into the ontological nature of antagonism itself” (3) Presented in these terms, OM’s ontological inquiry runs some risk of being substance metaphysical. I don’t think they are – because they are related to constitutive negativity – but Laclau’s ontological questioning could be presented in another way, placing the weight on the *presuppositions* regarding the types of relations. In the preface to the 2. ed of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau (and Mouffe) (2001) explained:

“the strictly ontological question asks how entities have to be, so that the objectivity of a particular field is possible. ... how – to repeat our transcendental question – does a relation between entities have to be, for a hegemonic relation to become possible?” (X)

To me, this is a more precise way of posing the ontological question: not, what *is* (antagonism), but *how must the world* (the entities) *be*, in order for our theoretical category of a hegemonic relation to be possible. What characterizes the social world, if something like a hegemonic relation is possible? The answer to ontological question might of course be ‘antagonism’, even though Laclau and Mouffe pointed towards Derridean structural undecidability (XII). But even to pose the question in

transcendental terms ‘how must it be’, rather than ‘what *is*’ (antagonism) saves it from any charge of ‘substance metaphysics’.<sup>1</sup>

## ANTAGONISM OR DISLOCATION?

The answer to the transcendental/ ontological questioning regarding “the very condition for hegemony” was not antagonism but “structural undecidability” (as developed by Derrida) (xii). Elements which can be articulated in specific hegemonic formations cannot be predetermined to enter into any specific arrangement but must be marked by structural undecidability. (xii)

Regarding dislocation (or structural undecidability)<sup>2</sup> versus antagonism Laclau never really made up his mind but stated different things at different times. Even though the above quote points in the direction of dislocation as primary instance of negativity, it is immediately connected to the generality of politics: “to say *contingent articulation* is to enounce a central dimension of politics. This privileging of the political moment in the structuration of society is an essential aspect of our approach.” (Xii).

‘Privileging of the political moment’ implies some kind of priority of antagonism, and it is fair to say Laclau was undecided on the matter. OM’s point of departure is a critique of placing dislocation before, or at a deeper level than antagonism. OM quotes Laclau for taking that position:

“constructing a social dislocation – an antagonism – is already a discursive response. You construct the Other who dislocates you as an enemy, *but there are alternative forms...* there is already a discursive organization in constructing somebody as an enemy which involves a whole technology of power in the mobilization of the oppressed. That is why in *New Reflections* I have insisted on the primary character of dislocation rather than antagonism.” (Laclau 1999: 137 [my italics, adh])

According to this argument any discursive organization – even to construct somebody in a ‘negating way’ as an enemy – takes us away from the realm of radical negativity, into the positivity of social articulations. Should the dislocating element be constructed as an enemy, we are in the realm of politics, but there are other alternatives (Laclau mentions religion).

Since OM’s ambition is “a post-foundational *ontology of the political* ... the science, not simply of politics, but of the political nature of social being as such” (3) he disagrees, and presents his basic argument:

<sup>1</sup> This is also a strong objection to Luhmann. Systems theory, like any theory, can be asked what the world must be like for its basic propositions to be possible, and therefore has an ontology.

<sup>2</sup> Laclau posed the problem in terms of dislocation rather than structural undecidability, but we can treat them as equivalent.

“Dislocation, no matter where it issues from, always occurs within a prior horizon of being: the social. Examples given by Laclau for seemingly non-antagonistic social practices prove to be far from being not political. To construct, for instance, a volcanic eruption or an earthquake as an expression of our sins and the wrath of God may be different from attributing it to a political enemy, but it does involve a technology of power, the Catholic Church for instance, which is politically instituted. At no point one can experience a dislocation that is not immediately reframed via the instance of antagonism.” (25)

The argument is based on an equation: *‘technologies of power’ = politically instituted = ‘instances of antagonism’*, which leads to the conclusion: “Whatever occurs in our social world, it has to pass through the medium of antagonism.” (ibid).

This is the decisive question: is power – as such – a sign of antagonism? I feel quite certain OM answer’s is yes. Regarding exclusions OM quotes Laclau affirmatively:

“[A]ntagonism and exclusion are constitutive of all identity. ... The system is what is required for the differential identities to be constituted, but the only thing – exclusion – which can constitute the system and thus makes possible those identities, is also what subverts them.” (Laclau, 1996: 52-3)

Note how antagonism disappears in the quote, and only exclusions remain. Any system is based on exclusion, which at the same time constitutes and subverts it. In a post-foundational theory, exclusions are definitely ontological: if our social world is not the unfolding of a positive ground, of an absolute foundation, there will always be more than one possibility. Constructions (articulations) involves linking together moments in a contingent way, which at the same time is to exclude other possibilities that could have been but was not actualized. As Laclau has pointed out many times, this means all social relations are relations of power.

Commenting on the quote OM take one further step, simply leaves out exclusion and mentions only antagonism:

“The term ‘antagonism’ denotes this double-sided moment: the moment of original *institution* as well as the moment of original *destitution* of social order.” (23)

The question is, however, whether antagonism can be made equivalent to exclusion? Are all exclusions per definition also antagonistic? I find it hard to accept. Antagonism does seem to imply some form of active questioning of the exclusion. But that is exactly what cannot be taken for granted, and not be elevated to an ontological level. I believe we are inhabiting an undecidable world, the social has no absolute foundation, and so all social being are based on decisions, and therefore on exclusions (which definitely have destituting effects). But not all exclusions are antagonistic - far from it. It demands, as Laclau rightly points out, an articulation, a ‘further discursive organization’, of someone actively opposing the decision, the exclusion.

## ANTAGONISM AND HAUNTOLOGY

In a sense OM seems to agree. He situates antagonism on a ‘deeper’ ontological level than the construction of friend/enemy distinctions: “on the ontological level, antagonism has little to do with a dualistic friend/enemy distinction” (194). In other words, there are many exclusions, many technologies of power which do not give rise to actual antagonizations. Rather, ontological antagonism “refers to a fundamental blockade that issues from an incommensurably negative instance.” (194)

Ontological antagonism is explicitly not dependent on contingent struggles and conflicts (which are instances of ‘discursive organisations’) but is elevated to the level of the foundation itself. It is made equivalent to radical negativity. To mark this elevation, to note that we have left the traditional ‘positive’ field of (‘Old European’) ontology, OM occasionally changes the vocabular to Derridean ‘hauntology’ (Derrida 1994). Ontological antagonism is “a hauntological instance, a purely negative outside of the social ... located beyond the functioning of any determinable ‘logic’ ... antagonism ‘grounds as a-byss’.” (26) Very explicitly, antagonism is equated with “the labour of the negative”, as ‘pure’ negativity (23). Despite the denial of direct links between ontological antagonism and actual friend-enemy dichotomies, hauntology is linked to conflicts, to “the spectral presence of a ground that remains absent, but exerts an uncanny presence in moments of *conflict* and contingency ...” (171, my italics, adh)

‘Hauntology’ is definitely to be preferred over ‘ontology’. To my reading at least, hauntology captures the radicality of negativity, i.e. the insight that it is only the blockade, the impossibilities, the dislocations which follows from negativity. How this negativity, these impossibilities will be articulated, discursively organized, is an ‘ontic’ question, including whether conflicts and politics will arise. Discourse theory would gain a lot from a general change of vocabular from ‘ontology’ to hauntology.

But Laclau did not follow that track and kept arguing in terms of ontology. Yet in his explicit engagement with hauntology (in “The time is out of Joint” (Laclau 1995) he clearly stated the differences between hauntology and ontology:

“We find in Marx an argument about spectrality at the very heart of the constitution of the social link. Time being "out of joint," dislocation corrupting the identity with itself of any present, we have a constitutive anachronism that is at the root of any identity. .... Marx, however, attempted the critique of the hauntological from the perspective of an ontology ... [i.e.] the arrival at a time that is no longer "out of joint," the realization of a society fully reconciled with itself..., to a purely "ontological" society.” (1995: 88)

Post-foundationalism makes the idea of a fully reconciled society impossible; we will forever be ‘haunted’ by a radical negative ‘outside’. The question is whether this radical negativity is somehow linked to the political. Laclau seems to be implying it is, and I presume OM would follow him in that. Laclau states:

“... since hauntology is inherent to politics, the transcendence of the split between being and appearance will mean the end of politics. ... If, however, as the deconstructive reading shows, "ontology" - full reconciliation - is not achievable, time is constitutively "out of joint," and the ghost is the condition of possibility of any present, politics too becomes constitutive of the social link.” (ibid)

This is one step too far. That we cannot have politics without hauntology (which I accept), does not mean that wherever there is hauntology there is politics. But only in that case would politics (or ‘the political’ become constitutive). What we can conclude is, that there is always, ‘constitutively’ (in a hauntological way) a *potential* for politics. There are no social links that cannot be politicized – but this does not come about ‘by itself’. Politization needs to be enacted, articulated. Politization is, to use that vocabular, an instance of ‘discursive organization’; a potential, but only a potential.<sup>3</sup> To activate a potential is to take a decision in an undecidable structure – as we might equally as well not take it, and follow another path (acceptance, neglect, or whatever). Decisions taken in an undecidable structure bears the mark of ethics – cf. Derrida’s notion of an *ethico-theoretical* decision by Husserl (Derrida 1973). As such hauntology (radical negativity) can well be articulated with an *ethics of politization* – but that is something quite different from an ‘ontology of antagonism’.

## AN ETHICS OF POLITIZATION

We might ask the question: if negativity is radical, is simply a blockade, something which haunts rather than founds, why call it antagonism? Why not simply call it negativity? OM situates his thinking in a specific tradition:

“the name ‘antagonism’ is not just a simple ‘X’, an entirely emptied signifier... Selecting ‘antagonism’, rather than any other term, is therefore not an arbitrary choice, as it results from a naming operation rooted in a social and political context. ...the term ‘antagonism’ suggests itself for its historical dimension: it is within a particular tradition of left-Hegelianism and Marxism that our move assumes verisimilitude.” (167)

One can agree it is not an arbitrary choice, nor a pure act of decisionism. But to choose the notion of antagonism for denoting (naming) the negative, thereby placing himself in this particular tradition (rather than e.g. rational choice) is still a decision. Naming (and especially naming the negative) is an undecidable game (otherwise it would be conceptually grasping), and we know from Derrida decisions are ethico-theoretical. They are ‘ethical’ because they are ‘based on’ something which does not follow from the system itself. There is nothing in radical negativity that determines the use of the signifier antagonism, to call it that is an ethical decision. When

<sup>3</sup> Especially Mouffe has argued that the potential for antagonization/ politization of all social practices in itself grants the Political an ontological primacy. I have developed the critique of that argument elsewhere (Hansen 2014).

OM chooses the signifier antagonism, it is obviously to spark a politization, to make “the social world ... appear in a strongly political light.” (23)

As I started noticing, I very much identify with the ambition of politization of social relations. However, starting from radical negativity and hauntology we must come to terms with such an ambition being an *ethical* rather than itself a political choice. It does not come about by itself, it must be enacted, and there is always the possibility that our social practices are not articulated in a political way. It might (paradoxically) be the case that a belief in the ontological necessity of everything social’s antagonistic character makes it easier for people to act politically – sometimes it seems it is easier to mobilize for the inevitable. But theoretically we must come to terms with the radicality of negativity, it’s complete lack of *any* positive characteristics. Negativity *as such*, ‘is’ a ‘pure’ blockade, an ultimate impossibility. To link it with the signifier ‘antagonism’ is to try to give it a ‘positive’ direction, to maintain some sort of ‘ontological guarantee’ (for politization). But we don’t have any guarantees, not even for politization; it might however, be an even stronger (ethical) injunction for political action.

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