RADICALIZING RADICAL NEGATIVITY
ON OLIVER MARCHART'S *THINKING ANTAGONISM*

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ABSTRACT

Oliver Marchart constructs an elaborate ontologization of the political that builds on theories developed by the Essex School while relying on Heideggerianism and Hegelianism. This original thought is a powerful and convincing attempt to think the ontology of the political without lapsing into a celebration of essentialist grounding or complete groundlessness, which are equally metaphysical and mutually supporting positions. Tensions arise within Marchart's own thought when the notion of instrumentality appears to be inscribed solely on the side of politics or the ontic. I suggest that a theory of practical judgment that is inchoate in Marchart's own position can resolve the tensions toward constructing a genuinely materialist ontology.

KEYWORDS

Political ontology, Instrumentality, Materialism, Agonistic Democracy.

The most distinctive contribution that Oliver Marchart has made to political philosophy is the attempt to think the ontology of the political in terms of a radical negativity. The ontologization of the political is inspired by Heidegger while radical negativity is indebted to the Hegelian conception of negation. This combination is not entirely new, but it is carried out in a unique way by Marchart, one that is informed by the "Essex School," in particular the work of Ernesto Laclau. This background enriches Marchart's project with concerns about post-Marxism and agonistic democracy, resulting in a compelling body of work.

This is amplified by the fact that Marchart is an increasingly rare kind of scholar: he is a thinker who builds a position gradually, methodically, persistently. This entails that it is hard to speak about *Thinking Antagonism*, his latest book where radical negativity is most clearly articulated, without considering his previous one, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, which develops the post-foundationalism of his

ontology.[1] Instead of summarizing the arguments in these two monographs, I will present a series of tensions that propel Marchart's development of a systematic position. Identifying such aporias is meant as a way to think with Marchart and to contribute to the construction of his position.

1. THE POLITICAL DIFFERENCE AND DEMOCRACY

The ontologization of the political

At the center of the ontologization of the political is what Marchart calls the "political difference." At first blush, this may appear simply as the distinction of politics and the political. However, in Marchart it does a lot more work, especially in leading to a conception of democracy. The political difference mirrors Martin Heidegger's ontological difference, that is, the difference between the ontic and the ontological.[2] The ontic is the realm of particular beings that we can encounter in our lives. By contrast, the ontological refers to being that organizes experience but that can never be experienced as mere presence. The ontological difference posits a relation that is, to put in Heideggerian terms, the interplay of concealment and unconcealment.

Marchart summarizes the mirroring of the political difference and the ontological difference as follows:

> the conceptual difference between politics and the political, as *difference*, assumes the role of an indicator or symptom of society's absent ground. As *difference*, this difference presents nothing other than a paradigmatic split in the traditional idea of politics, where a new term (the political) had to be introduced in order to point at society's "ontological" dimension, the dimension of the institution of society, while politics was kept as the term for the "ontic" practices of conventional politics (the plural, particular and, eventually, unsuccessful attempts at grounding society).[3]

Politics corresponds to the ontic because it refers to "conventional politics" in the guise of institutional processes. By contrast, the political is responsible for the instituting—for the creation or construction—of the social. As such, the first obvious inference is that the political can never be reduced to all those practices that occupy the everyday activity of the various arms of government and of political parties.

Significantly, the political difference indicates a radical negativity whereby the social "is prevented from closure and from becoming identical to with itself."[4] Marchart's assertion is a paraphrase from Jacques Derrida: "what is proper to a culture

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[1] Oliver Marchart, Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology After Laclau (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2018); and, Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2007).

[2] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 171.

[3] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 5.

[4] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 5.

is to not be identical to itself."[5] By affirming the priority of difference over identity, Marchart seeks to arrive at a deeper or more philosophical position. The radical negativity of the political difference pertains to political foundation. It is both the groundlessness of the social—the fact that the multiplicity and plurality of politics is thoroughly contingent—and the presence of its negative, the political, that makes a founding possible nonetheless. This radical negativity of the political is what Marchart—following Laclau and Mouffe— calls *antagonism.* I will return to the function of this negativity later.

An important caveat is needed to understand Marchart's political difference. Following the Heideggerian position about the relation of the ontic and the ontological, Marchart insists that there is no radical rupture between politics and the political. Their relation is—as Marchart puts it—quasi-transcendental in the sense that it is both possible and impossible. There is no politics without the political and vice versa, despite the fact that neither can be secured, neither can find a final ground. Their relation is thus like a "circle."[6] This is like the circle of the ontic and the ontological that Heidegger describes as unavoidable. Philosophy needs to accept such a circle, whereby the philosophical question becomes the inquiry into how to enter this circle; or, specifically in terms of the political difference, how to configure the constellation of the relation between politics and the political. The entire political project pivots around this relational difference.

Marchart theorizes this circular movement of the political difference with consistency and great insight. He pays particular attention to the points where it occurs. These are the points where any possibility of grounding dissolves. The term he uses to refer to these points is "the moment of the political." Such moments preclude the possibility that, not only the political, but even politics, can be confined to formalized institutional process: "Politics is not a matter of scale, it is a matter of kind. And, for the same reason, it is not restricted to a particular locus in the social topography (such as the political system)."[7] Politics cannot be confined within established institutions because it draws its sustenance from the moments when the political occurs, that is, those contingent occurrences of the grounding and ungrounding of collective action.

[5] Jacques Derrida, The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 1992), p. 9. We find a similar formulation in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself." Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (London: Verso, 2000), p. 125.

[6] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 30.

[7] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 190.

Democracy as political difference

Within this differential relation, we discover Marchart's conception of democracy. Democracy is the expression of the lack of ground characterizing political difference and the moment of the political: "democracy is to be defined as a regime that seeks, precisely, to *come to terms* with the ultimate failure of grounding rather than simply repressing or foreclosing it."[8] The last point in the determination of democracy is critical. The political difference cannot be eliminated, it occurs by necessity. Thus, groundlessness does not simply distinguish democracy from other regimes of power. Rather, democracy is the attempt to "come to terms" with the political difference as it is articulated in particular political moments.

Such moments of the political include the utilization of political institutions: "The democratic dispositive hence provides an institutional framework that guarantees the acceptance of the groundlessness of the social."[9] Marchart rejects the possibility that democracy can be confined within the purview of they operation of institutions, while also insisting that institutions matter. How they are formed and how the operate can make all the difference for the polity. If they are democratic, they need to include considerations of the groundlessness of democracy. Or, as Marchart puts it, they will "necessarily involve interrogating society's political institution."[10] We can say—although this is not Marchart's term—that the circle of political difference is democracy.

The groundlessness that characterizes the circle of political difference and democracy is then productive. It leads, according to Marchart, to a recognition and consideration of antagonism as the ontological negativity that prevents political ossification. Democracy then emerges as the dynamism of the ontological field of antagonism that guarantees such an irreducibility, whereby we can term Marchart's conception of democracy antagonistic—even if he prefers epithets such as "postfoundational" or "radical."

2. THE RISE OF THE POLITICAL

Antagonistic Democracy

We can consider *Thinking Antagonism* as the attempt to further refine and expand the notion of antagonistic democracy adumbrated in Marchart's determination of the political difference and democracy. In this sense, we can think of this book as participating in the discourse that has come to be called "agonistic democracy."

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[8] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 158.
[9] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 104.
[10] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 108.

We can immediately recognize, however, one feature that separates Marchart's antagonistic democracy from other prominent scholars in the field of agonistic democracy: He refrains from a sustained polemic with the politics of consensus characteristic of liberalism. Even though the fault line between his antagonistic approach and the politics of consensus is noted sporadically, there is nothing like the detailed engagement we see in other thinkers.[11] For instance, William Connolly first uses the term "agonistic democracy" in *Identity\ Difference* in opposition to how a politics of consensus constructs identity.[12] In *The Displacement of Politics*, Bonnie Honig's first book, more than half of the space is given to the polemic with liberalism and communitarianism.[13] And when Chantal Mouffe appropriates the term "agonistic democracy" for her own project in "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy" most of the essay is devoted to a refutation of deliberative democracy.[14] Why does Marchart buck this trend with his conception of antagonism?

We can readily identify three reasons. First, there is the academic context. By the time of the publication of Marchart's first book, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, in 2007, the critique of the politics of consensus is so well-rehearsed, it is hard to see what new can be added other than paraphrasing and recapitulating well-honed arguments. Instead of a summary repetition, Marchart positions his work as an extension of the project of the Essex school. From this perspective, there is no reason to write explicitly against the politics of consensus.

Second, the historical context is significant as well. The discourse of agonistic democracy developed in the interregnum between 1989 and 2001. Between the fall of the Belin Wall and 9/11, the dominance of the USA as the only superpower is shadowed by the myth of the "end of history," that is, the myth according to which liberal democracy is the only possible regime of power. Thus, when Connolly positions his conception of pluralism as a radical revision of liberalism and communitarianism, he is critical not only of these specific positions, but also of the dominance of a politics of consensus within political theory. By 2000, Mouffe goes even further. Her conception of the paradox of democracy calls for a reformation of the idea of liberal democracy by introducing antagonism in it as well as by aligning it with the post-Marxist position she had developed with Laclau.

Within this context, 9/11 is not a real but an imaginary date, or more accurately a date that challenges and changes the political imaginary. There is a marked shift,

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[11] It is regularly acknowledged that agonistic democracy develops as a discourse in opposition to liberalism. See, e.g., Mark Wenman, Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalization (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2013).

[12] William Connolly, Identity\ Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 2002).

[13] Bonnie Honig, Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1993).

[14] Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy", in The Democratic Paradox (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 80-107.

for instance, to political theology, as the kind of discourse that denotes the failure of secularism to separate the political and the theological. In a lateral register, political theology also concerns itself with what Carl Schmitt calls "the exception." Suddenly, Agamben's work on the *homo sacer* and the camp—reincarnated in Guantanamo Bay—become the focal points of intense theoretical scrutiny. The opposition to a politics of consensus seems less pressing, even inapposite in a world rife with conflict, in a historical predicament when conflict has arrived at the doorsteps of the White House and Wall Street—the symbols of the political and economic power that of the interregnum from 1989 to 2001 that the politics of consensus implicitly celebrated.

As a result—and this is the third reason for Marchart's scant engagement with liberalism and communitarianism—by 2007, a sustained engagement with the politics of consensus may appear more like an anachronistic academic exercise rather than an attempt to think on and about the historical conjecture of the moment. If in the early nineties the "enemy" of a radical political theory is the politics of consensus, a few years in the new millennium the "enemy" has changed. The "enemy" is now different conceptions of enmity, different forms in which agonism is conceptualized. My conjecture is that this is the reason Marchart avoids using the term "agonistic democracy" in his work. If the discourse of agonistic democracy defines itself in opposition to the politics of consensus, Marchart defines his discourse in opposition to different conceptions of conflict. Thus, it is more pertinent for Marchart to differentiate his position from Badiou's conception of the event than from Rawl's conception of justice, or Habermas's conception of morality—or Rainer Forst's conception of dignity, and so on.[15]

If we compare the amount of space given to the debates with the politics of consensus in the theories of agonistic democracy that pre-date Marchart and the amount of space he devotes in distinguishing his conception of antagonism from different conceptions of conflict, we could say that there is a substitution. The old problem is replaced by a new one. This is a key reason why I regard Marchart's work as so significant in the field of agonistic democracy: it marks a change of direction, a change in the distribution of volume of engagement with particular discourses—because it marks a shift in the conception of who the philosophical "enemy" is.

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[15] This does not mean of course that he never addresses philosophers who have advocated various versions of the politics of consensus. See, for instance, his comments on Hebermas in Oliver Marchart, "The Political, the Ethical, the Global: Towards a Post-Foundational Theory of Cosmopolitan Democracy", in eds. Tamara Caraus, Elena Paris, Re-Grounding Cosmopolitanism: Towards a Post-Foundational Cosmopolitanism (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 181-202.

The social and the political

The question of the enemy is the question of the antagonism of the political. But this raises the following problematic: Conflict is usually located at the social level. Does this mean that antagonism is in reality a social category? And if so, how does this affect the political? Does antagonism mean that the political is to be absorbed into the social? Marchart describes his own solution to this problematic in contradistinction to the two most notable attempts in the twentieth century to adumbrate the autonomy of the political from the social sphere: these are the attempts we find in the work of Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt. They were both responding to the threat of what Arendt terms "the rise of the social," the danger of subsuming the political within the social. Given that Marchart reverses their construal by attempting to subsume the social within the political, I refer to his position as "the rise of the political."

Marchart initially presents Arendt and Schmitt as occupying diametrically opposite positions. Arendt espouses an associative politics in the sense that for her the political happens through the interaction between subjects or what she calls the space "in-between." Schmitt defends a dissociative politics because the political consists in the identification of the enemy. Marchart presents the contrast as follows: "the way in which the collective is established ... is where the main difference lies: seen from an Arendtian angle, people in their plurality *freely associate* within the public realm, motivated ... by their care for the common. Seen from a Schmittian angle, though, a collectivity is established through an external antagonism vis-à-vis an enemy or constitutive outside, that is, by way of *dissociation*."[16] As a consequence, the forms of agonism that they espouse and that their followers further develop are marked by the difference between association and dissociation.

Nonetheless, both the Arendtian and the Schmittian approaches converge into the position Marchart calls the "neutralization thesis."[17] This is the familiar argument that Arendt calls "the rise of the social" and Schmitt the rise of the "total state." It consists in the expansion of the social sphere at the expense of the political sphere. Marchart notes that all "left Heideggerians"—a group he is partly aligned with given his reliance on Heidegger's ontology—also espouse the same position.[18] For instance, technophobia is a symptom of the neutralization thesis. The increased reliance on technology enters the social fabric and irremediably degrades human interaction as well as the human's relation to its environment. Understanding the political as association or as dissociation ultimately leads to the same result, namely, the incorporation of the political into the social.

[16] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, pp. 40-41
[17] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 44.
[18] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 47.

Marchart proposes a reversal. His own notion of antagonism is not consumed by the social but posits instead an increasing politicization that marks the autonomy of the political: "by stressing the autonomy of the political we might arrive at a point where the conditions are turned upside down, and the political itself now emerges as the *instituting* function of society: now it is the political which is the instance that grounds *and ungrounds* the social." This simultaneous grounding and ungrounding of the political combines the Aredntian and the Schmittian insights through the post-foundationalism of Marchart's political difference. He continues: "So, for instance, in the Arendtian trajectory, Claude Lefort ... will call the political the moment by which the symbolic form of society is instituted, while for Ernesto Laclau ... to some extent from within the Schmittian trajectory, the political is both the disruptive moment of the dislocation of the social and the founding moment of the social's institution vis-à-vis a radical outside."[19] The constitutive lack of foundation in the course of establishing provisional foundations—this double movement of "concealment and unconcealment," to speak with Heidegger—is inherently political, according to Marchart. In this double movement, "the political assumes primacy over the social and now indicates the very moment of institution/destitution of society."[20] This is what I call "the rise of the political" in Marchart's thought.

Polemology, or the reduction of conflict to the ontic

The rise of the political faces a danger: its radical autonomy can backfire leading to its re-absorption into the social. Marchart calls this move polemology or bellicism and examines some instances in chapter 3 of *Thinking Antagonism*. The first example of bellicism Marchart provides is Foucault's *Society Must be Defended*. This is possibly Foucault's most famous lecture-course, given that it introduces the term "biopolitics" in the last lecture. Foucault structures his lectures by inverting Clausewitz's hypothesis that war is the continuation of politics by other means. For Foucault, the reversal means that war permeates the social sphere. This is the typical move of confining antagonism to the social. The classical conception of sovereignty is substituted by this polemological conception of society. Marchart criticizes Foucault on the grounds that the way his genealogy is structured "does not go to the ontological *roots* of social conflictuality."[21] In other words, the enumeration of the various ways in which conflict is presented in Foucault's historical account unfolds as an analysis of the ontic plane, thereby failing to live up to the rise of the political.

A similar argument is employed against stasis theory as developed by Nicole Loraux—"the variant of polemology that comes ... closest to an ontology of

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[19] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 48.
[20] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 48.
[21] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 69.

antagonism."[22] Marchart discusses how Loraux, using philosophical anthropology, analyzes the notion of agonism in ancient Greece through the figure of stasis. He discerns a strong resonance with his own ontological notion of antagonism because stasis is also two-faced, meaning both movement and immobility, both discord and a static political arrangement. However, just as in the case with Foucault, the problem here is also that stasis reverts to an analysis of the ontic: "The modern notion of antagonism goes beyond this antique notion because ... negativity ... is no longer expressed by way of the paralysing clash of *two* objectively given parties (which suggests an ultimately 'ontic' understanding of conflict), but in the very breakdown of any form of unicity."[23] Ultimately, this means that Loraux's extrapolation of stasis does not arrive at the rise of the political because conflict is still confined at the social level that corresponds to the ontic.[24]

We should recall here the argument of Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. One of the key targets of their "post-Marxism" was the idea that social conflict can be organized into the conflict between two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Laclau and Mouffe tirelessly deconstruct the "scientism" that arises from such as a notion of class struggle in historical materialism. Following Laclau and Mouffe, Marchart's castigation of polemology is also implicitly a rejection of the dialectics of classical Marxism. That explains why Marchart accepts Althusser's revised Marxism, especially his conception of theory, only with the qualification that Althusser is "prone to a polemological ontology."[25] The antagonism at the social field needs to remain plural. By contrast, the best that the polemological approach can do is reduce it to two competing factions.

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The critique of both the neutralization thesis and the polemological move contains a hugely ambitious aim. Marchart wants to argue that the antagonism of political ontology of the rise of the political points to a *prima philosophia*. Starting from the premise that a post-foundational ontology can never be separated from the ontic but always arises in a circular relation to it, Marchart uses Jean-Luc Nancy's argument that then 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." Marchart makes a significant addition to Nancy's argument. To claim that

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[22] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 77.

[23] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 83.

[24] I present a different interpretation of Loraux's argument in particular and of stasis more generally in Dimitris Vardoulakis, Stasis before the State: Nine Theses on Agonistic Democracy (New York: Fordham U. P., 2018).

[25] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 194.

political ontology is *prima philosophia* entails that this "is a political move in itself."[26] It means, in other words, that an ontology, by virtue of its circular connection to the ontic, always carries political commitments.

Marchart subverts the meaning of *prima philosophia* that, in his construal, "is not concerned with a regional aspect of beings but with the ground and horizon of all possible being."[27] Unlike the metaphysical tradition that designates as *prima philosophia* the science of investigating being as unalloyed from power, he argues that political ontology is *prima philosophia* insofar as it designates that there is no pure being as understood by metaphysics. Political ontology is *prima philosophia* because it engenders the circularity of the political difference that invalidates any notion of being as mere presence. Or, in yet another formulation, political ontology is *prima philosophia* because it is antagonistic. The rise of the political is consummated in this move thoroughly ontologizes antagonism,

3. BANISHING THE INSTRUMENTAL

The ontologization of the political proposed by Marchart—what I call "the rise of the political"—is a radicalization of Heidegger's fundamental ontology that builds on the notion of antagonism developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. As soon as we consider their work, we can see that the rise of the political touches directly on the issue of instrumentality. This raises the question about how instrumentality is placed in the ontology characteristic of the political difference in Marchart's work. In particular, if instrumentality is banished to the ontic, as is the typical move in Heidegger's ontology, then how does such a banishment affect the circularity of the ontic and the ontological?

The double antagonism

The entire matrix of what Laclau and Mouffe call "hegemonic articulation" is described by Marchart as a technic of politics, that is, the various strategies and actions of the political actors. Marchart describes this instrumental field as an "onto-logic." Marchart takes a step beyond Laclau and Mouffe by extending this ontic logic to the ontological. More precisely, the "onto-logics of hegemonic politics does not strictly coincide with an ontology of the political." This "onto-logics," as developed by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, consists in a mechanism of instrumentality comprising "the logics of equivalence and difference, the empty signifier, the rhetorical figures of metaphor, metonymy or catachresis." But, adds Marchart, "all these technical categories ... are premised on, but not equivalent

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[26] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 83.
[27] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 149.

to a radical moment of negativity which makes itself felt in the differential play between the ontological and the ontic, the political and politics."[28] At the ontic level, political action can take place by negating present structures of repression that have imposed the hegemonic logic sustaining a given regime of power in a particular time and place. That's the lesson of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. At the ontological level, we also need to recognize that the negation of particular positions presupposes a radical negativity that organizes every particular negation.

This leads to a double meaning of antagonism: "If antagonism describes on the one hand the logic of politics, which consists of the articulation of differences into a chain of equivalence against a negating outside, it refers on the other hand to that instance of radical negativity which hinders the social to close itself into the totality of society."[29] There is the antagonism at the ontic level consisting in the strategic negations of instrumentality that promote the construction of hegemony. And there is the ontological antagonism that prevents any hegemonic articulation of becoming a solid ground for the social. We have already encountered this notion of radical negativity—the second antagonism—for instance, in the conception of the constitutive outside of the social. It is within this context of his radicalization of Laclau and Mouffe's position that Marchart extrapolates his notion of radical negativity.

Another way of phrasing the distinction between the two antagonisms is to say that Marchart's radicalization of hegemony is *mutatis mutandi* the same argument as the one he employs against polemology. Namely, just like Foucault's notion of biopolitics as the continuation of war by political means, and just like Loraux's extrapolation of Greek antagonism as a stasis that requires two specific opponents facing each other, the strategies of hegemony are also confined to the ontic. They fail to rise to the ontological proper, whence the need for the second notion of antagonism as radical negativity.

Significantly, Marchart notes that ontological antagonism can never be encountered directly. Just like Heidegger's being, the political in Marchart cannot be experienced. If the "being toward death" entails that one encounters death only ever as a futural possibility that structures one's experience, similarly the political is that which structures the experience of politics but is only ever accessible—or experienced—as at the ontic level. From this perspective, the strategies of hegemony—the entire gamut of instrumental means employed at the level of politics—pave the way to the ontological conception of antagonism as a constitutive outside. In this sense, the various techniques of hegemony are not to be dismissed as inferior to a superior ontological antagonism—no such hierarchy is permissible. To the contrary, it is only via the "technical categories" of hegemony that we can gain access to ontological antagonism.

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[28] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 26.
[29] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 150.

The confinement of instrumentality to the ontic

This entails that not every instrumental action is political. Marchart constructs a notion of "minimal politics" to indicate the conditions whereby politics can happen at the ontic level. Marchart's account in presented panoramically through a discussion of Gramsci's "war of position." I cite in full this important relevant passage:

> The abyss can no more be approached directly than the ground. What is called for is the development of tools for a theory of action that do consider the ontological register of the act, but do not imagine it as if it were to be realised in a vacuum. ... For we always act on a terrain criss-crossed by antagonisms and unevenly formed by sedimented institutions. For this sort of action Gramsci found the metaphor of a "war of position." With this metaphor, he recalls the convoluted trench systems on the battlefields of the First World War. Like these, the civil societies of the developed states in the West are made up of a very complex, yet resistant structure of interlaced institutions that are being contested. By introducing this notion, Gramsci let go of the classical idea of sovereign power long before Foucault did. Gramsci saw power in the developed societies not located in a given state apparatus (such as the government), nor in any place of society: he recognised that it is distributed throughout the entire civil society. Accordingly, it is not enough to storm the Winter Palace and take over power, as in the model of the revolutionary "war of movement"; the achievement of hegemony must be preceded by a long "war of position." As in the trenches of the First World War, the shifts that are achieved along the front line are but minimal and slow. The precise location of the front line is perhaps not even always apparent.[30]

The play of groundlessness and ground, the ontological ground of the abyss that post-foundational political ontology requires, can never be approached directly. The political is not visible as such, it is not subject to direct experience. Even the "front line"—the border between politics and the political—is malleable and indiscernible. This means that the political always requires its mirroring into politics where instrumentality unfolds. This ontic level is the contingent terrain where slow, unpredictable and often incalculable moves take place. Just like trench war, politics requires strategy, organization and collective action, even if these can never guarantee a successful outcome.

This confinement of the instrumental in the ontic has a significant effect on how the political difference is understood. Specifically, the ontological is purified of all instrumentality that is now confined to the ontic level. "Political action therefore means: calculation with that which cannot be calculated—the groundless—but still never without premise, and always under the conditions of a concrete, as political scientists would put it, 'opportunity structure,' i.e. in the presence of partial

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[30] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 139.

grounds."[31] The political admits of calculation only to the extent that it recognizes that it cannot calculate. The groundlessness of the ontological excludes calculation, which is now circumscribed within the ontic level, that is, the level where the "war of position" takes place and the various hegemonic strategies unfold.

Marchart takes this confinement of calculation and instrumentality to the ontic for granted. It is often repeated. For instance, in *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, Marchart writes: "What comes to block access to the 'pure' moment of the political (unmediated, that is, by the strategic movements of politics or by the sedimentations of the social) is, however, the differential nature of the political difference—implying the constant deferral of any stabilization, either on the side of politics or on the side of the political."[32] The circular relation between the ontological/political and the ontic/politics can never be stabilized. There is no purified realm of the political that is free from a "war of position." But in this relation the "strategic movement" is confined to politics. It is an entirely ontic concern.

The separation of the instrumental from the ontological is critical for the argument in *Thinking Antagonism*. For instance, we read the following: "if, on the ontological level, antagonism has little to do with a dualistic friend/enemy distinction but, instead, refers to a fundamental blockade that issues from an incommensurably negative instance, then a plethora of highly diverse concrete antagonisms will be unleashed. Conflicts will multiply, as will agents, strategies, organisations and parties."[33] The multiplicity of conflicts—the sheer contingency that characterizes the unfolding of instrumental calculations—will derail an ontology of the political. To avert this from happening it is required that antagonism on the ontological level is a pure negativity in the sense that it negates all possibility of a ground for calcuation. The possibility of ground—that is, the terrain where the first antagonism unfolds and which is vacated by the antagonism of radical negativity—is precisely the possibility of instrumental calculation.

The threat of formalism

I concur with a critique of essentialism that seeks to ground the political—moreover a critique that is mindful not to revert to metaphysics by asserting a complete groundlessness. Marchart's work is exemplary in this regard. I remain worried, however, about achieving this end by confining instrumentality to the ontic or to politics. Confining instrumentality into the ontic raises the prospect that the political difference lapses into formalism so as to sustain the relation between the ontic and the

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[31] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 140.
[32] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 6.
[33] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 194.

ontological. The ontological may appear only as the negative form of the content provided by the instrumentality characteristic of politics.

Such a prospect of formalism is troublesome. If on the side of politics agency and action are determined by the operation of instrumentality—such as the various strategies and organizational practices that enable hegemony—while on the side of the ontological the instrumental is banished, then one cannot help but sense a separation of the ontic and the ontological carried out via instrumentality. This seems to suggest a purely formal function for the ontological, which would consist in negating the instrumental—irrespective of content, since any content given by the instrumental antagonisms of the ontic is inadmissible in ontological antagonism.

Marchart flirts with such formalism. Symptomatic of this is his use of the passive voice to refer to action from the ontological perspective. Such a use of the passive voice is persistent throughout *Post-Foundational Political Thought* and *Thinking Antagonism*. Indicatively, here is a formulation of the political difference early on in *Post-Foundational Political Thought*:

> once *it is assumed* that the political acts as a grounding supplement to all social relations, it will not be possible to restrain its effects ... to the traditional field of politics. All dimensions of society ... will consequently *be subjected* to the constant play of grounding/ ungrounding as it is conceptually captured by the political difference.[34]

Both the assumption of the political difference and its effects are expressed in the passive voice. The post-foundational play of grounding and ungrounding is undertaken in the passive voice, that is, it is the agentless dispensation of the negation of the ontic where action and agency are confined. Similarly in *Thinking Antagonism*:

> dormant antagonism does not awake from its slumber by itself. Its awakening must *be provoked*—without any guarantee of success. Politics, by way of protestation, is about provoking antagonism. With regard to the latter, the political agent acts as *agent provocateur*. ... Thinking needs to *be activated* by antagonism, which, in turn, needs to *be activated* by thinking.[35]

So long as Marchart discusses the side of politics, he can refer to an *agent provocateur*, an actor who conducts himself instrumentally. As soon as the ontic is related back to the ontological so as to sustain the circularity of political difference, there is a lapse back to the passive voice. The danger is that this all that acting can do is merely provoke a recognition that it can never be fully successful—a point that surely does not need to be designated as the ontological as the ontic analysis itself has the capacity to reach the same conclusion.

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[34] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 9, emphasis added.
[35] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 197, emphasis added.

We see at this point the how close this position may appear to be to formalism. The difficulty is well-known for any ontology that refers to a constitutive outside that leads to an agentless conception of action. This is, for instance, the figure of the sovereign in Bataille—a sovereign whose actions are directed against utility and as such his most profound intervention consists in waiting rather than acting.[36] Bataille emphasizes this by calling the sovereign "NOTHING," always capitalized. Or we can see it in the celebration of the figure of Bartleby, whose "I prefer not to" most certainly dismantles any foundation of action but who also remains so devoid of content as to appear as mere form. Hardt and Negri correctly observe that "Bartleby in his pure passivity and his refusal of any particulars presents us with a figure of generic being, being as such, being and nothing more."[37] One fears that the passive voice in Marchart's text is like the shadow of Bartleby over his notion of political difference.

Astutely, Marchart avoids Heidegger's ruse to bypass this problem. Being acutely aware of the threat of formalism, Heidegger uses art or techne to fill the void of the ontological. According to Heidegger, it is great art—from the pre-Socratics to Hölderlin—that gives being an expression, or that lets being come forth. Heidegger valorizes art by accentuating the separation of being from instrumentality. Technology is ontic, only techne, as the "secret" source of technology is connected to being, as he argues in "The Question Concerning Technology." Marchart is not seduced by such a celebration of an art as settling the separation from instrumentality from the ontological. He does not take the path according to which content can be given in the guise of a book of Hölderlin's poems carried in the rucksacks of soldiers marching to war. The "uselessness" of Sophoclean tragedy is far from an adequate response to the plurality of political struggles and antagonisms facing us in any historical moment. Marchart is not tempted by Heidegger's *ruse of techne*.[38]

There are two key reasons why Marchart is prudent to avoid this solution to the problem of formalism and passive subjectivity. First, there is the ontological danger that the passive voice as an effect of the banishment of the instrumental reproduces one of the fundamental distinctions of metaphysics that Heidegger himself castigates, namely, the distinction between form and matter. The ontological, as an effect of an agentless passive voice, appears perilously close to be merely the formal observe side of the ontic. Second, this leads to pernicious political consequences.

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[36] For instance, Bataille writes: "the man of action—who meant to command history—if he were attentive would see that another, who doesn't act, who waits, may in a sense be ridiculous, but takes the consequences of the event more seriously: the one who waits without acting disregards those immediate ends that never have all the importance, nor the exact importance, which action bestows on them." Georges Bataille, Sovereignty, in The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, volume 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), pp. 277-78.

[37] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 2000), p. 203.

[38] I am alluding here to an argument that I develop in detail in Vardoulakis, The Ruse of Techne: Heidegger's Metaphysical Materialism (forthcoming).

Politics can never completely eliminate presentation, whereby it needs the "voice" both as the representatives and the represented. It is an illusion to believe that ontological formalism can dispense with representation altogether. Moreover, it is a dangerous illusion because then all sorts of mythical constructs can rush to fill the void of representation in politics, such as an imaginary people (*das Volk*) or a "charismatic" leader. Formalism does not eliminate the "active voice" in politics; rather, it prevents a critical political engagement, which is beneficial only for those who want to assume the mantle of authority.

Thus, the banishment of instrumentality from the ontological creates all sorts of metaphysical and political problems about how the differential relation between the ontic and the ontological is understood. If the typical solution is unpalatable, then how can we understand the circle of the political difference without lapsing into formalism. Maybe we need to delve deeper into the banishing of the instrumental into the ontic. Maybe we need to consider whether we need to dare to construct a notion of the ontological that *includes* instrumentality? How could such a radicalization of radical negativity be accomplished?

4.   THE PERSISTENCE WITH POLITICAL JUDGMENT

I noted earlier that there is a shift in the way Marchart positions his discourse of antagonistic democracy, so that it is no longer a matter of how to distinguish agonism from consensus, but rather a matter of how to identify the correct form of antagonism. Starting with the political difference—the distinction between the political and politics—Marchart develops a post-foundational theory of the political that is, at the same time, a theory of antagonism. Simultaneously, there is a double antagonism, both ontological and ontic, both political and a dispensation of the hegemonic articulations at the ontic plane. This position faces the problem of how to deal with the banishing of instrumentality to the ontic, which suggests a separation between the ontic and the ontological, making Marchart's political ontology appear precariously close to formalism.

Heideggerianism and Hegelianism

Even though the treatment of instrumentality causes all sorts of problems, there is no direct engagement with instrumentality in Marchart's work. But this may be due to the fact that the problem that I call the banishing of the instrumentality is dealt with through other means. Specifically, one may contend that the problem of formalism is addressed by a key move that we find in the opening of *Post-Foundational Political Thought*: the distinction between post-foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. The distinction suggests that the circularity of the ontological

difference and the double sense of negation cannot be separated and examined as individual concerns.

Focusing exclusively on negation at the expense of circularity, anti-foundationalism rejects any grounding of the political tout court whereby it lapses into the very grounding it has rejected. In Marchart's formulation: "insofar as the anti-foundationalist view is premised on the negation of, or simple opposition to, the foundationalist view, it obviously shares the same horizon with foundationalism."[39] Negating the possibility of grounding as such is nothing but another form of grounding. Anti-foundationalism is the obverse side of foundationalism. This is the reason that the "post-modernist" anti-foundationalist discourses, far from negating foundationalism, actually promote it: "framing of the discussion in dualistic terms—where anti-foundationalists are merely negating or inverting foundationalist premises—is part of the strategy of foundationalists rather than being the strategy of post-foundationalists."[40] This is why foundationalist discourses thrive when faced with anti-foundationalist ones: "The negative label of 'antiness' is assigned from the standpoint of foundationalism. ... Framing the ongoing debate in terms of the divide between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism favours foundationalism and thus is upheld and deliberately instrumentalized by foundationalists."[41] Thus, for instance, if we recognize that the liberal politics of identity in the US are in fact an anti-foundationalist discourse, then it is easy to see how foundationalist discourses such as "make America great" thrive in conjunction with them.

The critical idea in the distinction between post-foundationalism and anti-foundationalism is the combination of circularity and negation. How is it possible for post-foundationalism to negate foundations without lapsing into the naïve negativity of anti-foundationalism that is unaware of the circularity of political difference This is a pivotal concern for Marchart as negation affects the circular relation between politics and the political and it thus has an impact on whether the discourse manages to escape formalism. His notion of antagonism is inscribed in this problematic and it is a—if not, *the*—major concern of *Thinking Antagonism*.

At the onset of *Thinking Antagonism*, Marchart describes his position as a combination of Heideggerianism—the circular relation of the ontological and the ontic—and Hegelianism—the emphasis on negativity.[42] Thus, Marchart introduces the term "antagonism" as follows:

[39] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 12.
[40] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, p. 12.
[41] Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, pp. 12-13.
[42] I should note that what Marchart calls "Hegelianism" is perhaps much more indebted to French Hegelians than to Hegel himself. Kojève is hugely important in this context. In the generation after Kojève, and thus more removed from Hegel, it is important to note the influence of Bataille's conception of negativity—a conception that has come into contact with psychoanalysis. I cannot take up all these interesting connections here.

> Antagonism is the name that was given to the phenomenon of social negativity in the tradition of German Idealism, Early Romanticism and Marxism. It was carried forward by the Heideggerian Hegelians of the first half of the twentieth century, among them Kojève, Sartre and Lacan. This concept was born from a collective inquiry that reaches back more than two hundred years, but it was in the work of Ernesto Laclau, initially in his path-breaking book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, co-written with Chantal Mouffe, that "antagonism" found a contemporary systematic treatment.[43]

We are presented here with the framing of *Thinking Antagonism*. It is a combination of Heidegger and Hegel—of the circularity and negativity of ontology. The genealogy of this combination reaches back to the beginning of the nineteenth century—a genealogy Marchart presents in chapter 1, "Marx on the Beach," one of the most remarkable chapters of *Thinking Antagonism*. The combination of Hegelian negativity and Heidegger's destruction of metaphysical foundations is consummated in the work of Laclau and Mouffe who, nonetheless—as I noted earlier—do not take the final step of presenting a full ontology of the political. It is this step that Marchart takes with his own work.

What stitches together all these threads is negativity as the defining feature of the ontological. This is the *radical negativity* of a constitutive outside that is required— as Laclau recognizes, notes Marchart—for meaning to be produced:

> For differences to assume a certain degree of systematicity, they must be brought into a relation of equivalence, which can only be stabilised vis-à-vis a common outside that cannot simply be another difference (as in this case it would not constitute a true outside but would be internal to a system of differences). The outside must be of a *radically* different nature: different, that is, from all internal differences. And this it can only be as a *non*-differential instance of radical negativity—named antagonism by Laclau. ... Negating the differential nature of a given system is the very precondition for its systematicity and, thus, for meaning to arise.[44]

A discourse can be systematic without lapsing into foundationalism only by positing a constitutive outside that prevents its occlusion. At the same time, this outside enables the internal negation of the hegemonic articulations of a given social group. Radical negativity is the parallel operation of circularity and the negation of the ontic. Understood this way, radical negativity or antagonism denotes a "double-sided moment: the moment of original *institution* as well as the moment of original *destitution* of social order."[45] Thus antagonism, radical negativity or the constitutive outside—which from the present perspective are interchangeable terms—designate the ontological whose lack of foundation is presupposed by the operation of politics.

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[43] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, pp. 1-2.
[44] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, pp. 20-21.
[45] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 23.

Interchangeable priority or qualitative difference?

We need a further step to see why the combination of Heideggerianism and Hegelianism may answer the threat of formalism. The combination of circularity and negativity entails that neither radical negation not the negation of the ontic is privileged absolutely. But this does not mean that no such privileging takes place. If the production of meaning requires the constitutive outside of radical negativity, but Marchart insists that for the circle to be sustained the privileging could also be revered. Or differently put, the privileging is a matter of perspective, whereby either radical negativity or the negation of the hegemonic can be privileged. Marchart outlines the second kind of privileging in chapter 8, titled "Being as Acting: The Primacy of Politics and the Politics of Thought":

> Politics begins with negation. From an *ontological* perspective, this would of course imply the "eventual" emergence of an antagonism; yet, from the perspective of *ontic* practices ... negation has to be brought about. Negativity, in other words, is not simply "out there" as a cosmic principle or an objective feature of the world. Negativity is to be produced by our actions. Therefore, when trying to invert the order of priority between the ontological and the ontic, one has to insist on negativity as an ontic practice—for the ontological instance of antagonism will only emerge when activated by our worldly actions. There is antagonism because politics—as much as political thinking—proceeds through negation.[46]

The fact that "politics begins with negation" is not meant as a revision of the earlier position about the priority of the political but rather as the assertion of a double perspective on negativity—just as we saw earlier a double meaning of antagonism. Negativity is both ontological and ontic. What Marchart adds here is that the ontological emerges only "when activated by our worldly actions." It is through the combination of radical negativity and circularity—which makes possible an interchangeable priority of negation from the ontic to the ontological perspective—that Marchart evades the problem of formalism.

A few pages later we find his answer to the associated problem about passive subjectivity:

> While we are not the source of our actions, we must attribute to ourselves the capacity to act unless we want to remain passive bystanders. ... I am because I negate— and I negate because my being is negated. ... [A]ntagonism as an instance of radical negativity, far from constituting something of the order of a natural force somewhere out there, detached from our practice, is always politically produced. What from an ontological perspective is the name for an insurmountable blockade of society—a mere incommensurability that *cannot* be constructed—*is* constructed, from an ontic perspective, through a particular practice: the negation of the given.[47]

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[46] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 187.
[47] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 196.

The negativity at the ontic plane ensures that we do not "remain passive bystanders." In this sense, radical negativity provides an account of how action is possible. Far from celebrating passivity and lapsing into vacuous formalism that can only end up serving the interests of those in power, the combination of Hegelianism and Heideggerianism proposes a theory of action—one that "negates the given" while avoiding the dead-end of anti-foundationalism.

Does such a construal of radical negativity actually overcome the problematic banishment of instrumentality onto the ontic realm? Or is the combination of circularity and negativity a deflection whereby the banishment is merely transfigured into the positing of two perspectives, a move that changes the terms of the problem without address it as such? If circularity makes the two perspectives *interchangeable*, still this does not mean that they do not remain *incommensurable*. The fact that we can move from the ontic to the ontological, or from politics to the political, and back again, does not entail that the rift has been closed.

To the contrary, paying close attention to the passage above, we can notice that the rift is not just formulated in a different vocabulary. The antagonism of radical negativity, holds Marchart, does not constitute the political in the guise of "the order of a natural force." Naturalization makes politics and the political disappear. For politics to persist, instrumentality needs to function within the negations that are part of the hegemonic articulations. A "negation of the given" or determinate negation is required alongside the radical negation of the ontological plane.[48] The double face of negation—negation of the given and radical negativity—establishes a *system of exchange* or shifting perspective from within political and ontological difference. But this does not mean that it avoids an ontological dualism given that it persists with the *qualitative distinction* between the two perspectives.

Thereby a new gap appears, or, rather, the earlier separation is now reformulated—and, moreover, in such a way that instrumentality is still inscribed in it. This new formulation is between the naturalism of radical negativity that itself can construct nothing political, as opposed to the instrumentality that concerns exclusively the hegemonic constructions of politics. Politics institutes us through negation because its instrumentality is different from natural causality.

How are we to understand this gap between instrumentality and causality? There is a significant history on the relation of causality and instrumentality—one that, as I argue elsewhere, is central to the conception of materialism.[49] A materialist ontology

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[48] There is a temptation at this point to stage the divergences between Marchart's reliance on a Hegelian notion of negativity from a Spinozan position in terms of the old debate that Pierre Macherey's classic Hegel or Spinoza, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). But this will be a diversion that I cannot undertake here.

[49] I argue that the distinction between causality and instrumentality is indispensable for a materialist politics. See Vardoulakis, Spinoza, the Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2020).

requires this distinction between causality and instrumentality so as to give an account of action. Telegraphically, a version of this history goes as follows:

Causality and instrumentality in materialism

The notion of causality can deal with matter. At the beginning of philosophy, the principle that nothing comes out of nothing, or that there is a totality outside of which nothing exists, is a commonly agreed upon ontological principle. The "Greek cosmologists," as David Furley calls them, fiercely debate this ontological principle that itself remains however beyond dispute.[50] This position is the founding principle of materialism. It effectively asserts that there is no transcendence. There is no being that is essentially different from the being that we empirically encounter in our experience. Or, to put it the other way round, there is no possibility that an entity—let's call it "god"—can intervene from the "outside" of empirical being to change that empirical being in any way, regardless of whether such interventions are understood as miracles or as acts of the free will.[51] In yet another formulation, the laws of nature are constant, which is why the chains of causes and effects, or causality, cannot account for the construction and change characteristic of the political sphere.

Alongside this natural causality, there is instrumentality that articulates as the calculation of utility and is necessary for an account of action and politics. If causality concerns being, instrumentality concerns the being of the human. The human is not capable of having a complete knowledge of the chain of causes and effect. Even the simplest act—just like the actions of my finders right now pressing the keys of the computer keyboard—is the product of a vast chain of causes and effects that I am utterly hopeless in mastering. I can master some of these causes. For instance, I can study the causality that makes it possible for my computer to work, or for this file to be saved automatically on my cloud storage. But this is far from an adequate explanation about how I have come to write what I am writing right now.

We can readily discern two distinct yet inseparable constellations of questions. There are questions about the causes that determine action. And there are questions that inquire about the means and ends of action. The material cause of a book may be the computer technology that enables the typic, saving, and sharing of the document. But this tells us nothing about why the author chose a particular topic or about the decisions to treat that topic in a particular way. These are instrumental questions whose end is always provisional and unstable. It is produced along with

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[50] David Furley, The Greek Cosmologists: The Formation of Atomic Theory and its Earliest Critics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[51] The resurfacing of this materialist insight is critical for the development of natural science in modernity. SeeCatherine Wilson, Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008).

the actions that it produces. Causality and instrumentality give answers to different questions but they concern the same being.

The materialist tradition has always had recourse to such a distinction between causality and instrumentality. Despite the different terminology that have been employed over the ages to delineate this distinction, it is always suggests the commensurability of causality and instrumentality, because they occupy the same ontological plane. For instance, Machiavelli formulates this in terms of the distinction between fortune and virtue. His illustration of the distinction in chapter 25 of *The Prince* refers to a river that fortune (that is, natural causes) make it flood with ferocious destruction, while virtue (that is, the instrumental calculation) can prevent the destruction of the river by building dikes and dams.[52] Machiavelli is not suggesting that fate or virtue refer to different kinds of being. Nor does he refer to two interchangeable perspectives. Rather, causality and instrumentality are circumscribed within the same plane but indicate different questions that can be asked of that plane.

This has implications for the political difference. From the perspective of the ontological difference, it is impossible to confine either fate or virtue to either the ontological or the ontic. The distinction of fate and virtue—or of causality and instrumentality—overlays the ontological difference thereby preventing a gap to open up between the ontological and the ontic. Similarly, there is an overlap between the political and politics.

Practical judgment and the inscription of instrumentality in the ontological

This overlaying that inscribes instrumentality across political difference is effected through practical judgment. The earliest instance of the distinction between causality and instrumentality that I am aware of occurs in the context of Aristotle's examination of phronesis in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. At the very beginning, Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of the end:

> Judging determines acting (it instigates the movement of action, not its final end), and judging is determined by desire and the *logos* toward a certain specific or provisional end [πράξεως μὲν οὖν ἀρχὴ προαίρεσις (ὅθεν ἡ κίνησις ἀλλ᾽ οὐχ οὗ ἕνεκα), προαιρέσεως δὲ ὄρεξις καὶ λόγος ὁ ἕνεκα τινος].[53]

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[52] Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1988), pp. 84-85.

[53] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard U. P., 2003), 1139a32-33, trans modified.

Consideration of nature requires the determination of *final ends*—which accords with Aristotle's theory of the four causes.[54] By contrast, the kind of practical judgment that the Greeks call phronesis and which pertains to action is characterized by an instrumental thinking that considers *provisional ends*—that is, ends that can be otherwise as they are determined by contingent circumstances. We are all aware of the drawback of making the ends of phronesis only provisional: as Aristotle observes, this entails that phronesis never achieves certainty, which is why at the end of book of Book 6 he privileges theoretical knowledge over phronesis. Regardless of the details of Aristotle's argument and its conclusions, it is worth remembering that construction of practical judgment requires the distinction between causality and instrumentality.[55] From such a materialist perspective, causality and instrumentality are distinct but inseparable. Practical judgment is the function of the difference between causality and instrumentality that effects an overlap between the ontic and the ontological or between politics and the political. Effectively, this means that practical judgment ensures the inscription of instrumentality into the ontological as well as the ontic.

This historical background matters because of the enormous influence of Heidegger in obscuring the distinction. This takes place through a curious mistranslation of the passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics* that I cited above. In his early work on Aristotle, such as in the opening seminars of his course on the *Sophist*, which is of fundamental importance in his preparation of *Being and Time*, Heidegger misses the negative next to the final end. This leads Heidegger to conflate causality and instrumentality, or to bundle together all thinking of ends.[56] This mistake persists in the late Heidegger. For instance, in "The Question Concerning Technology," we still discern the same collapse of causality into instrumentality. The effect of this amnesia about a distinction that ancient philosophy was acutely aware of has been that the jumbled causality/instrumentality is circumscribed into the ontic. Whence the difficulty of a rift between the ontic and the ontological effected by instrumentality. And the inadequate solution of the problem through the interchangeable priority of ontic and ontological negation that still asserts a qualitative difference between the two notions of negativity.

To recognize and follow this materialist tradition about the distinction of causality and instrumentality creates a pernicious dilemma for radical negativity. The

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[54] Aristotle formulates his theory of the four causes in both the Metaphysics and the Physics. See, e.g., Aristotle, Physics, Volume I: Books 1-4, trans. H. Wicksteed, F.M. Cornford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1957), 1013b.

[55] That this distinction is not peculiar to Aristotle is supported by the fact that we know of numerous treatises on ethics from antiquity whose title is Peri telous (On ends), culminated in Cicero's De finibus.

[56] This mistranslation and its implications are the topic of chapter 1 of Vardoulakis, The Ruse of Techne. For reasons of space, I cannot go into the details of this argument here.

dilemma arises as soon as the rift between the ontic and ontological via the confinement of instrumentality to the ontic is realized. Two equally undesirable options arise at this point: either trying to bridge the rift, thereby lapsing into a vulgar empiricism; or persisting with the rift, thereby accepting transcendence and abandoning materialism in favor of metaphysics. Let us return at this point to Marchart's text to examine how this dilemma plays out.

There are passages where Marchart appears to side with the empiricist solution. Assertions such as that "politics begins with negation" and that it is our actions that produce negativity may appear to lean this way. But a lapse into empiricism is something that Marchart himself explicitly denounces. This is, for instance, the reason of his rejection of Foucault and Loraux's polemological approaches—as we saw earlier. Moreover, if political philosophy were merely an enumeration of empirically observable instances, then a political ontology would be defunct and any attempt to determine post-foundationalism or a determinate outside purely futile.

The alternative is the hardly more palatable prospect of a re-inscription of transcendence. When Marchart writes, as we saw above, that "the outside must be of a *radically* different nature" from the ontic realm where politics unfolds, then the banishment of instrumentality into the ontic sphere asserts a qualitative difference. In the absence of an argument that shows the operative presence of instrumentality in this radical negativity of the constitutive outside, we will be entitled to say that the outside here is of a different kind of being—*qualitatively*—from the being of the political actors. Radical negativity has not cut off the rearing head of transcendence yet.

We have already seen the way out of this dilemma: the inscription of instrumentality to the ontological with recourse to a notion of practical judgment. Marchart has this solution at his disposal, even though he does not develop it—or, at least, has not develop it in his published work yet. The solution pertains to how the circular relation of the ontic and the ontological can be construed through judgment in such a way as to avoid positing a qualitatively different being at one side of the circle. In a note, Marchart observes: "Politics and the political can only emerge from each other, yet there remains that minimal difference of non-concurrence that precludes coming full circle and blocks every deductive thought." Instead of a constitutive outside that is qualitatively different from its ontic underbelly, here the relation of politics and the political is construed as an overlap. How can the political difference within the overlap be retained? Marchart continues: "Hence *the inevitability of political judgement* as the virtue that is absolutely necessary to achieve plausible articulation on both sides of the difference."[57] Exactly! If political judgment is instrumental—encompassing all the instrumental strategies of hegemonic articulation—then it is necessary to articulate the operative presence of instrumentality *on both sides* of the political and ontological difference. It is this overlap of politics and the political,

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[57] Marchart, Thinking Antagonism, p. 234, emphasis added.

of the ontic and the ontological, through the inevitability of practical, instrumental judgment that breaks the hold of the dilemma "empiricism or transcendence."

Even if Marchart appears to have entrenched himself in a radical negativity whose combination of Hegelianism and Heideggerianism leads him to the confine instrumentality into the ontic, the tensions within his position push him to adopt the discourse of practical judgment—even momentarily. All that is needed to overcome the rift between the ontic and the ontological that instrumentality threatens is to inscribe instrumentality into the ontological. In other words, all that is needed is for the inclusion of practical judgment to be persisted with. Such a foregrounding will constitute the radicalization of the radical negativity.