

THINKING ANTAGONISM (BY WAY OF APPROPRIATION)

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ABSTRACT

This article critically explores Oliver Marchart's recent and notable book, *Thinking Antagonism* by way of the ideas of 'the proper' and appropriation. After presenting a broad overview of the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe, and the specific ways Marchart further develops their arguments, the paper goes on to explore in what ways the thinking of antagonism, as Marchart discusses it, implies a rethinking of the political significance of appropriation and 'the proper', two terms that are not without ontological implications for post-Marxist and post-foundational political thought. In order to demonstrate this, the article seeks to show three things: (i) that the novelty of Marchart's thinking, as set out in *Thinking Antagonism*, is already engaged in a series of interpretive-appropriative acts, and it is as the outcome of these appropriations that Marchart's thinking on antagonism, alongside the traditions within which his thinking operates, and the idea of antagonism itself, show themselves in their proper light; (ii) that, while remaining unthematized, 'appropriation' nonetheless operates in significant ways in the process of Marchart elucidating central features of 'being-in-the-political' (the politics of naming serves as a test-case for this) and (iii) ontologically, Marchart opens up the possibility for thinking 'generalised appropriation' on the basis of de-appropriation (or, as Marchart himself puts it, 'disowning'), though this is never explicated by Marchart. The article presented here thus invites a discussion surrounding the ontological synergy between antagonism and appropriation.

KEYWORDS

Marchart, Antagonism, Appropriation-Deappropriation, the Political, ontology, post-Marxism.

'We dwell in appropriation inasmuch as our active nature
is given over to language.'
(M. Heidegger)

Oliver Marchart has established himself as one of the foremost thinkers to emerge out of the intellectual tradition coalescing around the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their original purpose, presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985),¹ was to offer a deconstructive reading of Marxism that would be in the service of two principal and overarching aims: (i) to recast the

¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (London: Verso, 2001).

emancipatory project for the Left, as well as to elaborate on the strategic means by which this *political* project was to be effected, and (ii) to articulate a theoretical discourse that could provide an understanding of the complexity of social and political phenomena that relinquished neither explanatory nor analytical force. While for more than three decades the so-called ‘Essex School’ became the institutional setting for a wider collaborative elaboration and application of Laclau and Mouffe’s central ideas – generating a profusion of empirical analyses and studies on social and political phenomena as well as giving rise to innumerable texts proposing minor conceptual refinements and exegetical clarifications – Marchart’s thought stands somewhat apart. Apart, though all the while remaining every bit a part of this living tradition. If permitted to begin with a statement that may confound, we can say that the precise distinctiveness of Marchart’s thinking shows itself against a background with which his thought remains utterly consequent and consistent. Indeed, we can go so far as to venture that what is most distinctive about Marchart’s *Thinking Antagonism* is what binds itself all the more rigorously to a common core of presuppositions and ideas surrounding the specificity, primacy, and conflictuality of political practice. This, I will contend is what defines – in texture, in style, in purpose – the ‘proper’ of Marchart’s thinking; admittedly a ‘vexing’ or ‘troublesome’ term that I will develop later,² but for the time being is to be glanced from two principal aspects, namely in the two senses of (i) the proper as what makes something belong to something else (i.e. what is *proper for* Marchart’s thinking to be immediately recognisable as belonging to the post-Marxist tradition) and (ii) the proper as that which ‘stands out’ in its singularity (i.e. what is *proper to* Marchart’s line of thinking).

1. AFTER-THOUGHTS

Admittedly these are some odd remarks with which to begin, not only because (as will be discussed later), the notion of the ‘proper’ (and its rich stream of cognates) would appear to be at the far edges of Marchart’s thinking, and for this reason would seem to function above else as a ‘provocation’, but owing to the fact that by

² Before going any further, a conceptual clarification is required. What is stake in the following set of reflections concerning Marchart’s recent book, *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology after Laclau*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), is an understanding of the ‘proper’ with respect to a particular relation of ‘belonging’. It does 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). Not, then, an issue of ‘propriety’, ‘decorum’, ‘integrity’, or other such terms that are related to ‘social mores’. The discussion developed here will rather play on the following filiation of terms: ‘ap-proprietion’, ‘ex-proprietion’, and ‘de-proprietion’, which lend themselves to thinking the ‘proper’ ontologically (and which therefore has the merit of thinking with Marchart on the same ‘terrain’. In order to make the question of belonging at issue here, the German language better points out, what at root, is at stake: *eigen*, *Eigenschaft*, *Eigentum*, *An-eignung*, *Ent-eignung*, *geeignet*, *eigentlich*, *Ereignis*.

beginning in this manner we are left with a certain paradox: how can the distinctiveness of a certain thinking be indexable on the basis of what it is entirely congruent with? To set things in their correct light, let us first recall how Laclau and Mouffe themselves begin *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* with a direct reference to Descartes' *Discourse on Method*:

Travellers who, finding themselves lost in the forest know that they ought not to wander first to one side and then to the other, nor still less, to stop in one place, but understand that they should walk as straight as they can in one direction, not diverging for any slight reason, even though it was possibly chance alone that first determined them in their choice. By this means if they do not go exactly where they wish, they will at least arrive somewhere at the end, where probably they will be better off than in the middle of a forest.³

This would, phrased in other terms, be the ethical injunction of *ostinato rigore* to which Marchart will draw out at the very end of his book, *Thinking Antagonism*, as standing as the intellectual insignia (first pronounced by Leonardo, and also underlined by Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe) under which any act of thinking equal to its own possibility must submit:⁴ a thinking that does not 'waver' or 'deviate' from its course 'no matter how furiously the wheel of fortune is turning', of 'not abandoning [at the first sign of the turning of the bell-weather] the very *cause* of one's actions'.⁵ (The cause of thought and action will, undoubtedly, be key here, though its naming will be held in abeyance for a few moments longer.) What, at this point, needs underlining is how *ostinato rigore*, along with the Cartesian figure of the stranded and lost travellers finding their way out of obscurity, are no avatars of dogmatism. What they both point towards is the topological structure through which thinking operates: namely, that the condition for thought (the facticity of contingency) and the conditioning of thinking (in the necessity that arises therefrom) constitute a Möbius band, making the two moments ultimately indistinguishable from one another. Which is to say: as something contingent, the precipitate for thinking is not thought itself, but what comes from 'elsewhere', irrupting from outside of the cogito, triggered as a disturbance that 'touches' from without. But the contingency of this incipience (of whatever calls us *into* thinking) nonetheless issues us with a sense of necessity, the meaning of which only becomes clear once thinking is already underway; that is, once thinking, conditioned by what is outside of itself, becomes (reversibly) its own condition, and proceeding along its *hodos* unfolds its own internal logic (obstinately and rigorously) to the utmost degree, transmutating this thought back onto the real that initiated it. All this bears on what Marchart, in his *Thinking Antagonism*, identifies as thinking's implicative structure: 'of folding

³ Descartes, cited in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp xxii-xxiii.

⁴ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p211-212.

⁵ *Ibid*, p213.

ourselves back into the matter of our thought and of unfolding thought into an ontology of ourselves'.⁶ The significance of this helps us in a provisional manner to locate the distinctive quality of Marchart's thinking, and how all the while this appears on the basis of following the common line that defines the post-Marxism of Laclau and Mouffe.

Returning to the Cartesian example, though, we may well ask the following: how far should the stranded travellers proceed without either deviation or termination? Does a thinking ever reach a moment of repose? Does it ever find itself in a situation where it declares 'enough!?' Not necessarily because that line of thought has reached a point of self-sufficiency where, self-satisfied, it understands itself as fulfilled, as having reached its culmination, or telos, but because it has, for one reason or another, exhausted itself; reaching a plateau or brushing against its own limit, stumbling against its blind spots, it retreats into itself, and says, exasperatedly, 'no more!'; 'no more can the saying of a particular line of thinking be expressed in a way other than as it has already been said'. Here, however, we locate Marchart's ingenuity. His wager? That those travellers (Laclau and Mouffe) and fellow travellers, who have proceeded along the sign of 'post-Marxism', have not drawn out the implications of this mode of thought to the fullest and utmost degree; they have flinched, equivocated, recoiled, or stepped back from their vertiginous insight, which first gave direction and impetus to their central political intuition. From what, then, have they turned away? From drawing out the full and far-reaching consequences of the idea of 'antagonism', the *conditio sine qua non* of social being, the *name* for the groundless ground of being, and the 'cause' of thinking. In some cases (as in Laclau himself) this stepping back is conceptually subtle, though all the more far-reaching because of it (i.e. in his essential essay, 'New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time' (1990), Laclau would end up subordinating 'antagonism' to the notion of 'dislocation' as a more basic and metaphysically neutral category in capturing the constitutive lack of both the structure and the subject, one that would not presuppose 'antagonism' or 'politics' as a necessary result of the disclosure of the lack in the structure);⁷ in other cases (as in Mouffe) this stepping back is more of a

⁶ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p159.

⁷ Cf. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (London: Verso, 1990). The basic question is how are we to understand the following statement from Laclau: 'To understand social reality, then, is not to understand what society is, but what *prevents it from being*.' p44. Is it to be accounted for structural dislocation or antagonism? Everything will hang on this question for Marchart. As a counterpoint, this is a discussion that has been taken up by Allan Dreyer Hansen, in his 'Laclau and Mouffe and the ontology of radical negativity', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 2014, 15:3, who while affirming the ontological principle of negativity will not make antagonism co-original with it. For what it is worth - though this will not be the opportunity to discuss this particular matter - I have certain sympathies with the adjusted position of Laclau's from 'New Reflections', and thus, by extension, with Hansen Dryberg's arguments, as set out in his article. Essentially, 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

stepping sideways (i.e. in that while recognising the ontological primacy of antagonism she ends up (i) limiting her understanding of antagonism to a notion of conflictuality modelled on the friend-enemy distinction of Schmittian provenance, and because of this (ii) seeks to limit antagonism through sublimation by means of agonism); in other cases still, this stepping back amounts to conceptual domestication and political sanitisation (insofar that ‘antagonism’ is bleached of its political and ontological tonalities, becoming but an empty husk, part of a language-game that researchers like to play in offering up analysis of their chosen empirical datum in exchange for funding grants). We could go on...

And yet, we should (as Marchart does) recall the merit of a line of thinking, traceable back to the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that reframed the discussion surrounding the nature of social and political struggle, bringing into the open the idea of antagonism, which, as a non-relational relation, could place in starker relief the genetic conditions from which all hitherto struggles come to play themselves out on the terrain of the social. By now, we all know where this route would lead and how it proceeds. The break with Marxism, and the concomitant constitution of *Post-Marxism*, would consist in:

(i) Exposing the subreptic fallacy of Marxism – namely its confusion of class struggle, itself but a historically conditioned appearance of political struggle, to be the a priori form through which all political conflict expresses itself; an amphibologous form of reasoning that ended up placing fundamental limits on Marxism’s own visibility vis-à-vis the vicissitudes and polymorphous character of social struggle.

(ii) While exposing Marxism’s limits, this meant at the same time not unmooring oneself from all transcendental riggings, simply to dive into a sea of appearances and a dispersal of heterogeneous cases – an act of thought’s self-abdication that would desist any possible inquiry into general conditions for struggle as such. Instead what was required was a different way of re-posing the question surrounding those transcendental conditions making intelligible the historical appearances of struggle (of which class struggle would doubtless be one of, but not its privileged forms). This would need to be achieved not by simple decree, in elevating a historical appearance to the status of an indubitable ground and unsurpassable horizon, but by accounting for the conditions under which the objective field of the social is constituted as such, and how the subversion of that field is itself possible; genetically this would involve the very inquiry into the forming of form, into the appearing of political appearances, and into the structuration of the structure. It would refer back, to (quasi-)transcendental conditions of possibility. These operations would be articulated in terms of discursive conditions, for which an entire set of articulated

between being and beings with the political difference between the political and politics) is the *unilateralisation* of the political, which, ends up runs the risk of obscuring the specificity of other modes of being, forms of practice and thinking. The specificity of art, poetry and literature would be three examples, that should not be reduced to political, and whose relative autonomy as modes of thought and practice should be thought on their own immanent terms.

categories were required (e.g. the field of discursivity, the relation between ‘elements’ and ‘moments’ within a discursive totality, ‘nodal points’, ‘empty’ and ‘floating signifiers’, the logics of ‘equivalence’ and ‘difference’, ‘constitutive outside’, ‘antagonism’, etc.). This inquiry amounted to providing an understanding of social and political life and political with, in Kantian terms (albeit radically modified), a transcendental logic, that is, a politico-logic of the social as such.

(iii) In politico-*logical* terms, this entailed a radical questioning of the basic categories that had set the basic grammar for thinking the very nature of struggle,⁸ and that had historically taken one of three forms: (i) notions of logical contradiction, specifically the law of the broken middle (of Aristotelian provenance) – taking the form of either ‘A’ or ‘non-A’ – for which the fusion of opposites remained but an instance of inexplicable unreason, and must be proscribed as an illicit instance of discursive thought; (ii) the Kantian understanding of real opposition (*Realrepugnanz*), according to which oppositional forces take the form of really existing objects, as is the case with the collision of two carriages, and (iii) the Hegelian idea of dialectical contradiction that on account of positing the unity of logic and the real, took the logical category of contradiction to be in fact constitutive of reality, the merit of which was to retain both an idea of negativity (lost in Kant’s idea of real opposition), and a sense of real movement inherent in contradiction (absent in the classical Aristotelian idea of logical contradiction) while nonetheless having the significant drawback of positing the dialectical unity of opposites (the identity of identity and non-identity). Breaking simultaneously from all three of these models, Laclau and Mouffe inquired into how political struggle must be re-thought in order for it to be understood as an antagonistic relation, *stricto sensu*, namely a relation of non-relation fundamentally exposed to a radical negativity, preventing each part of the antagonistic relation from constituting itself qua identity. Antagonism, while an idea that Marx himself and the Marxist tradition had nominally affirmed, they did so without having the categorial means of thinking it through adequately, resulting in a vacillation between the ‘idealism’ of Hegel’s dialectical contradiction (e.g. Lukacs, Karl Korsch) and the naturalism of the Kantian notion of real opposition (principally in the notable work carried out by Della Volpe and Lucio Colletti).

⁸ Laclau and Mouffe dedicate some notable space to discussing this in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, see: pp . . . However, it is Ernesto Laclau’s essay ‘Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics’, in *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, (London: Verso, 2014), pp121-125 that provides the fullest and most elaborated exposition of the issues at stake. Parenthetically, it is interesting to note the significance of this particular text of Laclau’s for the architecture of Marchart’s own thinking, as presented in *Thinking Antagonism*. While, arguably, Laclau’s essay ‘The Impossibility of Society’, reprinted in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, pp89-93, served as the key text in Marchart’s previous and significant book *Post-Foundational Thought* (at least with respect to the final chapters that focus on Laclau and Mouffe), then in his new book it is Laclau’s ‘Antagonism, Subjectivity and Politics’ that provides the central stimulus for the novelty and development of Marchart’s arguments.

Above, we have the three principal merits of the position that Laclau and Mouffe first staked out, prising open a new terrain for thinking political antagonism, riveting antagonism to an understanding of political life. To a *certain* degree, an insight is reached in Laclau and Mouffe's thinking that, while always-already at work in the history of western thought and practice, is finally sketched out beyond any abstract and simple cosmological postulate that would simply declare that 'all is struggle'. This was achieved by setting the matter within a more analytically rigorous field of concepts and transcendental categories, which, as part of this procedure meant dislodging the outmoded categorial baggage by which an understanding of struggle had been couched.

While rigorous and in of itself exhaustive, for all that their undertaken has, according to Marchart, only unfolded the centrality of antagonism to a certain degree, and not to the fullest (which is to say, its *utmost*) degree. Here, then, we return to Marchart's wager: to think antagonism not *only* means tracing antagonism as a phenomenon, a mode of relation, or, even, as part of a transcendental argument that accounts for the appearance of antagonism as the very possibility of and for politics (i.e. what must be presupposed about the nature of political being in order to think the appearing of antagonism etc.), but to have antagonism orbit around the issue of a general and fundamental ontology, inquiring into being *qua* being. This means for Marchart re-routing the discussion of antagonism from 'political theory-building' into a strictly philosophical line of question surrounding the political nature of the being of social entities *in toto*, (that is, insofar as the interrogation into being remains distinctly and uniquely philosophy's concern).

2. WHAT COMES AFTER? PHILOSOPHY, MINOR AND MAJOR

This would thus constitute Marchart's 'move beyond', a one step further to be taken: a 'Laclau beyond Laclau' (or an 'after' Laclau), as Marchart himself pronounces.⁹ This gesturing towards a 'Laclau beyond Laclau' is in no way an act of iconoclasm. It remains the most fitting way to honour his thought.¹⁰ Here we only need to recall the way that Laclau will draw to a close the introductory remarks to his 1990 essay 'New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time', with reference to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*: 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as non-

⁹ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, e.g. pp24-36, pp43-44, pp56-58, pp206-07

¹⁰ As Heidegger reminds us, what call us into thinking (i.e. what provokes thought and gives cause for thought) is what is most problematic, what is deserving of the most severe form of questioning. And this way into thinking is what gives thanks. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, tr. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

sensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb *beyond* them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it).¹¹

As already noted, this step ‘beyond’ is the path into philosophy, and the affordance into fundamental ontology, with which antagonism is identified as the ungroundable ground of being. Although, we see within the pages of Marchart’s inquiry that the tenor and texture of this philosophical inquiry rightly modulates. Which is to say, his appeal to philosophy is expressed both emphatically and meiotically, remaining, respectively, ‘less’ and ‘more’ than what can be presented ‘non-philosophically’ (e.g. ‘theoretically’ or ‘politically’).¹² Philosophy is, to put it in the medieval formula that Marchart opts for, *major et minor se ipso*.¹³ This modulation of the philosophical gesture can be traced in several ways. For example, when framed in terms of a mode of questioning, the step ‘beyond’ appears very slight. Here, Marchart recalls that while the question Laclau posed was ‘what is *an* antagonism?’, the philosophical inflection placed on the same question takes the following form: ‘what is antagonism?’.¹⁴ The presence and absence of the otherwise unsuspecting indefinite article would thus appear to mark the space beyond. In shifting register from ‘an antagonism’ to ‘antagonism’ per se, one marks out a space ‘beyond Laclau’s’ questioning that takes as its starting point not *any* actual (or possible) form of antagonism as an irruption of conflict *within* the social, but as the social’s spectral (groundless) ground, pervading all relations, regions and modes of being: antagonism continues in silence, the background hum, the tremorous ground, the tremulous quality by which beings are imbibed.¹⁵ Certainly, the nature of this beyond can be amplified, but in a way that rephrases Marchart’s philosophical question into – what is equally part of philosophy’s armoury – the apophantic statement, which can be expressed as *what is: antagonism*. The colon, operating as a copula, makes an identity between ‘being’ and ‘antagonism’ (they are the same). This, then, the more emphatic form of expressing ‘the beyond’, is consistent with a set of claims Marchart makes, occasionally veering into the language of ultimates (even if antagonism is the ultimate that vanquishes the need for all ultimates): ‘the *final* law of being’¹⁶ (the Law to end all laws), ‘the *final* name of being’¹⁷ that assumes the cover of *all*

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, cited in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*, p5.

¹² Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p180.

¹³ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p5.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p61. Marchart never flinches from the metaphysical implications of his (or ‘our’) position. ‘Our’: not simply as so to say sympathetic readers of his text, who are committed to proceeding with him in taking ‘the further step’. But, and this is a key question that would involve much discussion – ‘our’ in the sense that ‘antagonism’ is the historical name for being, in our post-metaphysical age. To what extent does history ‘send’ this name to ‘us’?

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp100-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp37-40.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Ch.7.

social being¹⁸ and for which no thing evades its capture. Between the short shuffle and the long stride, Marchart indexes this *step beyond* in a further way, drawing the line that needs to be traversed between two different ways in which the ‘being-question’ is approached. Marchart will thus instructively propose a distinction between, on the one hand, ‘a political ontology’ (which is essentially what Laclau committed himself to developing, and that many of those who have followed him (and Mouffe) have remained faithful to), and, on the other, ‘an ontology of the political’ (which Marchart seeks to stake out).¹⁹ This is, then, where the step beyond finds its stride. On the hither side, ‘a political ontology’, which focuses on the internal constitution of the political as it is set against and over sedimented social practices, but (as the adjectival marker indicates) constricts its purview towards being to what strictly refers to entities that have political provenance. On the other side, an ‘ontology of the political’, which, as the use of the double genitive indicates, is not just an ontology that pertains to a region or field we call the political (however broad and general this field is, as is certainly the case in Laclau’s (and Mouffe’s) work). But traverses and intersects all spheres, to the point that political ontology becomes pleonastic: ‘the political’ (antagonism) and ‘being’ (antagonism) are one and the same.

If there is an ontology that *belongs* to politics *qua* political, then the political belongs to ontology; the political act is inscribed already in the interrogation of being.²⁰ Being and thinking are hinged by way of the political. It is through this originary binding, that Marchart can crown politics as ‘first philosophy’ (the most recent coronation, after ‘metaphysics’, ‘theology’, ‘ontology’, ‘ethics’, and ‘literature’).²¹ This way into the philosophical is precisely the route that ‘post-Marxism’ in its Laclauian and Mouffian iterations have not been consequent in pursuing, along with pushing

¹⁸ Ibid, p157.

¹⁹ Ibid, This distinction is clearly explicated by Marchart on pp24-26. There are, however, textually some instances where the distinction at stake becomes less clear cut, and blurred. The sliding between a ‘political ontology’ and an ‘ontology of the political’, which occurs from time to time, might be owing to the fact that we are not dealing with differences of kind or even differences of degree, but two constitutive parts that a post-Marxist philosophy of antagonism requires. Thus, a relation of complementarity. For this reason, at one and the same time, Marchart could reasonably shift (as he does) between these two registers. The question, though, is whether what Marchart presents as part of a philosophical discourse on being (under the locution, ‘an ontology of the political’) does not unsettle some of the conceptual furnishings and question some of the modes of reasoning on which the ‘political ontology’ a la Laclau is based?

²⁰ Ibid, see in particular: pp170-80.

²¹ Ibid, p171. Marchart writes: ‘a post-foundational ontology will thus retain the traditional status of a *metaphysica generalis* or *first philosophy*, except that its metaphysical claims with regard to an ultimate foundation are seriously weakened.’ Interestingly, Marchart is a little more strident in his previous book, where he writes: ‘ontology must aspire to be an ontology of all being and yet, in doing so, it can only proceed from a particular, ‘ontic’ region. Every *prima philosophia* is always and can only be a *philosophia secunda*, and nevertheless will have to claim the impossible status of a first philosophy. This impossible, and yet necessary, role of a post-foundational *prima philosophia* can today, as will be elaborated upon in the concluding chapter, only be claimed by the hitherto marginalized sub-discipline of *philosophia politica*.’ *Post-Foundationalist Political Thought*, p83.

antagonism towards the further limits: Laclau, in subordinating ‘antagonism’ to the (onto)logically prior notion of ‘dislocation’, which, in a metaphysically more neutral way, understands ‘antagonism’ (and thus politics) as one possible outcome of presumably a wider set of non-antagonistic (and thereby non-political) possibilities, ends up sequestering the scope of his own theory and introducing equivocity into some of the fundamental claims he otherwise makes about the primacy of politics; and Mouffe, in understanding agonism as the ethical conduit through which antagonism is politically to be managed, turns away from examining the political and ethical injunctions issuing from antagonism itself.

3. IN ITS PROPER LIGHT: APPROPRIATION-INTERPRETATION-PROJECTION

The above has served as the backdrop against which the *distinctive* ‘hallmarks’ of Marchart’s thinking show themselves, while remaining consistent and consequent in pushing the *common* line that has come to define the post-Marxism of Laclau (and Mouffe). It is, to use the terms I used at the beginning, what is proper to Marchart’s thinking, alongside what is proper to the tradition, in whose name he takes up the task of thinking by means of his further interpretive and constructive work. What is the nature of this interpretive work, which is doubtlessly integral to (the) thinking (of) antagonism, that Marchart himself performs, and that we are enjoined to follow? It is an act of ap-proprietation. Here, we are first to encounter appropriation as an interpretive-appropriative act. I will suggest here that the interpretive-appropriative act involves a *making* ‘proper’ in the absence of the ‘Proper’ (i.e. something that out of a common or shared background, reveals itself in its distinctive and peculiar light through a process of appropriation (as gathering and projection)).²² Marchart takes up the tradition of post-Marxism, and the wider filiation of thinkers from out of which a thorough inquiry into antagonism is born (beginning with the Kantian antinomies in the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ from the first *Critique*, passing through German Idealism and Hegel’s idea of ‘the labour of the negative’, and Marx’s primacy of class struggle and the antagonistic relation between the forces of production and the social relations of production).²³ In taking up both the post-Marxism of Laclau (and Mouffe) and its antecedents, Marchart does not simply reproduce an intellectual line that, as an objective datum, can simply be read off the legible face of the history of philosophy. Nor is it the case that the interpretation he offers amounts to an articulation of thoughts and ideas cobbled together, based on his own subjective whims. Neither a taking possession or making something ‘one’s own’ – in the sense of ‘a taking ownership’ by a subject entirely in possession of itself – nor an idea of a tradition in possession of itself. The interpretive-

²² Sections 6, 7, and 8 of this text will develop the point in greater detail.

²³ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, pp47-54.

appropriative act, which sets Marchart's thought and the tradition it is tasked with thinking in its proper *qua* distinctive form, is a projection (not an intro-jection); a projecting outwards. As projection, it projects a 'world' (as the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition would have it),²⁴ allowing the 'proper' to come into itself by moving beyond itself as a result of the new discursive space into which it is brought.

Here, the 'proper' is seemingly varifocal. At one and the same time it refers to what is 'proper' to Marchart's thinking, to the immediate intellectual context (post-Marxism) within which Marchart's thinking operates, to the wider philosophical filiation (Kant-Hegel-Marx-Heidegger) that prepares the way to think antagonism as a central ontological category, to the notion of antagonism itself, and finally to antagonism *eo ipso*, 'set free to stand on its *own*,'²⁵ as Marchart tellingly and instructively writes. These are all different ways in which the 'proper' figures. Crucially, all these ways are gatherable under the same appropriative process. They are conjoined as part of the same projection of a world, each revealing itself in its own distinctive and singular light by virtue of 'fitting' together (with respect to what is *suitable* and *appropriate*, on the one hand, and what is *articulated*, on the other). Marchart's book is thus the site and the result of this interpretive-appropriative-projection, which, drawing on a formulation from Paul Ricoeur, makes available 'new modes of being - or [...] new 'forms of life' - *giving* the subject new capacities for knowing himself'.²⁶ What Marchart brings to view is a mode of being that is fundamentally attuned to being *qua* political; 'politicality' becomes the *qualia* of social existence.

4. THE WORLD THAT OPENS-UP: BEING-IN-THE-POLITICAL

In *Thinking Antagonism*, the world, which, as an outcome of appropriation opens up for us, and which makes available a mode of being attuned towards the political nature of things - co-implicating us in a new mode of thinking and acting - comes together in Marchart's notion of 'being-in-the-political'.²⁷ While the status of this locution (*vis-à-vis* the Heideggerian idea of 'being-in-the-world as the existential a priori for Dasein) is admittedly equivocal (i.e. is being-in-the-political simply analogically connected to being-in-the-world, or is a structural homology being intimated, or even, as what makes possible the worlding of worlds is being-in-the-political ontologically prior?),²⁸ what we can say is that 'being-in-the-political' performs three functions: ontological; ethico-political, and reflective.

²⁴ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), esp. ¶ 31-32. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. & tr. John B. Thompson, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp91-144.

²⁵ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p47.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, 'Appropriation', *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, pp154-55.

²⁷ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, e.g. p192, p206.

²⁸ Two interesting passages. In the first, Marchart suggests an identity (or equivalence, (see p20) between 'being-in-the-world' and 'being-in-the-political'. Accordingly, he writes: 'Being-in-the-World,

First, *ontological*. For Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, the ‘world’ is understood as the necessary existential structure for Dasein in its everyday practical dealings and encounters, it serves as the ground and horizon against and over which other beings as well as Dasein’s own being reveal themselves, and against which Dasein’s own possibilities become a matter for it. As that which brings being into appearing without itself being apparent, the world is the transcendental field upon which our understanding of things and self-understanding operate.²⁹ When Marchart chooses to speak in terms of ‘being-in-the-political’, the shift from ‘world’ to ‘the political’ is not a dismissal of Heidegger’s idea of ‘being-in-the-world’. It builds upon it by underwriting it. It first and foremost places a different inflection on the phenomenological-existential understanding, and the play of world-ground-Dasein-freedom that opens up for an existential analytic of Dasein as being-in-the-world. As Being-in-the-world, Dasein is not a being positioned alongside other beings; not only is it correlated to the world, its being lies in its ek-sistence (in it standing out, always ahead of itself). This specific relation to the world is defined by way of not only its projection of possibilities, but its thrownness (*Geworfenheit*). The animal, the mineral, the object, may be parts of a world, but they are in fact worldless. In being thrown, Dasein shows itself to be worldly in that it is bound up with a transcending movement. Thrownness plays a double role with respect to ascertaining the precise relation between being and world: it shows up human Dasein’s finitude and freedom. It is for this reason that Heidegger will, in his 1929 essay, ‘On the Essence of Ground’, that human Dasein shows its peculiarity by virtue of it giving ground.³⁰ Marchart’s idea of ‘being-in-the-political’ becomes relevant here inasmuch that it is not, per se, Dasein’s transcendence (indicated through human freedom and finitude) that accounts for the grounding operation of world; the *political* carries this mantle. The grounding operation is no longer to be thought in terms of the existential structures of human Dasein (an investigation with which the later Heidegger will in any case

as was argued from a left-Heideggerian perspective, should be understood as being-in-the-political.’ (p88). In another passage the precise relation between ‘being-in-the-world’ and ‘being-in-the-political’ takes on a different inflection. On p192, Marchart argues that political thinking demands that we implicate ourselves into our being-in-the-world in terms of our ‘being-in-the-political’

²⁹ Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, tr. Erazim Kohák and ed. James Dodd, (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1998), pp99-107.

³⁰ Heidegger writes: ‘Freedom as transcendence, however, is not only a unique “kind” of ground, but the origin of ground in general. Freedom is freedom for ground’. The echoes between this and how Laclau understands the emergence of the subject in the disclosure of a dislocatory experience are extraordinary, according to which ‘dislocation is the very form of freedom’. See: pp43-44. The significant thing here is that Marchart goes further, removing the vestiges of transcendence that cling to Laclau’s understanding, and that are doubtless a theoretical-effect from privileging dislocation as an ontological category. As I understand him, Marchart’s notion of ‘being-in-the-political’ marks an ‘immanentisation’ and an ‘a-subjective’ turn that is the direct outcome of him remaining entirely consequent with the riveting of antagonism to being.

dispense with), but to the transimmanent and ‘a-subjective force of the political’.³¹ While the existential analytic of Dasein draws out the condition of being-in-the-world in the laying hold (projection) of possibilities in its thrown state as already being involved with entities, with others and with situations it practically encounters, being-in-the-political accounts for the re-possibilisation of possibilities, the recasting of those meaningful structures within which possibilities are taken up in orienting us in the world. Invoking a line from Beckett’s ‘Westward Ho’ (‘say ground. No ground *but* say ground’), the political becomes the privileged operator in an interminable grounding operation. There is nothing that is not itself grounded;³² the grounded ground, as conditioned ground, is the only available ground from which a ‘world’ (qua social whole)³³ is formed. The political is the name for both the de- and re-grounding of the transcendental field upon which our being-in-the-world is mounted, and for which actual possibilities become a matter for us; antagonism (and not the anxiety of Dasein) discloses the abyssal ground upon which all grounds (which, as an act of grounding) are themselves grounded. To shift idiom in order to sharpen the switch from ‘being-in-the-world’ to ‘being-in the-political’: whatever shows itself as meaningful for us (e.g. things, ideas, practices, institutions), as well as whatever understanding we have of ourselves, is set within and against ‘hegemonic structures’, themselves the sedimentation of the *longue durée* of historical conflict and contestation. Our dwelling in these structures, within which we orientate ourselves, are brought back to their political origin, to the act of grounding. Riveted to the world, the political becomes the frame for which the worlding of world (and concomitantly the grounding of ground) is accounted.

Second, Marchart’s locution of ‘Being-in-the-political’, which, by means of the interminable play between de- and re-grounding, accounts for the worlding of worlds, is (by virtue of an interpretive-appropriative event) itself the projection of a world. This world effectuates something akin to an ‘aspect change’, a perspectival shift. In *Thinking Antagonism* we are told how there is ‘instigat[ed] a fundamental *alteration of our image* of the social world [...] now forced to bring into view the contingencies and conflicts at the basis of the apparently most stable social formations.’³⁴ We are attuned to being in its political key, to the tremulous timbres

³¹ In the clearest, though compressed, formulation of this, Marchart writes: ‘From the perspective of an ontology of the political, if the latter is to explain our very being-in-the-world as a being-in-the-political, it is the real and a-subjective force of antagonism, which –in the form of an absolute restlessness of becoming –drives the unstoppable process of the constitution and destitution of the social as much as the folding of its limits into a self’ p105.

³² The ambiguity of this sentence must be left to stand. In the claim that ‘there is nothing that is not itself grounded’, we must hear simultaneously: (i) that only *nothing* is ungrounded, and as ungrounded, nothing is at the basis of all acts of grounding (the abyssal ground); (ii) that all grounds are the result of an act of grounding; as the effect of having been grounded, grounds are conditional, contingent, and contestable. All the while such grounds will take on the role of grounding the whole.

³³ *Kosmos*, the Greek word for ‘world’, meaning totality.

³⁴ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p89.

and restlessness pervading our social worlds. This is the *ethico-political* significance of the locution of ‘being-in-the-political’, which carries with it its own marching order: “there is always reason to be political” (even if, in its minimal degree, politics is not happening all the time, it nonetheless irrupts at uncertain times and in uncertain places). To ‘activate’ and ‘amplify’ the political nature of the world, of ourselves, and of thinking, for which antagonism lies always as the absent cause (even if in a state of dormancy), is the ethico-political prescription around which Marchart’s book orbits.

Thirdly, since the interpretive-appropriative work of *Thinking Antagonism* projects a world touched by antagonism to its core, then this cannot but touch the thinking of Marchart. This would be the *reflective* implication that subtends the category of ‘being-in-the-political’, namely that he himself is placed under the condition of ‘being-in-the-political’ – a principal lesson of the implicative form of thinking discussed earlier: as both the object that thinking must further examine, elucidate, and to expound in terms of its ontological significance, as well as being the wellspring from out of which the act of thinking arises, antagonism is the cause and effect of his thinking (the outcome of which is an interpretive-appropriative-projection in terms of ‘being-in-the-political’). Marchart is not the authorial-subject who stands above and ‘gathers’ and ‘projects’, in an act of free-standing ‘appropriation’. He is as much the effect of a real process that is underway, and that appropriates us: ‘antagonism sends out shock waves that *capture* every single body’,³⁵ Marchart will write: Antagonism appropriates us, placing us under the condition of its thinking. There is thus a co-belonging between what is thought and what gives rise to thought, between thinking and being: the necessary virtuous circle.

Here, we have reached a provisional position, which will now need further explication. Thinking antagonism (and especially *Thinking Antagonism*, which lays the groundwork for such an undertaking) opens towards the issue of appropriation, and it does so necessarily. Not only because, interpretively, it is a category that makes Marchart’s thinking show itself (along with the philosophical tradition of which it is a part, and the central notion of antagonism incubated therein) in their distinctive and proper light. But, because, with respect to the project of laying out of the ‘ontology of the political’, generally, and fundamentally in light of antagonism, appropriation (and the proper) begin to show their onto-political valences. If this point needs to be insisted upon then this is because, in contradistinction to antagonism, appropriation is left unthematized by Marchart, even though it remains at play in his thinking. In what remains, a set of further glosses will be made regarding this.

³⁵ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p106.

5. ON DIS-OWNING AND THE COMMON

Surrounding the ideas of the proper and appropriation, difficulties undeniably abound. So far, these obvious problems have only been skirted around. Let's begin with two of the most glaring problems: (i) appropriation (and this becomes all the more clear with the German, *Aneignung*) is rooted in what is 'own', a laying claim over, a possessing; (ii) 'appropriation' presupposes a subject (in the form of a willing-ego) behind the act, actively bringing other beings, understood as passive objects, into the power of the appropriator.³⁶ Based on these assumptions, we can, with good reason, suppose it is a term Marchart is mindful of. In a passage, coming right at the beginning of *Thinking Antagonism*, we read that an idea or thought is impossible to 'own'. One never owns an idea, one dis-owns it ('ideas can only be *dis-owned*', Marchart writes).³⁷ Those who are often a little quick to wrap their critical charges in exposing the presence of logical contradictions will wonder how this can be so when the possibility of disowning an idea must be logically predicated on it having first belonged to someone? And yet, importantly, no contradiction is necessarily implied in what Marchart pronounces. While appearing logically and causally contradictory, the prioritisation of disowning an idea over and above any ordinary ownership or proper belonging must ontologically hold, and is consistent with the mode of politics articulated on these ontological bases. It would be characteristic of the 'politics of protest' – the affirmative 'no' – central in Marchart's understanding of politics in action,³⁸ mirroring the ontological negativity within which this mode of political engagement is rooted, and also consistent with the politico-ontological claims of Ernesto Laclau, for whom the privative experience of 'injustice', 'unfreedom', 'inequality', 'disorder', etc., remains superordinate over the positivisation of ideas of 'justice', 'freedom', 'equality', 'order', in serving as a precipitate for political mobilisation.³⁹ Beyond these points, in claiming that one can only disown an idea, Marchart wishes to capture something further, and ultimately for our purposes, something even more significant. The dis-owning of an idea, in a more ordinary sense, would not simply address an idea in its privative form, something that we experience as lacking (e.g. the experience of 'inequality', 'injustice', 'unfreedom'), nor would it target an 'idea' in terms of 'denying', 'annulling', 'repudiating' it in the direct form of negation (e.g. 'no' to the 'market economy', 'no' to 'humanitarian

³⁶ Cf. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. H.B Nisbet & ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In §44, Hegel puts the point bluntly: 'A person has the right to place his will in any thing. The thing thereby becomes mine and acquires my will as its substantial end (since it has no end within itself), its determination, and its soul – *the absolute right of appropriation which human beings have over things.*' p75. (emphasis added)

³⁷ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p1. A short but crucial point that deserves to be highlighted.

³⁸ Ibid, p107.

³⁹ Cf. Ernesto Laclau, 'Why do Empty Signifiers matter to Politics?', *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996).

wars', 'no' to 'freedom of choice'). The dis- of 'dis-owning an idea' would point instead to a reversal in the very act of possessing itself, marking out a reversal by which the thinking subject and idea as object are correlated. When Marchart speaks of 'disowning' an idea, we no longer follow the movement by which an idea is drawn inwards and becomes one's own (qua appropriation), but conversely, we trace it by way of its ex-ternalisation, alienation, im-personalisation (or anonymisation) by means of an outwards movement (qua ex-propriation).⁴⁰ This, we can say, means that the result is making an idea *common*, if not a *res nullius*, which belongs to no-one in particular and for anyone in general, folded and unfolded within the common fabric of social relations. Ultimately, the disowning of an idea, as Marchart comes to speak of it, here needs to be understood with respect to a process of *de-propriation*, that is, a short circuiting of the logic of the 'proper', for which we find its classical philosophical systematisation worked out in Aristotle, as part of his discussion of the four predicables to which something is said to belong to something else. In contradistinction to definitions (which touch on common essences), the 'genus' and the 'accident', Aristotle understands the 'proper' (*idion*) as a singularising property or trait i.e. that which belongs to 'that thing and that thing alone'.⁴¹ For something to class as proper to thing *x*, according to Aristotle, it must satisfy the rule of convertibility, explained through the following example: 'it is a property of man to be capable of learning grammar; for if a certain being is a man, he is capable of learning grammar, and if he is capable of learning grammar, he is a man'.⁴² Significantly, whatever counts as 'proper' can be either an essential or accidental determination; what sets it apart from both the essence and the accident is (i) the quality of unicity (its singularity) and (ii) that it is an inalienable characteristic or property. In the superlative, the proper would be clarified by way of what is 'ownmost'. Now, clearly, by speaking of disowning qua depropriation (as Marchart rightly does), we appear far removed from the Aristotelian understanding of the proper. Dis-owning an idea or thought means putting something into *general* circulation; it means extricating ideas or thoughts from any sole possession by an *ego cogitans*, disabusing them of any unique sense (the stuff of private language games). Disowning an idea ultimately means allowing them to 'emerge from, and return to, an a-subjective,

⁴⁰ To clarify the 'ex-' of expropriation must be understood in its purely spatial sense, as an outwards movement serving as the counterpoint to the inwards movement of 'ap-propriation'. We are thus speaking less of Marx, on this occasion, and how ex-propriation is understood in the context of so-called primitive accumulation, but how ex-propriation is understood by Heidegger in *On Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (London: Harper Collins, 1977), and later by Reiner Schürmann, cf. Introduction to *Broken Hegemonies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) and 'Ultimate Double Binds' in *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anarchy, and the Singularisation to Come* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019) pp121-150.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Categories*, 1a 24-5. See also: Aristotle, *Topica*, 102a 17 and *Posterior Analytics* 73a 6

⁴² Aristotle, *Topica*, Loeb edition. 102a. 19-21

collective effort that cuts across temporal and geographical barriers.⁴³ If Marchart begins by underlining how the act of disowning an idea as originary then this gives ontological priority over to depropriation. But one would do well to resist surmising that de-propiation marks the end of the ‘proper’. It would beg the question: what politics, thinking, mode of being could not do with some retention of the ‘singular’, in one form or another? Rather than its complete relinquishment, the notion of the proper is recast, no longer with respect to substance – as a unique thing, entirely monadic – but as a process by which, from the common, something *becomes* ‘proper’ or ‘singular’ qua singularisation.⁴⁴ Here, it is not in spite but because of depropriation that ‘ap-propiation’ (as a making proper in the absence of the Proper) asserts itself all the more stringently as a central political category. Something we will now indicate by way of the politics of naming, an issue that takes up an important place in Marchart’s ontology of the political.

6. NAMES, PROPER AND COMMON

To what register does a thinking, which is conditioned irrevocably to the political, belong with respect to being, and how does it attest to, show, indicate, this belonging? Clearly, as Marchart remarks, it does so not as anything we can know through empirical measurement or by means of observation. But at the level of intervention, decision, implication, inflection. Linguistically, political thinking is exercised not by the universal light of the Idea, and even less by the generalising rule of the concept, but by the ‘name’, specifically the name with respect to how proper names (*nomen proprium*) and not common nouns function. This will first appear counter-intuitive, since the taxonomy of names that furnish, at the very least, the modern political imagination (‘equality’, ‘human emancipation’, ‘revolution’, ‘justice’, ‘freedom’) are not principally (though they can be) names in the strict sense of ‘proper names’ (‘Mandela’, ‘Robespierre’, ‘Lenin’), but common nouns that easily drift into abstraction and indetermination.⁴⁵ This however misses the point, namely that even if politics operates on *prima facie* common nouns (‘democracy’, ‘equality’, ‘emancipation’, ‘revolution’, etc.) these common nouns come to be deployed within a given political sequence *as if* they could properly designate and belong (wholly and inalienably) to a series of articulated political actions and demands, not only serving as their *focus imaginarius* but as their common ground. It is as if, in the *hic and*

⁴³ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p1.

⁴⁴ Cf. Reiner Schürmann, *Tomorrow the Manifold: Essays on Foucault, Anarchy, and the Singularisation to Come* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019)

⁴⁵ A point that was not lost on Carl Schmitt, who, in a set of reflections on the relation between *nahme* and name, remarked precisely that modern politics (with its appeals to ‘Justice’, ‘Humanity’ and ‘Virtue’) had forgotten what it means to name, in that at every turn modern political thought confounds the singular by means of the common. Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth* (New York: Telos, 2006).

nunc, the name of ‘democracy’, ‘equality’, etc., comes to singularise a concrete manifestation of politics, giving the seal of distinction and a material inscription to a specific political collectivity in formation. In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau reminds us that ‘an assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept *equivalentially together* only by a name is [...] necessarily a *singularity*.’⁴⁶ What does this amount to? In politics, we are dealing with names that function: (i) not as a descriptor of extant things, but as *performatives* that serve as the ground for what is by virtue of the name alone; (ii) not as whatever presides over common essences, but that which individuates and *singularizes*; and (iii) as a singularity, the name is what makes a specific *materialisation* and localisation of the *common* possible.

A given politics gives rise to its own nomenclature of terms that, nested within a series of discursive relations (established through stratagems and decisions, and injected with cathectic investments), become the support for the existence of a political collectivity, whose own existence is sealed through the name to which it becomes irrevocably tied. A name is not a generalising property that might indifferently be assigned to either this, that, or other similar things but a *singulare tantum*, that gathers under itself a diversity of unrelated elements *into* a unity. Immanent to a given political struggle, that is to say, from the perspective of those engaged collectively, a name is not just any name pulled indifferently from the common stock of words that circulate. It is *the* name because it *becomes* ‘our name’ and, convertibly (following the rule by which Aristotle understands the proper), because it is ‘our name’ it can only have been that name and that name alone. ‘Our name’, not insofar that the ‘us’ antedates the name of which it takes possession but, on the contrary, because it is the name that ‘grounds’ the ‘us’, and which then retroactively belonging wholly and inalienably to the ‘us’, fusing it into a singularity.

It is quite instructive here to illustrate this not with respect to a particular political example, but by taking cognisance of Marchart’s own thought and the internal movement by which *Thinking Antagonism* unfolds. Operating under the condition of the political, Marchart’s philosophical thinking is itself an act of naming. ‘Saying’ being is, in its political key, a matter of ‘naming’ being. Being is *named* ‘antagonism’.⁴⁷ This will come as no surprise. What, though, is most instructive is not the fact Being is *named* ‘antagonism’, it is the movement through which ‘antagonism’ as name passes in Marchart’s thinking. On a first level, Marchart refers to antagonism as *a* name (‘Antagonism is *a* name for the essentially unstable and disputed nature of the social’⁴⁸). What is the principal effect of this use of the indefinite article? It gives antagonism a certain indetermination with respect to its fundamental relation to Being, in that as a name, ‘antagonism’ is one among other possible names which presumably stand at an equal distance to it, either (in the strong sense) as

⁴⁶ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005) p100.

⁴⁷ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, e.g. p160, 181.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p30.

equiprimordial, or (more weakly stated) in an analogical relation. Either way, it takes its place alongside ‘the clinamen’, ‘dislocation’, ‘différance’, the ‘differend’, the ‘event’, the Lacanian ‘real’, as ‘a *synonym* of incommensurability’:⁴⁹ a chain of terms expressing, more or less, the same ontological insight. On a second level, Marchart substitutes the definite for the indefinite article: antagonism is not simply a name but *the* name for social being, ‘*the* name [...] for the co-originary condition of conflict and contingency’.⁵⁰ What is the function of the definite article here? It suggests that ‘antagonism’ is not after all just one name among others (that operate synonymously); it draws out something more. Certainly, this can be accounted for by the direct political determination that ‘antagonism’ harbours over and above other terms. But, in making this claim, Marchart has to acknowledge (as he indeed does) that other political names (‘conflict’, ‘polemos’, ‘war’, ‘stasis’, ‘agon’, ‘struggle’) might equally well serve to index the same ontological insights. It is in acknowledging this that Marchart makes the further claim: antagonism is ‘the only true name of the ‘political’, ‘the key word’, ‘the single name’,⁵¹ it is (and this is instructive) a *fitting*⁵² – which is to say appropriate, proper – name for the political. How is it that a name can prove to be the best fit in this way? What is *in* a name that permits one to distinguish between different nominative possibilities? This is the critical question, for which two responses can be given. One is to draw the ‘name’ back into the order of conceptuality. To dig deep into the words themselves, in order to separate out *the* category that holds the true definition of ‘social being’ from its pretenders. Thus, from this perspective, located *in* the name is an essential kernel of meaning, an ineradicable conceptual content, to be recovered. But even were this conceptual operation possible, in order to begin such an undertaking, a few steps would already have had to been made: one would already have set oneself within the *Kampfplatz* of philosophy, already placed ‘somewhere’, embarking on a line of thinking where a series of conceptual connections are already established, initiating an inquiry from a tradition one has already received, only then to ‘intervene ...[b]y the creation of a name’.⁵³ It is the re-baptising of a name that, for Marchart, has the capacity to cause a disturbance in the conceptual order, serving as a new opening, and therefore re-activating ‘the sedimented order of definitions, classifications and conceptual hierarchies specific to a *given* philosophy, a philosophical paradigm, an intellectual tradition or an accepted canon of ideas.’⁵⁴ This form of intervention through naming, that operates within the ungrounding and regrounding of a determinate

⁴⁹ Ibid, p47.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p206.

⁵¹ Ibid, p82.

⁵² Ibid. Marchart writes exactly: “Therefore at the end of a long intellectual development, the notion of antagonism emerges as a fit name for the doubly reflective determination of conflict and contingency”.

⁵³ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p168.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

philosophical field, convokes a 'we' that 'brings to light forgotten partisanship[s]', forging new equivalences and augmenting new frontiers and differentiations. It gives rise, then, to a final and third level by which the form of the 'name' of antagonism emerges. After having shifted from being a simple synonym ('antagonism as a synonym for the incommensurable') through a definite and privileged signifier ('the name for the co-originary condition of conflict and contingency'), there is the moment when the usage of impersonal article shifts into the *possessive* form. Thus, we read: antagonism is 'our name for being.'⁵⁵ *Our* name. We find ourselves necessarily within the logic of appropriation once more. It is by virtue of this reference to an 'our' that the name is no longer simply part of a conceptual analysis; it is the site of an affective investment that injects the conceptual labour with a sense of purpose and direction. It becomes inflected with a political determination: part of a wider intellectual struggle, for which the staking out of positions, the drawing of the lines of demarcation, and the founding of alliances, are redolent. In convoking an 'us', the name designates a rallying point. In this process, 'antagonism' *does* show itself as the 'single name', 'the key word', the most fitting of names for the co-originary of conflict and contingency. The difference between 'antagonism' and its other associated names ('struggle', 'opposition', 'polemos', etc.) properly reveals itself only once one has taken it on as our name, not simply as an internal theoretical dispute. But as 'our name' it attunes us to our present, to the situation in which we find ourselves. It gives rise, in short, to an affectology.⁵⁶ Otherwise, for the disinterested, the terms simply become interchangeable, and any issue arising therefrom becomes '*just semantic*'. Yet for those attuned to 'antagonism', nothing can be further from the truth: it becomes the principal term through which, *inter alia*, modern Post-Kantian philosophy shows itself in its proper light, antagonism becomes more than a conflict between two pre-formed identities, and it is the term through which the peculiarity of our own times is brought into starker relief.⁵⁷

If the name has within its power to singularise, then it does so by a process of *gathering*, resulting in a symbolic condensation from what, in the half-light, would remain obscure in its pre-formed heterogeneity. It is here, having grounded the relation of thinking and being in the name, we return to the question of the proper. A returning to the proper that is not accomplished through the production of proper names, *stricto sensu*, or 'new signifiers' (neologisms) that are singularly, irrevocably and inalienably attached to a unique political movement, sequence or struggle,⁵⁸ but by way of the (re)appropriation of common nouns (or concepts)

⁵⁵ Ibid, p160.

⁵⁶ Something that Marchart rightly develops. See esp.: pp103-8.

⁵⁸ This has always been the materialist's fantasy (at least in its nominalist guise), of which the later Althusser is a clear, even if, hyperbolic, example. He writes: 'Conclusive recent studies have shown that for primitive societies, there exist only singular entities, and each singularity, each particularity, is designated by a word that is equally singular. Thus, the world consists exclusively of singular, unique

already in general circulation, that, precisely, owing to a process of appropriation, are made singular once more, where, for a *specific* political struggle or philosophical inquiry, the name itself becomes the locus of new meaning and affective desire.⁵⁹ Precisely, this is the point that needs underlining: the name bestows upon a political movement a purposefulness by virtue of a sense of singularity that is induced through the act of naming. But as an act, this naming operation amounts to a taking or laying claim over a name, the power of which will always be refracted due to its common availability. It is, in this way, one could say (following Marchart) that ‘naming brings conflict (to the common nouns) of concepts’.⁶⁰ But just so long as one is able to further add that these antagonisms wrought through naming are unleashed because the names that bring conflict are split between their commonality and singularity, their general availability and their punctual designation. They give rise to antagonisms because they are subject to appropriations.

7. DE-PROPRIATION-AP-PROPRIATION AND THE PROPER

What I have sought to sketch out above is how in one crucial part of Marchart’s book (on the politics of naming), appropriation returns. However, in returning it dare not show itself; it lurks in the margins, unthematized. I would suggest, then, that appropriation, as the making proper or singular, is in actual fact an operative part of the architectonic surrounding ‘being-in-the-political’ that *Thinking Antagonism* does an immaculate and rigorous job of presenting.

Now, for sure, Marchart’s disqualification of ‘owning’ an idea is a way of showing critical distance towards the fantasmatic horizon of intellectual property rights, ‘rooted in the capitalist system of property ownership’,⁶¹ with its attendant support in ‘possessive individualism’, along with the hypostatization of the willing and autonomous ego as the ground and essential locus for the arrogation of anything and everything as its own. The notion of appropriation (and its cognates: propriety, property, the proper, etc.) is to our ears overdetermined by this politico-economic sense, mired by its determinant position in discourses of property and possession.

objects, each with its own specific name and singular properties. ‘Here and now’, which, ultimately cannot be named, but only pointed to because words themselves are abstractions –we would have to be able to speak without words, that is, to show.’ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter. Later Writings, 1978-1987*. ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, tr. G.M Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006) p265. This, we can say, would be the purest social expression of the ‘proper’.

⁵⁹ This position comes with its own dangers, namely the entire problem surrounding homonymy (ambiguous or equivocal names). The work of Jacques Rancière risks falling into such pitfalls. Please see my: ‘On Homonymy and Heterology: The Hazards of Jacques Rancière’, in *Jacques Rancière and the Aesthetics of Democracy*, ed. Tora Lane and Anders Burman, Stockholm: Tankekraft, Forthcoming.

⁶⁰ Oliver Marchart, *Thinking Antagonism*, p168.

⁶¹ *Ibid* p.1

It is thus, for understandable reasons, that CB MacPherson once claimed that ‘the concept of man as infinite appropriator’⁶² (for which the model of the possessive individual was its correlate) constituted the central axiom of a capitalist market economy, and which political thought (from Hobbes onwards) had hypostatised; and on this very basis, MacPherson sought to dislodge the preeminence of the category of appropriation in political and social thought. And yet even if we acknowledge the salience of such a critical undertaking, appropriation, as Louis Althusser once commented, ‘abounds with mysteries’;⁶³ a notion that cannot so easily be resolved into the frame of the liberal-capitalist order or, for that matter, reduced to matters of ‘cultural appropriation’. In truth it is a term that spills over, not only (as Marx will specifically analyse) into other modes and relations of production, but (and Marx is attentive to this too) appropriation is deepened into a basic existential structure accounting for man’s real practical relation to the world.⁶⁴ While it is not the time to go into the matter in any satisfactory way here, what needs to be said is that Marx (among others) assists in understanding appropriation as a generalizing feature of socio-political existence. A generalising and deepening form of appropriation that increasingly leaves no sphere of human practice or facet of social life untouched. A process without ontological limits, according to which every- and any- thing submits to its logic. No thing has a designated proper place, nothing belongs wholly and inalienably to either itself or another. It is an age of insufficient reason, and deficient being, contingent grounds and conditioned ends, for which substitutability and supplementarity are the defining operations. All of this applies not only to the side of the object (i.e. to what is appropriatable), but to the subject (i.e. the ‘appropriator’) who is compelled to engage in a game without end because the player is *ohne eigenschaft*, to cite Robert Müsil. ‘Appropriation’, as Heidegger will surmise, ‘is something we ourselves dwell in’; it is not we who are the first appropriators, we ourselves are the appropriated, given over to a process without end.

⁶² CB Macpherson, *Democratic Theory. Essays in Retrieval*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p28.

⁶³ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, tr. Ben Brewster, (London: New Left Review, 1970) p54.

⁶⁴ Indeed, Marx, specifically, and the Marxist tradition (especially those strands infused with phenomenological, in general) was attentive to the ambivalences of the notion, a concentrated testament of which remains Marx’s 1857 ‘Introduction’ to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. A text that critically repudiates the general abstractions (including ‘production’, ‘appropriation’, ‘distribution’) that furnish classical political economy, those terms of which are used to naturalise the capitalist mode of production, and instead opens up for a modulation of different forms of appropriation; on the one hand as part of a historical materialist investigation into successive social forms that exhibit variability with respect to the character and relations of appropriation that help to comprise them, and on the other, an explication of how appropriation is an invariant in modes of practice and thinking, such that in ‘artistic’, ‘scientific’, ‘political’ practice, the subject seizes, works-on and -over the real.

What accounts for this generalisation of appropriation? This is the crux: it is deappropriation; which, despite the prefix, is not the negation of, but in fact constitutes the underside to the process of appropriation. This allows us to turn back to the idea of disowning, which earlier we indexed in Marchart's opening thoughts in *Thinking Antagonism*. Once the question of the proper as a pure singularity, as what is, in its superlative form, 'ownmost' has been liquidated, then this accelerates the process and extends the field for appropriation as the genetic form by which all things (including ideas) are commanded, *singularised*, taken possession of, inhabited. This generalising phenomenon is, for one, drawn out masterfully by Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his reading of Diderot's paradox of the actor. There we read that the greater the actor, the greater his privation; 'the *more* the actor is nothing, the *more* he can be everything'.⁶⁵ Here Lacoue-Labarthe identifies a hyperbolic exchange of contraries (i.e. the more something is *x* then the more it is *y*) between deappropriation and appropriation, between being nothing and becoming everything. The worldly actor, who can master all possible roles, must be equal to all, and thereby be without all assignable properties: 'precisely with the absence of any *proper* quality [...] is he able to produce in general'.⁶⁶ Any production or presentation requires a multiplication and pluralisation of appropriations. For the actor, then, 'the gift of deappropriation becomes the gift for general appropriation.'⁶⁷ This insight into the paradoxical condition of the actor, Lacoue-Labarthe will not hesitate to generalise beyond its specific articulation in Diderot, surmising that we must allow it to infect 'the subject of thought, literature or art',⁶⁸ and we can add politics, also. The political inflection upon the same relation between deappropriation-appropriation finds its trace, we can say, in Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche. What in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Deleuze immediately indexes as the temerity of Nietzschean thought is how the 'history of a thing, in general, is the succession of forces which take possession of it and the co-existence of the forces which struggle for possession.'⁶⁹ There is no unique sense proper to the thing prior to its appropriation. For this reason, the 'same object, the same phenomenon, changes sense depending on the force which appropriates it';⁷⁰ the sense of things, deappropriated, is but given through the accumulation of multiple and heterogeneous appropriative-interpretative practices. But equally, and this is central, the force that applies itself to the object it appropriates is no Subject that stands above the appropriated and behind the force: the act of appropriating 'can only appear[...]by first of all putting on the mask

⁶⁵ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis', *Typography*, tr. Christopher Fynsk, (California, Stanford University Press, 1989), p260.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p257.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p260.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p266.

⁶⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, tr. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1986) p3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

of the forces which are already in possession of the object'.⁷¹ Appropriation emerges, first, not as the assertion or super-imposition of a self, but through, we can say, an alienation of oneself into an object already possessed by countervailing forces.

The central implication to be underlined, then, is that depropriation is both the formal and real condition of generalised appropriation; the deeper and greater the extension of the process of depropriation, the more generalized the process of appropriation. Depropriation and appropriation, disowning and enowning, are not antonymic (or for that matter, antinomic) terms; they mutually encroach and cross one another. To speak of their mutual encroachment, rather than simply about their complementarity or dialectical unity, is to index how this is a process with friction, as well as, let us say, a space of antagonism.

What is the immediate outcome of this? In the context of our reading of Marchart, it is to bear in mind the two interconnected claims that orbit around thinking, as well as the status of his thinking: (i) that thoughts (ideas) cannot be owned (they are not sourced by a singular, unique origin); (ii) that they can only be dis-owned (that is, they are part of a common horizon, history, tradition). These two points are not to be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather than the second of these claims coming at the expense of the first, i.e. something 'belonging' as distinctly and uniquely one's own, (ii) is in fact the condition on which something like appropriation as a genetical-discursive process becomes possible. Depropriation, as what becomes common, does away with the idea of originary possession or singular essences. What it concomitantly involves, however, is a pluralisation of acts of possession, a process of singularisations, of re-inscriptions, re-contextualisations, and affective re-investments - not in spite of the 'common' of depropriation, but because of it. Politics, whether minimal or major, operates interminably within this turning movement. Which is to say, only once 'appropriation' is brought back into the abyssal ground of depropriation, are we able to index the aporetic movement that underwrites a politics that always operates between the common and the singular.

The question here is simple, though doubtless too blunt: in a book that presents us with a thoroughgoing ontology of the political, to which the 'antagonism' is riveted as its *prima principia*, where can we locate appropriation within the comprehensive and insightful picture it projects? Thematically, beyond Marchart's opening gesture surrounding dis-owning, we see no direct reckoning (though, doubtless, the short reference to dis-owning is a precondition for such a reckoning). The question that should duly be asked is whether it is incumbent for Marchart to do so? By way of conclusion, there are three things to be said in this regard: In the short space this review article has afforded me, the aim has firstly been to show how in *Thinking Antagonism*, Marchart himself is forced back upon and folded into the logic of

⁷¹ Ibid p4.

appropriation. On the one hand, it is what must be presupposed in order to establish how Marchart's important contribution makes it mark, how, that is, the distinctiveness and novelty of both his line of thinking alongside the tradition(s), of which his own thinking is a further development, and for which the outcome is the setting free of antagonism, are allowed to stand on their own (but doing so together). On the other hand, the purpose here has been to give an indication that internal to the philosophical elucidations of the political and politics with which Marchart provides (e.g. the ontological significance of the name and the act of naming), appropriation appears central. Second, it has been at the very least to intimate that 'appropriation', as the process of making something proper, should not be adjudged as a regress into the suppositions of bourgeois political economy or an act of abdicating one's critical faculties at the altar of the figures of 'possessive individualism' (and today's obvious displacement onto collective identities, in the form of 'possessive collectivism'); appropriation and the proper are not ultimately categories about which we should subject to a moral or normative argument. More specifically, this means in squarely political terms, not rigging the game in advance by placing the 'Right' on the side of the sanctity of property, of possession, propriation, appropriation, propriety, and the 'Left' on the side of ex-propriation, impropriety, the improper, dis-possession, etc. This would be the surest way not to be equal to the intellectual maxim of *ostinato rigore* that Marchart affirms. The ontological valence of these categories needs to be accounted for from the viewpoint of their strictly political accent. This accounting, it must be said, is something that varieties of post-foundational political thought, generally, and Marchart's thinking, in particular, are in an enviable position to undertake. We only have to recall how *Thinking Antagonism* begins by giving ontological priority to dis-owning or de-propriation. What we now have to further appreciate is how 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 generalising condition plays itself out as an interminable condition of 'being-in-the-political' and as an imminent effect of antagonism. In the form of the hyperbolic exchange of contraries that Lacoue-Labarthe discusses, it could be said that 'the greater the process of depropriation, the more generalised the effects of appropriation'. To draw out the implications of this undertaking would not just be for the sake of theoretical exhaustion or completion (were ever this possible). It would, more concretely, be because our own political conjuncture is ready to show us its battle scars surrounding the issue. Today, against the backdrop of "right-wing populism", we witness a pursuit of otherwise divisive and nationalist political agendas that, when circumstances bend in a particular direction, will soften their acerbic tones by drawing on certain motifs from the history of emancipatory struggles (and on certain ideas that guided these struggles. On the other side, there is the neo-liberal establishment, which resists this populist insurgency by presenting themselves as the heir apparent of internationalism, global justice,

freedom, equality and pluralism. Between this rock and hard place is but the shifting shores on which the Left presently finds itself: on the defensive, crying ‘foul’, speaking (in a variety of ways) of the negation of the sense of Ideas that they have come to understand as belonging wholly and inalienably to their living political tradition of emancipatory struggle. A sense of violation and melancholia can be indexed in the fact that, for them, political ideas, which they regard as embedded within *their* traditions, *their* histories, have been subject to illicit appropriation. Today, we find no end of claims that give expression to these, so to say, wounded attachments: from a past act of injustice (“*Solidarność* has been taken from us”) , to a defiant call to resist any future possibility of (“let us not let the bigots steal feminism”); we see such grievances detailed in the exacting prose of a third-person’s description (“the right stealing the left’s clothes”, amounting to “stealing its language” , “deftly coopting its causes, policies and rhetoric”); it is conveyed in hysteric form, where present politics is described as “a disorientating game of rhetorical appropriation, in which it is constantly unclear who stands for what and why” but also in the forensic military tone of “a blunt and effective confiscation, in which the battle-ready right relishes its ability to seize, inhabit and neutralize the arguments and vocabularies of its opponents.” In one way, the entire logic of hegemony captures this adeptly: hegemony as a game of winning over consent, of the struggle between the forces of transformism and transformation proper; an attritional and intractable war of position in the (re)construction of a common sense, in the articulation of a counter-hegemonic project that can build a new world, etc. Though, arguably, this does not go far enough in showing how the process of depropriation-appropriation implies a political ontology (synergetic with, and complimentary to, what Marchart presents surrounding antagonism as the groundless ground). It is to invite the question: might (the) *Thinking* (of) *Antagonism* force us back onto (the) thinking (of) appropriation?