THINKING 'THINKING ANTAGONISM'. A RESPONSE

OLIVER MARCHART
Institut für Politikwissenschaft
University of Vienna
oliver.marchart@univie.ac.at

ABSTRACT
This contribution replies to a set of articles by Paula Biglieri, Allan Dreyer Hansen, Vassilios Paipais, David Payne, Gloria Perelló and Dimitris Vardoulakis about the book 'Thinking Antagonism. Political Ontology after Laclau' (Edinburgh University Press 2018) by Oliver Marchart. The author positions his own ontology of the political, i.e. of antagonism, in relation to the work of Ernesto Laclau and within the intellectual context of the Essex School. He thereby reflects on the role of the university, the transferential relationship between academic 'master' and 'disciple', the question of what is 'proper' to a given thought, agonistic democracy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and what 'thinking' could mean from a political perspective.

KEYWORDS
Political ontology/difference/post-foundationalism, ontological turn, antagonism, radical democracy, negativity, Laclau, Hegel, Heidegger.

I'm immensely grateful to Paula Biglieri, Allan Dreyer Hansen, Vassilios Paipais, David Payne, Gloria Perelló and Dimitris Vardoulakis for their insightful and sophisticated engagement with my book. If thinking is, as is proposed in the book, a political exercise, then it is also a collective one. And obviously, we are engaging in a collective enterprise that is not merely 'dialogical' in the liberal sense of a plurality of opinions, nor are we shouting at each other from the opposite sides of a ditch separating incompatible paradigms. Some of my interlocutors would, I suppose, clearly affiliate themselves with the Essex school, as I do, others perhaps less so, but they would still take a position sympathetic to its main tenets. So, in a sense we are all standing on the same side of the ditch; but, as it goes without saying, this does not mean that we agree on everything. Even as thinking, unconventionally understood as a mode of political acting, emerges only in and through antagonism – vis-à-vis the other side of the ditch, as it were – there would be no thinking on this side,

only sterile unanimity, without internal differences and contradictions. Our endeavor, therefore, exemplifies what *Thinking Antagonism* is all about.[1]

What I claim in the book, to recapitulate in a few lines, is that the recent 'ontological turn' in social theory is not fully accomplished as long as the intrinsically political nature of all social being is not accepted. What is needed is an ontology of the political (as differentiated from politics). By 'the political' I understand, from a post-foundational perspective, the grounding moment of the social, actualized by political practice. And I propose 'antagonism' as a name for the political. This name is taken from the work of Ernesto Laclau where, to make a long story short, antagonism constitutes the radically negative outside with respect to which the differential elements of any signifying system are brought into a 'chain of equivalence' and, thus, are given partial coherence. But while their unity is established with reference to a pure negativity, the latter, because of its threatening nature, also dislocates their unity.[2] Laclau himself remains highly ambivalent though and tends to shrink back from developing an ontology of antagonism, but for reasons developed in the book, I submit that antagonism lies at the ground of every social identity (not only of political identities or discourses). Antagonism, in Heideggerese, should be envisaged as 'the groundless ground' of the social. Such an ontology is not anymore located in the field of empirical science or even hegemony theory, nor does it fall into the realm of philosophy as an academic discipline. Rather, it is a matter of thinking, that is, of thinking antagonism. Therefore, antagonism in my approach does not have conceptual status: it is not a concept that could be distinguished from other concepts in a set of well-defined differences. It is a political presupposition that must be given a political name – a name that will direct our attention to the ineradicably conflictual and contingent nature of all social relations. This is the reason why, in order to approach antagonism, we will have to leave behind the field of conceptual differentiation and turn towards ontology, for ontology is the science of *all* being, not of a particular sector of beings. It is concerned with equivalence, rather than well-defined differences. Hence my claim that the ontological nature of antagonism must be *thought*, rather than conceptualized, provided thinking is envisaged as a collective, strategic, organized, conflictual, in short: political activity that brings together heterogeneous differences into a chain of equivalence. Given this thoroughly politicized idea of 'thinking', there can be no ontology of antagonism without thinking and vice versa. Hence, in the introduction to my book, I portray thinking and antagonism as the two foci of an ellipse; and the purpose of the book is to squeeze together the

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[1] Oliver Marchart: *Thinking Antagonism. Political Ontology after Laclau*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[2] Note that 'dislocation' is deliberately presented here as an *effect* of antagonism, rather than a deeper, non-political ontological source. As will become evident shortly, this is the main point of contention between my position and the position of some of my interlocutors with regard to Laclau's conception of antagonism.

two foci into a single centre, thus turning the ellipse into a circle in an effort of both 'thinking the political' and 'politicizing thought'.

No doubt, the act of squeezing requires a certain degree of force. One needs to be prepared to not only logically follow an argument which I tried to bring out in the book as clearly as possible, but also to accept the very name antagonism as a name for social being. Ultimately, the name will be granted verisimilitude only by someone within largely the same intellectual-political horizon. A rational choice theorist, for instance, will find the whole claim unacceptable – but so I find rational choice theory. One needs to position oneself in a tradition that leads from Hegel and the young Hegelians via Marx to contemporary theorizations of antagonism, particularly in Laclau and Mouffe's work, to grant verisimilitude to this choice of name. This also implies that one has to have a stake in (re-)politicizing rather than depoliticizing society. All of my interlocutors share a deeply political outlook on our social world, but not all of them would be prepared to accept my apparently boundless ontological approach to the political. And, of course, not all of them would position themselves in exactly the same line of affiliation. Here is where an initial source of irritation can be detected – a certain irritation regarding the degree to which I rely, or may not rely, on some of Ernesto Laclau's basic intuitions. It seems to be a potential matter of discomfort that the 'dogmatic status' of this book, subtitled 'Political Ontology after Laclau', remains partially undefinable. The purely temporal, and thus banal, resonance of the word 'after' does not provide the reader with any clues. Is political ontology in this book developed 'according to' or 'following' Laclau? Or is the author invested in pushing political ontology 'beyond' Laclau? Or both? Is the author perhaps deviating from Laclau's track precisely by following it?

So let me start my response by clarifying my relation to Laclau's theory, as the nature of this relation is subject to a variety of speculations. In the eyes of Hansen, I am 'more Laclauian than Laclau himself' (which Hansen takes to be a good thing, even as he disagrees) in pushing his theory to its final conclusions – onto the terrain of ontology, where Laclau himself could never make up his mind. So even while deviating from the Laclauian course (in granting ontological primacy to antagonism, which Laclau didn't), my position is even more Laclauian than Laclau's own position. It is what one is tempted to call hyper-Laclauian. Of course, this – supposed – hyper-Laclauianism not only gives reason to praise, it is as well subject to criticism. In the eyes of Paipais, I seem to be 'overly invested' in 'Laclau's legacy in ways that threaten to compromise the radical potential' of my own argument. So, while Hansen thinks that my 'over-investment' will productively radicalize the argument, Paipais thinks it would de-radicalize it. Given this choice, I obviously side with Hansen. I do think over-investment, if this should be the case, can be a much more productive intellectual strategy than pointless self-distanciation. So while I'm grateful for Paipais' many inspiring comments on my book, I do not think it would be a sign of

'ostinato rigore' to simply abandon and abdicate my theoretical position and convert, as Paipais seems to recommend, to some kind of Agambenianism, because the idea of 'radical passivity', defended by Paipais, is largely incompatible with a realistic take on politics as I see it.[3] A Gramscian stand, it is true, does associate political action 'with success, effectivity and mastery', but only to the degree to which all this flows into a concerted effort at constructing a (counter-)hegemonic formation. Therefore I cannot manage to see the danger of Laclau's Gramscian inheritance functioning 'as a straight-jacket' that would keep my book from 'taking the final step', which is supposed to be a step from Gramscianism to, say, a certain 'weak messianism' and 'radical passivism'. For theoretical as well as political reasons that I have developed elsewhere, this step would be inadvisable.[4] Let's not forget that Bartleby, the hero of 'radical passivity', starved himself to death – hardly a recommendable political strategy.[5]

Thus, I cannot agree with Paipais' claim that '(i)nheritance is indeed a heavy burden', because I am convinced that inheritance is precisely what allows us to move on. Nor do I agree with his claim that moving on should be premised on 'the symbolic act of "killing the father"'. I appreciate the provocative note on which Paipais' intervention ends, but would like to retort that I'm not too much invested in the oedipal business of 'killing the father', because it strikes me as a rather adolescent attempt at tackling the burden of inheritance. A more productive way of coping with intellectual inheritance would be to stretch it to its utmost limit, its breaking point, from where it can change its form and open new roads of inquiry. Hansen has it right that therein consists, by and large, the programmatic goal of *Thinking Antagonism.* Actually, there are three goals: (a) to push Laclau's hegemony theory to a point where an ontology of the political emerges through the re-articulation of the Hegelian tradition of radical negativity with the Heideggerian tradition of difference; (b) to develop a theory of thinking (as opposed to science and philosophy) that is reminiscent of Heidegger's notion of thinking, but would thoroughly politicize the latter; and (c) to make a claim – on the basis of the reversible relation between ontic

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[3] I have presented my critique of Agamben in a chapter added to my *Die politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp.221-243, the significantly extended German version of Oliver Marchart: *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[4] Marchart: *Die politische Differenz,* pp. 317-18.

[5] Paipais thus defends a logic that he thinks could be better guaranteed by the Lacanian formula of sexuation, because 'it authorizes forms of politics, namely incarnations of a 'non-All' universal, that operate as embodiments of failure, incompleteness, messianic weakness, brokenness; not only as the failure to fill the absent fullness of society'. Given Paipais' implicit defence of a Benjaminian 'weak messianism', I should specify that I don't have any problem with political weakness, I just happen to think that it is not a virtue in itself. From a realistic perspective, to remain weak – what I describe in Chapter 6 of *Thinking Antagonism* as a deficient strategy of 'becoming minor' as opposed to a hegemonic strategy of 'becoming major' – is simply a recipe for disaster or irrelevance.

politics and the politico-ontological – for the primordiality of mundane politics as a protest practice of negating the given, a practice necessary for bringing to live antagonism.[6] It is hard, if not impossible to tell if or to what degree Laclau would have subscribed to any of these claims (for instance, he was hesitant to move onto the terrain of a generalized ontology, and with regard to Hegel, whom he had studied intensively, he once wrote: 'Forget Hegel!'). But the question is largely irrelevant. Neither was the purpose of the book to 'kill the father' nor was it to vindicate his theory. To be honest, and to disclose the genealogy of the book, its initial aim was 'to bury the father'. While the key ontological argument had been presented to different audiences over a period of at least two decades, the germ of the book traces back to a memorial section devoted to Laclau in a 2016 issue of *Contemporary Political Theory*. My contribution to this issue was based on memorial lectures at the KU Leuven and a memorial conference at Birkbeck College, organized by my friend Mark Devenney. The book, then, was conceived as a philosophical *tombeau*. In the history of literature, the *tombeau* is a Renaissance literary genre, a collection of poems or epitaphs honoring a deceived king. In a sense, the memorial section in *Contemporary Political Theory* could be seen as a modern academic variant of such a *tombeau*. But a *tombeau* can also consist of a more extensive work by a single author. In French Baroque music, a *tombeau* is a composition devoted to the memory of a colleague or teacher, whose name would be included in the title of the piece.[7] So, whatever else *Thinking Antagonism* is in relation to Laclau, it also is a philosophical *tombeau* devoted to a teacher.

An outmoded genre? Well, let us praise, for a moment, the unfashionable. Paula Biglieri and Gloria Perelló are not entirely wrong when describing my relation to Laclau as one between *maestro* and *discípulo*. I happen to appreciate the old-fashioned, if not medieval semantic – not least because, as pointed out in the Conclusion to the book, Laclau, apart from being a political militant, was a scholar of quasi-medieval stature whose style of reasoning reminded of medieval scholasticism in the good sense of the term.[8] Most of his Essex PhD students had travelled from all over the globe to study with him, reminiscent of the age-old practice of medieval students travelling across Europe to study, say, in Paris with Thomas Aquinas. This traditional idea of a cosmopolitan University (which is in actual fact the second oldest still existing occidental institution – after the Catholic Church) is incongruent to today's neo-liberalized companies that call themselves universities.[9] It is

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[6] This argument is directed against the common, I think unfounded charge that political ontologists ignore ordinary politics.

[7] The famous Baroque composer Marin Marais, to give an example, wrote many *tombeaus* for viola da gamba, one 'pour Monsieur de Lully', and another one for his own teacher Sainte Colombe.

[8] see pp. 215-6 of *Thinking Antagonism.*

[9] Biglieri and Perelló point out that Laclau's style of combining political militancy with rigorous academic learning might be a peculiar feature of the Latin American variant of the university as a

incongruent, even as they pride themselves on their 'international students', because real academic learning is not about paying fees and getting in return prestige, symbolic capital and a pole position on the job market. In the traditional idea, which deserves to be defended against all odds, academic learning is based on a transferential relationship between 'disciple' and 'master', only that the master – who is not reducible to a 'supervisor' – is not someone you are accidentally bumping into at the place of higher learning closest to your parents' home, nor is she the most prestigious person in the mainstream of your discipline who can guarantee you a job. And without doubt, an academic master is the opposite of a teacher imposed on you by a disciplinary institution. An academic master is someone you were looking for (even if you encountered her through serendipity), someone you took an effort to find (even if she found you), in line with your reasons, interests and convictions (even if they were yet undeveloped). Therefore, it is your deliberate choice, and your own responsibility to study with *someone* rather than anyone.[10] From the Platonic academy onwards this has always been the idea of an academic 'school' which, in its initial stage, can only be established around the core of a personal relation of transference vis-à-vis a subject supposed to know; and it is the only form, I would assume, in which collective academic work can really thrive.[11]

From this perspective, the *subject* of academic work is not the individual scientist, theorist or philosopher; a 'thinking subject' is a collective of teachers, students, researchers, interlocutors, and so on. If the collective nature of intellectual work is taken seriously, and is given a political inflection, extreme skepticism is indicated with regard to the narcissistic academic culture of intellectual copyright claims. In the realm of thinking, understood as a common adventure, property claims are entirely misplaced. Otherwise, the realm of thought will be confused with a competitive racecourse of possessive individuals circling around university rankings, publication scores and third-party funding. This also implies that in the realm of thinking individual assertions of originality are inappropriate. Not only because the culture of possessive individualism needs to be combatted, but also because these claims are directly contradicted by the collective nature of thinking. This is the reason why

public institution: 'Quien haya transitado las aulas de las universidades públicas latinoamericanas sabe de su tradición crítica, que se enraíza en una concepción singular respecto de la academia y su imbricación en el campo de lo social. Para muchos académicos formados en Latinoamérica la universidad pública es el espacio para asumir el compromiso de la ética militante ya que alberga en sí el legado democrático popular aunado a la rigurosidad academicista'.

[10] And even if this deliberate choice issues, as Derrida would have said, from 'the other's decision in me'.

[11] As in the analogous relation between analyst and analysand there are obvious dangers involved in the transferential process of higher learning. It was for good reasons that Laclau, as a supervisor, regularly tried to frustrate transferential desire. The standard line he had for PhD students asking him 'what to do now' was: 'I'm not the subject supposed to know'. This is the other task of being a teacher: forcing students out into the cold and frightening world of autonomy.

I take questions as to the dogmatic status of my theoretical proposal to be largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, these questions can instigate some more general reflections on what is 'proper' to one's thought or what it means to 'own' a particular idea or theoretical outlook without taking possession of it. And indeed, upon further reflection, the picture may get more complicated, as it may turn out that thinking, on the other hand, is impossible without *some* kind of appropriation – an appropriation without usurpation, to be sure. David Payne, in his beautifully written and mindful text on what is 'proper' to my theoretical contribution, sets out to develop the implications of what he describes as '"generalized appropriation" on the basis of de-propriation'.[12] As they serve as Payne's jumping board, I will be allowed to quote the very first lines of *Thinking Antagonism*: 'Every thinker, as Heidegger used to say, follows the line of a single thought. What he forgot to mention was that no thought belongs to a single thinker. (...) If there is originality in intellectual work, it is originality without determinable origin. For this reason, ideas are never the property of an individual. It is impossible to "own" an idea – which is but an ideological fantasy rooted in the capitalist system of property ownership. Ideas can only be *disowned* (...) as they emerge from, and return to, an a-subjective, collective effort that cuts across temporal and geographical barriers. One of these ideas bears the name "antagonism"'.[13]

It is this idea of 'disowning' an idea that Payne, in turn, seeks to 'disown' with his reflections. As he warns us, thinking, while indeed based on a process of disowning or de-propriation, does not deprive us of what is 'proper' to our thought. He thus raises the question: 'might (the) *Thinking* (of) *Antagonism* force us back onto (the) thinking (of) appropriation?' I agree with Payne that through an intellectual process of disowning we come to develop a position of our own rather than merely repeating what has been said before or, at the other end of the scale, cutting all ties with our legacy. It would be futile to deny that thinking results in something 'proper' to a given thought; and while setting out to discuss what is 'proper' to my thought, Payne develops something 'proper' to his thought: a theory of appropriation. I thus take his reflections to imply that academic authorship, as that which is proper to the thoughts of a given author, does not simply disappear without a trace in a process of disowning. Were it otherwise, it would be impossible for me to speak about 'my

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[12] Payne's thoughts on 'the proper' and on 'de-propriation' resonate in interesting ways with Mark Devenney's project of theorizing the 'improper', see Mark Devenney: *Towards an Improper Politics*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Payne's concerns take a different turn, though, as they do 'not directly touch on the question of the "proper" with respect to the "clean" or the "pure" (for which ideas of the "improper" or "impropriety" would constitute counterpoints)'. I am thrilled that *Thinking Antagonism* appears to invite reflections on what is 'proper', as Mark Devenney also contributed a lucid reading of *Thinking Antagonism* along these lines for a workshop on the book organized by Guido Barbi and Matthias Lievens at KU Leuven in February 2020.

[13] Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p.1.

book' or use the first-person pronoun in the singular.[14] Payne is right in stressing this point. While the first lines of my book appear to give priority to *dis*-owning, Payne correctly insists that 'de-propriation or dis-owning is not the negation or annulment of appropriation as the making proper; it is instead the *ab-grund* on which appropriation as a generalizing condition plays itself out as an interminable condition of "being-in-the-political" and as an imminent effect of antagonism'. It should be noted that, at this point, Payne seeks to out-Heideggerianize me, by moving antagonism into the register of the Heideggerian *Er-eignis* of 'en-owning', thus insisting on the 'appropriative' side of antagonism. While agreeing on the importance of stressing this appropriative side,[15] I am wondering, though, whether in Payne's more deconstructive account this move does not come at the expense of radical negativity and, thus, of the political. By restricting our view to the differential play between appropriation and de-propriation we are running the danger of de-antagonizing antagonism, of placating the scandal of radical negativity. The move towards 'en-owning' may turn into a defense reaction against the scandalous nature of antagonism.

Does this explain the curious absence from Payne's text of *the* obvious reference regarding disappropriation – the Marxian call to expropriate the expropriators?[16] This call does define a 'constitutive outside': an antagonist. What the famous formula presents us with, when given a political reading, is a process of antagonization, of 'en-owning' based on 'dis-owning' the 'dis-owners'. The formula should be read as a call for political practice, understood as the negation of the given. In short, it initiates a passage through negativity. And yet, it is not a call to abolish property altogether, only *private* property as it is legally instituted in bourgeois society and results from the prior expropriation of the expropriated. It is this kind of expropriated property which, by way of a passage through negativity – through the expropriation of the expropriators –, needs to be re-appropriated *collectively*. Hence, antagonization will lead society to another form of property (I'm not Hegelian enough to say a 'higher' form) that hopefully will be appropriative without being exploitative.[17] What Payne and I are looking for in our discussion is that which is 'proper' to

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[14] The well-known stylistic habit of avoiding the first-person singular in academic writing is not much more than a rhetorical cover-up for academic, if not legal insistence on one's own originality and property rights. One could suspect, in applying Payne's intuition to the case, that academic possessive individualism seems to be premised on the denial not only of any process of intellectual 'de-propriation' (hence the neurotic obsession with plagiarism) but also on the denial of anything 'proper' beyond the legal realm of property claims.

[15] In a trivial sense, to start with, the construction of a chain of equivalence is indeed premised upon the appropriation of differences which at the same time are de-propriated of their original particularity.

[16] The Marxian idea of ex-propriation is mentioned in passing and relegated to a footnote where it is merely stated that it will *not be topical* for Payne's text. My guess is that it should be.

[17] Unlike Marx, I doubt, however, that in a post-exploitative society antagonism, as an ontological condition of all society, would simply disappear.

thought, while being beyond the reach of private property. Only thinking, I submit, can give us a glimpse of a post-exploitative idea of intellectual labour. It is post-exploitative because it is collectively shared. Therefore, to come back to the book, the thinking of antagonism whose intellectual history I try to unravel in its historical chapter, is not Laclau's private property nor is it mine, but is shared, sometimes under different names, among the German idealists, the early Romantics, the young Hegelians, the Marxists and post-Marxists, and *us* as we continue this trajectory of thought. And still, to jointly move onto the field of what is 'proper' to thought is also to antagonize the political, legal and economic regime of private property.

Now, I am well aware that my stubborn insistence on antagonism can itself be antagonizing. It can bring to light internal differences and contradictions on this side of the ditch. Someone who gives prevalence to the Heideggerian or Derridean play of difference will be less inclined to cherish the productive threat of negativity; while, on the other hand, for Paipais or Vardoulakis, who approach the issue from a, say, 'stasiological' perspective, the idea of radical negativity does not seem to constitute much of a problem. Yet, there is another line of internal contention that can be discerned in some of the contributions. It concerns what in the eyes of its critics appear as the imperialist pretensions of the political vis-à-vis other aspects of life. Hence Payne's warning that 'the risk with equating the abyssal ground, negativity, or the difference between being and beings qua difference with antagonism (or, and this boils down to the same issue, with equating the ontological difference between being and beings with the politological difference between the political and politics) is the *unilateralisation* of the political, which ends up running the risk of obscuring the specificity of other modes of being, forms of practice and thinking' – such as, for instance, the 'specificity of art, poetry and literature (...) that should not be re-duced to the political, and whose relative autonomy as modes of thought and prac-tice should be thought on their own immanent terms'. On this account, Payne sub-scribes to Hansen's line of criticism, established first in an article for the journal *Distinktion* in 2014. In his contribution to our present exchange, Hansen remains unconvinced. While acknowledging the 'clear activist mark' of my proposal, he still believes that no ontological priority should be granted to antagonism. He thus sides with the Laclau of *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, who intro-duced, along the lines of the Lacanian Real, the apparently more primordial con-cept of dislocation (in a search not, as Heidegger would have warned against, for a 'ground of the ground', but, apparently, in search for an 'abyss of the abyss' – which I take to be equally metaphysical).[18] In my book I contest this assumption because every dislocation of apparently non-political nature – say, a pandemic – must pass, as soon as we make sense of it (and otherwise it only amounts to white noise),

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[18] Ernesto Laclau: *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time,* (London and New York: Verso, 1990).

through discourses or institutions that *are* of political nature. 'Pure' dislocation is not available to us – and could only be subject to mystical speculation, but that would again be a form of social sense-making. Dislocation, if there is something like non-antagonistic dislocation, will always only be available in either a social (institutionalized) or political (actualized) mode of antagonism.

Except for some moments of hesitation, Laclau did not want to grant such ontological primacy to antagonism. However, in Laclau, there are other concepts that seem to be predestined for a comparable ontological role, for instance when it is held in *New Reflections* that *all* social relations are relations of 'power' or that *all* social systems are constituted by way of 'exclusion'. Hansen's point is that power and exclusion are not reducible to antagonism, hence no need to grant primacy to antagonism. But this would mean to treat power or exclusion as concepts, while I would respond that they are just alternative *names* for antagonism. My reasoning is the following: if, and therein consists Laclau's main theoretical intervention, every signifying system must constitute itself vis-à-vis a purely negative outside (i.e. antagonism), then it follows, I would assume, that any kind of exclusion achieving this very effect will be exactly equivalent to the working of antagonism. In this sense, exclusion *will be antagonism.* Of course, what is indeed imaginable is an antagonistically constructed system that happens to produce exclusions which, however, are *not* constitutive to the system. In this case, Hansen would be correct in assuming that these exclusions are not reducible to antagonism, but they are not constitutive either and therefore ontological primacy still lies with antagonism. So my main argument remains intact. The same could be said about power relations. If power is defined, pace Laclau, as that which allows repressing alternative paths available at the moment of the institution of the social, then it is antagonistic by nature: it gives coherence to a social system by repressing alternatives, and to achieve this it relegates the latter to the outside of the system. In other words, power (in Laclau's definition of the term) needs to draw an antagonistic line of demarcation. Again, hypothetically, there could be other forms of power, but they would not be constitutive in the sense defined above and, thus, do not contradict our claim as to the ontological priority of antagonism. It is unclear to me why Laclau was not prepared to draw these consequences. But given his general theory of signification, a form of exclusion or power that appertains to *all* social being (and therefore assumes ontological status) is synonymic with antagonism.

This answer does not address Payne's concern as to the 'specificity of art, poetry and literature (...) that should not be reduced to the political, and whose relative autonomy as modes of thought and practice should be thought on their own immanent terms'. Indeed, but let's be clear about what is at issue here: the question, as phrased by Payne, is one of specificity and relative autonomy. I would never deny this. To claim that, ultimately, every social identity or practice is grounded upon the political (and at the same time un-grounded by the political) is not to deny the

former specificity or 'relative autonomy'. Art, poetry and literature can indeed be thought on their immanent terms, provided we keep in mind that their immanence, i.e. their specificity and autonomy, is granted by a prior moment of the political: art and literature are social practices that are not trans-historically given, but only acquire their specific and quasi-autonomous role within a particular social formation which, ultimately, is constituted politically – in the sense of *the political*, of course, not in the sense of politics as another particular field with its own specificity and relative autonomy.[19] So the charge of ontological imperialism would only be justified if I had claimed that everything should be reducible to *politics* in the narrow sense.

Let us now turn to the contributions by Vardoulakis and Biglieri and Perelló. Vardoulakis, who has contributed an extensive and lucid reading of my book, is concerned with two aspects: with its positioning within the field of democratic theory, particularly with regard to so-called agonistic theories of democracy, and with the role of political judgement. I am grateful for him pointing out that my post-foundational conception of democracy is indeed 'antagonistic' rather than agonistic because I do retain a skeptical distance vis-à-vis the term 'agonistic democracy'. This has to do, for reasons explained more extensively elsewhere,[20] with the nature of the ideal-typical Greek *agon* as a rule-based competition among, for instance, sportsmen, whereas I do think that radical democracy, at least partially, needs to break rules rather than simply following those imposed by liberal-democratic regimes. Nor do I think the idea of 'competition', as implied by the term *agon*, really captures what is going on in politics – the fantasy of fair-play political competition remains much too close to liberal ideology to count as a realistic portrayal of actual politics in so-called liberal democracies; and Vardoulakis's previous engagement with *stasis* (as opposed to *agon*) might have been motivated by a similar intuition. In this sense,

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[19] Concerning the general question of immanence (alluded to by Payne with regard to 'immanent terms' of other practices), I would like to add that the political, while being the ultimately grounding moment of all social practice (including art and literature), should not be confused with a transcendent ground; it is, to borrow Nancy's term, 'transimmanent' to all social practices. I regret, however, not having included in *Thinking Antagonism* a discussion of Roberto Esposito's important concept of 'the impolitical', which I had discussed in *Die politische Differenz*. pp. 279-82. It allows countering what could be the obvious next step of criticism: Isn't a notion of the political that appertains to *all* social relations, even when not confounded with politics, equally imperialist? If the political is immanent to the social in a 'sleeping mode', as claimed in *Thinking Antagonism*, is there then something which is not *the political*? Given the ontological nature of my argument, which makes a claim as to the being of *all* social being, it is clear that no particular social area or practice can be 'un-political'

or 'outside' the political as an immanent ground/abyss. But I would not deny that the political may have an obverse side, a side that is neither *anti*-political nor simply 'un-political' (which is but a soft version of being anti-political), and which is called by Esposito the 'impolitical'. See Roberto Esposito: *Categorie dell'impolitico* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1988). I would add that my project in *Thinking Antagonism* is also close to what Esposito presents in his recent *Politics and Negation. For an Affirmative Philosophy*, tr. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity 2019).

[20] See Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics. Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019), pp. 26-29.

my own variant of radical democracy can indeed be called antagonistic. Interestingly, democratic theory does not play any major role in *Thinking Antagonism*, where questions of ontology take center stage, which is why Vardoulakis occasionally refers to my previous book on *Post-foundational Political Thought*. However, apart from some articles, it is only in the German version of the book, published under the title *Die politische Differenz* in 2010, that I engage more elaborately with radical democratic thought.[21] Given this peculiar absence, or only fragmentary presence, I am all the more grateful for his re-, or rather, pre-construction of a democratic theory that is yet to be published in two forthcoming books: *Post-foundational Theories of Democracy* (EUP) and *Der demokratische Horizont* (Suhrkamp).

There is a systematic reason for this preliminary absence, though. The aim of *Thinking Antagonism*, from the perspective of democratic thought, is to provide the ontological groundwork for an 'antagonistic' theory of democracy. It is not by accident that, by way of ending the book (but before constructing a *tombeau* for Laclau in the Conclusion), an outlook on such democratic theory is given in the very last sub-chapter, entitled 'Thinking Democracy'. It is claimed in this sub-chapter that the task of deepening the democratic revolution 'involves the construction of a democratic will-to-democracy which, in turn, can only be founded on democratic action', while at the same time, though, one must accept that democracy, by virtue of being an 'ontic' regime, does not follow with necessity from an ontology of the political. And precisely because *no particular* politics can be pre-determined by a general ontology, a radical democratic politics needs to be 'affirmed, created, and recreated' and the 'democratic horizon has to be expanded and democratic principles rejuvenated' – as there is no prior ontological guarantee for radical democracy. The chapter ends with a plea to 'engage liberal democracy by way of *affirmative refusal*' (p. 205), i.e. by way of a radical-democratic will to 'negate the given' and democratize democracy. As Vardoulakis correctly registers, this project remains uninvested in the critique of liberal philosophy – a critique that was topical for agonistic or radical democratic theory of the 1990ies – and may thus mark 'a shift in the conception of who the philosophical "enemy" is'. Without wanting to offend any Rawlsians, for some of my second-best friends are Rawlsians, I agree with Vardoulakis that attacking Rawls today would be like flogging a dead horse. There are more urgent tasks ahead.[22] But I do think that liberalism, as a *political ideology* rather than a rationalist philosophy, needs to be politically questioned from a radical democratic perspective, because it is the liberal ideologues – often posturing against so-called 'populists' whose rise they themselves have caused with their TINA-policies

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[21] See Marchart, *Post-foundational Political Thought*; Marchart: *Die politische Differenz.* pp.329-64.

[22] There is another pragmatic reason for leaving these discussions behind. The Rawlsians, as a rule, will ignore radical democratic positions anyway, so why shouldn't we ignore theirs.

– who have taken an increasingly authoritarian turn and now constitute a greater danger to democracy than many 'populists' do.

Secondly, Vardoulakis is worried about the status of instrumentality – the strategic, for that matter – in my framing of the political difference, criticizing that it is restricted to the ontic side of politics. Instrumentality must, in his view, also be located on the ontological side of the political. Such a move would obviously contradict a definition of antagonism as radical and a-subjective negativity, but the compromise solution, proposed by Vardoulakis, may point a way out (if one agreed that the model of the political difference remains ignorant as to the ontological dignity of instrumentality). It is by practical judgement, or *phronesis*, that an overlap can be effectuated between the ontic and the ontological, between politics and the political. Without having the space to engage with the intricate structure of his argument, I would concede that this is certainly one way of modelling the relation between politics and the political. And I fully subscribe to the aim of integrating a notion of practical judgement into our idea of politics as a strategic activity (as a way of politically coping with the *kairotic* event of antagonization). However, given the circular or reversible structure of the political difference, I'm not yet fully convinced that we really need *phronesis* as a mediating term effectuating an overlap between politics and the political. If the political only exists in politics, without having any independent or transcendent existence of its own, and if antagonism only comes to life through an antagonistic practice of 'negating the given', then, I would suppose, instrumentality/strategy/*phronesis* is *already* implicated in the political or antagonism *by way of politics and antagonization*, and Vardoulakis would have nothing to worry about. Only if it was possible to look at the ontological side of the political 'on its own', i.e. disconnected from politics, we would be able to detect a disconcerting absence of instrumentality. But we can only look at the political through the eyes of politics (and, vice versa, at politics under the aspect of the political), which is why the instrumental – in terms of strategic calculation or practical judgement – in actual fact *is* implicated in our notion of the political. But maybe Vardoulakis and I not that far apart here.

The position closest to my own – supposedly hyper-Laclauian – position is arguably the one formulated by Biglieri and Perelló, who, at the end of their contribution, stress their agreement with many of the points defended in *Thinking Antagonism*.[23] Rather than criticizing the book, they seek to complement or expand on the political 'affectology' whose contours, admittedly, I discuss in only a highly fragmentary fashion. This point is all the more important as such an affectology may provide answers to some of the most puzzling questions of a post-foundational theory of

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[23] Such as my reading of Peronism and Laclau's theory of populism, my theory of minimal politics and the idea of an ethics of intellectual engagement, and, most importantly, my insistence on the difference between ontological antagonism and antagonisms in the plural.

politics: '¿por qué se impone un cierto fundamento (parcial) y no otro? ¿Qué es lo que hace que entre diversos proyectos fundacionales en pugna prevalezca uno y no otro?' Their answer to these questions relies on a Lacanian re-reading of Laclau, which leads them to a theory of affective investment and a re-framing of the play between grounding and un-grounding as the contingent encounter between chance and the intentionality of the subject in a moment of decision. I have no objections to their proposal on a theoretical level, but would simply like to add that Laclau himself regularly responded to questions of the above kind by pointing to what he called the 'uneveness of the social'. In a less formulaic way, I take this to mean that questions regarding the reasons why a particular hegemonic project was successful can only be answered with reference to a given historical conjuncture and the unevenness of power relations within that conjuncture. Put differently: a general affectology will only explain the general logics of affective investment, but not a particular investment in a particular collective will – which is why, and I assume Biglieri and Perelló would agree, an 'ontological' theory of affect, in order to develop its explanatory potential with regard to the above questions, needs to be combined with an 'ontic' political analysis.

I would like to end by commenting on a further Lacano-Laclauian amendment to the ontology of antagonism. As Biglieri and Perelló sustain, the Lacanian Real does not only reappear in Laclau's work in the form of antagonism, but also in the versions of dislocation and social heterogeneity. In their reading of Laclau, Antagonism (with a capital A) consists in knotting together antagonisms (in the plural), dislocation and social heterogeneity. Their reading is based on Lacan's Borromean knot between the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary, without being a 1:1 mapping of these registers onto the Laclauian categories. I agree that *Thinking Antagonism* does not discuss Laclau's highly interesting concept of heterogeneity, as the book remains focussed on antagonism. It is, no doubt, feasible to develop a more integral picture of Laclau's theory that would integrate these categories. Again, there is certainly no space here to enter this terrain, so I want to rather concentrate on what, according to Biglieri and Perelló, binds these categories together: the knot. Lacan, from the early 1970ies on, starts playing around, first with mathematical nodology, then with actual threads or whatever came into his hands to produce knots. In the very final phase of his teaching, the silent practice of knotting in front of his audience took over from verbal teaching in what Lacan called 'monstration'. His aim, apparently, was 'to induce every member of the audience – as well as himself – to carry out operations relating no longer to discourse but to "monstration"'.[24] Attending these seminars must have been a rather peculiar experience: 'As "monstration" took over from discourse, Lacan came to use proportionally fewer and

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[24] Elisabeth Roudinesco: *Jacques Lacan*, tr. Barbara Bray, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 363.

fewer words: he would draw rather than write, and then, when he could no longer either draw or speak, he played with rings like a child'.[25] The weirdness of some of the scenes has been attributed to cardio-vascular problems and signs of senility, yet, apart from physiological circumstances, this practice of course resulted from an intra-theoretical development: Lacan's continuous thrift toward the Real. The Real, as everyone knows, escapes symbolic representation – the realm of meaning –, but can be given the quasi-mathematical form of the matheme or of the knot. But the latter, contrary to mathemes (such as the Lacanian formulae of sexuation, proposed by Paipais as a possible option of formalizing antagonism), eventually implies a move toward physical *practice*. Lacan engages in a quasi-Wittgensteinian move of practically showing what cannot be said.

This digression into the role of Lacanian nodology is not of psychoanalytic relevance only. We are touching here, once more, at *praxis* as the silent core of postfoundational thought. Jean-Claude Milner, in his excellent book on Lacan, *L'Œvre claire*, seems to suggest that Lacan's 'monstration silencieuse des nœuds'[26] reveals precisely the abysmal nature of any Ground: 'il n'y avait pas d'Autre de l'Autre, ni de métalangage ; il n'y a pas de mathème du mathème, ni de lettre de la lettre ; il n'y a que le nœud'.[27] As is immediately evident from a left-Heideggerian perspective, the Lacanian declarations according to the scheme 'there is no X of the X' (there is no Other of the Other, etc.) are modelled upon the most important Heideggerian 'an-archic principle': 'Es gibt keinen Grund des Grundes'. And exactly because there is no ultimate foundation, the process of grounding is grounded upon nothing other than an abyss – which is Heidegger's second principle, implied by the first one: ‚Der Grund gründet als Ab-grund‘. And because no foundation will be allowed to rest on a prior or ultimate foundation, the process of grounding can never stop. Yet it must not be ignored that 'grounding' is a verb and refers to a *practice*. 'There is nothing but the knot', as Milner puts it in Lacanian parlance, should thus be read as follows: if 'there is no X of the X', then there is nothing but a practice of knotting. Which reads, translated into political post-foundationalism: if there is no ground of the ground, then there is nothing but the practice of politics in a never-ending play with the political. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues for having invested their care, their intelligence and their passion in what I would like to see as a collective theoretico-political practice of knotting our thoughts together.

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[25] Ibid., p. 366.
[26] Jean-Claude Milner: *L'Œvre claire. Lacan, la science, la philosophie,* (Paris: Seuil 1995), p. 165.
[27] Ibid., p. 163.