

# IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER: THE WEIGHT OF INHERITANCE IN OLIVER MARCHART'S *THINKING ANTAGONISM*\*

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## ABSTRACT

Oliver Marchart's new book stretches his political ontology to its logical implications extending and reworking some of the central insights of Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxism. At the same time, however, Marchart may perhaps be too deferent to, or possibly overly invested in, Laclau's legacy in ways that threaten to compromise the radical potential of his own reconceptualisation of antagonism. This critical review seeks to uncover in Marchart's ontology of the political the untapped potential for a radical political stasiology by building on his earlier concept of political difference.

## KEYWORDS

Political ontology, antagonism, political difference, stasis.

As someone who has been persistently prodding Oliver Marchart to stretch his political ontology to its logical implications (Paipais 2017a; 2017b), I cannot but praise the publication of *Thinking Antagonism* for taking a step to that direction (Marchart, 2018).<sup>1</sup> From a profound reconstruction of the post-Marxist concept of antagonism to the elaboration of a systematic 'ontology of the political' (p. 3), this volume takes Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxist insights to their logical conclusion, while further unpacking some of the implications of Marchart's own political ontology. At the same time, however, it leaves one with the impression that Marchart is perhaps too deferent to, or possibly overly invested in, Laclau's legacy in ways that threaten to compromise the radical potential of his own argument. At any

\* Parts of this essay are based on my review of Marchart's book in *Constellations*, 26(3): 504-6 republished here with Wiley's kind permission.

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent references to Marchart (2018) will be indicated by using page numbers in the text.

rate, as this is a book that slaughters many sacred cows in philosophy and political theory, it may equally cause outrage, astonishment, disagreement, admiration, or unconditional praise, but only great books can engender such mixed reactions thanks to the wealth of provocative ideas and creative rereadings they propose.

## THE PROMISE OF AN ONTOLOGY OF THE POLITICAL

Marchart's main objective in the book is to offer a political ontology – or, rather, an 'ontology of the political', as he puts it for good reasons – that fleshes out some of the ideas already inherent, but not fully spelled out, in Laclau's post-Marxism. In this respect, the book goes beyond the Laclau (and Mouffe, 1985) of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and draws on some of the breakthroughs that Laclau achieved at a later stage, following Žižek's Lacanian critique, as outlined in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (Laclau, 1990), his *On Populist Reason* (Laclau, 2005) and his posthumous collection of essays, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (Laclau, 2014). The central intuition Marchart borrows from Laclau (but also from Lefort, Mouffe, Nancy and other post-foundationalist thinkers) is that the political is the moment of institution/de-institution of society that, in line with the post-Marxist nomenclature, he calls antagonism. Yet, in Marchart, antagonism is inflated to become the name not only for the 'ontic' battles social actors conduct in society, but primarily for the 'political nature of social being as such' (p. 3). This is a maximalist claim that Marchart defends throughout the book, initially by offering a genealogy of the idea of antagonism that harks back to the legacy of German Idealism and Marxism.

The first part of the book expands on the main difference Marchart identifies between his ontological conception of antagonism and those older renditions of Marxism or some more contemporary ontological discourses, such as those offered by Michel Foucault, Bernard Stiegler, and Nicole Loraux, which Marchart deems as ontic polemologies that do not go far enough in their theorisation of antagonism. In a nutshell, his critique amounts to claiming that, after the Heideggerian attack on metaphysical foundations, 'we' have come to recognise that antagonism does not operate solely on the ontic level of conflictuality (as 'class struggle' or ontic 'polemology'), but it rather bears an ontological quality it shares with the Hegelian notion of radical negativity. In fact, Marchart audaciously brings together Heideggerian fundamental ontology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the Hegelian notion of *reflective negation*<sup>2</sup> to defend a reformulation of antagonism as

<sup>2</sup> In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel (1995: 407) carefully distinguishes two senses of negativity that in many ways resemble the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological. On the one hand, negativity as reflective designates the purely negative process of Becoming as self-differing or moving-away-from which is independent of specific content. Negativity here becomes the condi-

the inaccessible Real of political ontology, responsible both for the grounding of the social *and* for its unravelling in situations of crisis, be it either revolution, dissent or protestation (in a sense, as constituent power always mediated through ontic, either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, politics).

In the second part of the book, Marchart outlines the 'symbolic onto-logic' of the construction of ontic politics corresponding to his radical rethinking of antagonism. Marchart is adamant that there are certain minimal conditions that need to be in place before any action is recognised as political. Faithful to the radical democratic tradition that equates politics with collective mobilisation, he restricts politics to an act of collective will, strategically pursued, aiming to 'usurp' the universal, i.e. create a chain of equivalences that would transform a mere sectional request into a social demand, with an eye on achieving a hegemonic status (so politics, even if not numerically, at least symbolically should be majoritarian targeting people's 'hearts and minds' as an expression of universal aspirations). Marchart consciously sides here with those definitions of politics that view it necessarily as militant or oppositional activism pursuing either hegemony or counter-hegemony building. Either way, social action for Marchart is worthy of the name politics only if it generates the very negativity that the political qua antagonism seems to be the marker of on the ontological level. Consequently, not everything is political for Marchart, but even within sedimented forms of the social (institutions, bureaucracies, even regular family or personal relations), the political qua antagonism lies in hibernation or, as Marchart somewhat poetically puts it citing Nancy, 'trembles' (p. 106) inconspicuously, awaiting reactivation through protest politics.

The next logical step in Marchart's radicalisation of the concept of antagonism is to make a claim which is even more provocative, yet follows directly from his conception of antagonism-as-the-name-of-the-political. Marchart's wager is that *thinking* itself is an inescapably militant, contentious, collective, and partisan activity, elevated to its true potential only when it goes beyond mere conceptuality, namely beyond serving as the theoretical component of the various scientific disciplines that sustain the sedimented or reproductive practices of a given society. Philosophy, in other words, assumes its true dignity, so to speak, only as far as it, not only reflects, but also critically enacts or reactivates dormant possibilities within the social (according to Marchart, only when ontology becomes *prima philosophia*). Marchart's radical re-conceptualisation of antagonism thus comes full circle. Thinking, being and acting are at once penetrated by the political, perceived as the

tion of possibility for any differentiation, identity, or particularity within the ontic world. On the other hand, negativity as qualitative is a mediated negation -reflecting the Spinozian dictum that 'all determination is negation'- which describes the way negation appears within existence as the affirmation or identity of a thing as differing from its own opposite and from everything else. This parallel between Hegel's and Heidegger's discourse is premised on their agreement that pure negative activity is only visible in the world as 'qualitative determinateness'.

elusive dimension of radical negativity that does not come from the 'outside' but is generated by the very constitutive incompleteness of the social, manifested in the politico-intellectual terrain through the restless repetition or succession of ontic conflicts.

### ANTAGONISM OR *POLITICAL DIFFERENCE*? DIVIDING THE DIFFERENCE

This is a tall order, indeed. Antagonism becomes the very name of the political qua radical negativity.<sup>3</sup> Marchart blends his sources very skilfully but also often somewhat daringly. Heidegger and Hegel are intriguingly brought together in ways that can also be disconcerting, even for those like Marchart who reject Hegel's panlogism, since the Hegelian politics of negativity (or, rather, the Hegelian-Kojevidian synthesis that Marchart defends) sits uneasily with late Heidegger's politics of affirmative passivity. One does not have to be an Agambenian to see that Marchart's too quick dismissal of the politics of affirmative passivity as passively nihilistic, anti-political, or even not really politics at all, accords primacy to a very specific (Machiavellian/Gramscian/Laclauian) understanding of political action that, even if not always directly voluntarist, it is at least identified with success, effectivity, and mastery in an uneven social terrain riven by power asymmetries and inequalities. While Marchart may claim that his affirmation of concrete politics and his refusal to recognise a politics of abdication, to remember Blanchot's (1986) coinage, from a harsh or unfavourable social reality is authorised ontologically, his very own formalisation of antagonism may be the first victim of such a narrow perspective. To paraphrase Agamben, antagonism as radical negativity/nothingness can easily become the final veil of language (i.e. a well-hidden ultimate foundation),<sup>4</sup> obstructing access to a view of *political difference* as a productive threshold where the political and its infinite cross-cuttings with politics are still indeterminable and thus open to multiple appropriations and diverse incarnations.

As Marchart (2007) has previously shown, the difference between politics (any particular constituted order) and the political (the exception(s), contingency or pure difference that constitute it by transgressing it) is not simply another posited,

<sup>3</sup> Although it is not clear why antagonism should not rather be, as I will argue shortly, the name of the very *difference* between politics and the political, which would have perhaps saved Marchart from some unnecessary criticisms.

<sup>4</sup> 'Nihilism experiences this very abandonment of the word by God. But it interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language' (Agamben 1999: 47).

arbitrary structural necessity. It rather constitutes a necessary *quasi-transcendental* condition of possibility for any meaningful order of historicity to arise. Quasi-transcendental, here, stands for the paradoxical operation of the political as both belonging to the social order by authorizing the principle(s) of its constitution *and* being in a relation of constitutive exception to it. And yet, Marchart often neglects to stress, or stress enough, that this is only half of the picture of the formal logic of double negation that governs *political difference*, namely that it is only the part that corresponds to the operation of the political as constitutive exception of every particular sociopolitical order. The other crucially important dimension is the radical impotence penetrating the political itself that corresponds to the idea of the Lacanian Real as inexistent, incomplete, 'non-All'.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, my impression is that Marchart may have better served the radical potential of his argument had he focused more closely on Lacan's formula of sexuation in articulating what is at stake in his wonderfully productive earlier concept of *political difference*. The latter signifies a radicalised, doubly split concept of antagonism that maps nicely onto the Lacanian idea of the absence of sexual difference, as the below long quote by Žižek (2012: 760-1) suggests:

Sexual difference is thus ultimately not the difference between sexes, but the difference which cuts across the very heart of the identity of each sex, stigmatising it with the mark of impossibility... there is no relationship, *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* – the two sexes are out of sync...Lacan defines the desire of the analyst not as a pure desire...but as a desire to obtain absolute difference. In order for the difference to be 'absolute', it must be a redoubled, self-reflected difference a difference of differences, and this is what the formulae of sexuation offer: the 'dynamic' antinomy of All and its exception, and the 'mathematic' antinomy of non-All without exception. In other words, there is no direct way to formulate sexual difference: sexual difference names the Real of an antagonism which can only be circumscribed through two different contradictions.

The upshot of this formula is that the masculine logic of the political as constitutive exception to politics (the still Schmittian/Hegelian/Kojevian logic of antagonism as radical negativity) is doubly split by the feminine logic of the ontological-political as constitutively 'non-All'. This is not, anymore, obeying the logic of the transgression that sustains the law (any hegemonic normative socio-political order and its transgression in the form of anti-hegemonic politics) but of love as fulfilment of the law (the double negation or division of the division that deactivates the violence of the law). Such a logic authorises forms of politics, namely incarnations of a 'non-All' universal, that operate as embodiments of failure, incompleteness, messianic weakness, brokenness; not only as the failure to fill the absent fullness

<sup>5</sup> The aspect of the political as the constitutive exception to politics corresponds to the masculine side of Lacan's formula of sexuation whereas the idea of the political as inherently incomplete or 'non-All' to the feminine side, see Žižek (2012: 764-771).

of society, but as renewal and hope, as the logic of transfiguration of the political itself, of what it means to act politically.

The double formalisation of *political difference* described here is not captured by the foundational prejudices of regional ontologies, but constitutes a *formal ontology* or, else, a type of political ontology that undermines the logic of foundationalism from within without falling back to either the abstract exteriority of a ‘false’ transcendence or the incessant immanence of a self-enclosed agonistic totality. Transcendence, in that sense, is neither exalted nor domesticated nor dismissed. It is rather reconstrued to signify the void within immanence as the condition of possibility for historicity itself. Critique then rests on this irreducible double gap (the gap between the Real and the Symbolic for Žižek or, as Benjamin and Agamben would have it, the Pauline ‘division of the division’) within historical forms of social identification that both enables social reproduction and prevents its ossification by producing a remnant that deactivates and denaturalises social and political order without discarding it.<sup>6</sup>

Such a critical formalism is also genuinely materialist<sup>7</sup> in the sense that radical negativity or pure difference understood as the ‘internal-external’ excess/gap of signification – that is, as emerging in the intersection of the Real and the Symbolic – explains empirical differentiation and multiplicity, not as emanating from the infinity of positive historical actualities (which would make the contingency of positive worlds not necessary but contingent), but rather from an originary antagonism (a globalised civil war or *stasis* as an ontological condition and a zone of indistinction between order and disorder) that makes these actualities (im)possible in the first place (see also Agamben, 2015; Vardoulakis, 2017). Such a civil war, such a *stasis*, becomes the ontological condition of (im)possibility of the politics/political double negation. Stasis, here, does not signify any prejudice in favour of ontic mobility, upheaval, anarchy, or irregularity. As the term’s ambiguity itself suggests, denoting both immobility and unrest, *stasis* operates not only as the ontological condition of possibility for the constitution/de-constitution of any particular order, but also the internal block in any constituted order that undermines its fulfillment,

<sup>6</sup> Such a perspective that has recently inspired the work of Critchley (2012), Žižek (2003) and Agamben (2005) is often described as Pauline *meontology* from St Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (7: 29-32) where the life of the messianic subject is described as an existence where every aspect of this world is experienced as passing away in a process whereby every worldly activity is not nullified by its opposite but suspended (‘as though not’, *hōs me*) in the nothingness that constitutes its groundless ground.

<sup>7</sup> In a counterintuitive critique of traditional notions of dialectical materialism, Žižek proposes an alternative understanding of the term based on the idea that we conceive the ‘material’ not as an all-encompassing fundament, a totalising ground of reality or history, but rather as ‘non-All’, as the marker of the incompleteness of being (see Žižek, 2011).

completion, innocence, and self-sufficiency. In other words, it stands in for *political difference* itself as a double caesura between politics and the political.

It is also important to note here that, unlike Agamben's (1998) excessive overidentification of sovereign power with governmentality (that transforms the physical existence of individuals into a political state of exception, which is paradoxically maintained into perpetuity), this reading of *political difference* as *stasis* conceives of sovereignty, not as necessarily murderous politics or biopolitical depoliticisation, but rather as 'nothing but a name for the impossibility of self-immanence and hence the designator of the infra-structurally necessary alterity that constitutes order' (Prozorov, 2005: 88). Sovereignty, then, rather than being necessarily disastrous or oblivious of the political, is itself this zone of indistinction or indifference that Agamben (2015: 11) ascribes to the concept of *stasis*. In particular, it stands for two ontological possibilities or, rather, it signifies two ways of instantiating the political: a) as a defensive, claustrophobic, and oblivious delimitation of the boundaries of political community sustaining a clear designation of the community's internal and external enemies (sovereignty as the restrainer (*katechon*) of social chaos and disorder and the guarantor of political unity), as in Schmitt (2003, p. 60; 2008, p. 92) and Machiavelli (1996), and/or b) as a constant interrogation of society's principle of constitution (see Lefort, 1988; Žižek, 1999; Marchart, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2006; Honig, 2009).

The second possibility should not be envisaged simply as perpetuating the structural impossibility of achieving another type of community, designated by various poststructuralist thinkers as the 'unavowable' (Blanchot, 1988), 'inoperative' (Nancy, 1991) or 'coming' (Agamben, 1993) community, lest this structural impediment -envisaged by Lefort as the 'empty place of power'- turns into another depoliticising device that may well imagine an agonistic politics of reform and re-foundation, but could never fathom the possibility of absolute renewal or transformation of the political (see Wenman 2013). The evocation of the transgressive nature of the political and the unstable fixity of every constituted order can, in other words, almost imperceptibly be turned into a pretext for new forms of depoliticisation that may perpetually defer any commitment to dangerous or so-called 'lost causes' (see Žižek 2009).

It is for this reason that it does not suffice to defend the 'impossibility of society' as the ultimate hallmark and guide of a politics of repoliticisation and resistance. One needs to be mindful, here, of the possibility that a historicist understanding of antagonism may undermine the *truth* of antagonism itself. It is mainly for this reason that Žižek took issue with what he took to be a historicist appropriation of antagonism by early Laclau and Mouffe. In a critical review of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Žižek (1990) attacked the apparently innocent question of the relationship between antagonism and the theory of subjectivation in Laclau & Mouffe's landmark book. The argument is that antagonism undercuts the text's

insufficiently radicalised vision of the subject of the political. *Hegemony* remains trapped, argued Žižek, in an Althusserian vision of the subject, one which conceives of society as discursively hegemonised by ‘subject-positions’ each of which brings its own ‘point of view’ on political matters. As Brockelman (2003, p. 190) has noted, however, such a vision of the political implicitly already *substantialises* society –suggesting a master ‘viewpoint’ of the social itself, a viewpoint from which all the discourses of the ‘subject-positions’ are exposed as limited and ideological. Antagonism, then, becomes a form of historicism that reproduces the image of society as a dynamic, yet unpunctured, totality.

In that sense, when one prefigures the content of critical discourse or pre-determines the meaning of emancipation, resistance, and solidarity or apriori stipulates that ‘the name of politics is populism’, one refuses the practical imperative implicit in antagonism –an imperative to contest the independence and finality of any substantial identity or ontic designation- that eventually does violence to the truth of antagonism, to antagonism *as truth*. Instead, as Žižek (2000, p. 100) writes, we should appreciate how

the impossibility at work...is *double*: not only does ‘radical antagonism’ mean that it is impossible adequately to represent/articulate the *fullness* of society – on an even more radical level, *it is also impossible adequately to represent/articulate this very antagonism/negativity that prevents Society from achieving its full ontological realization*.<sup>8</sup>

As to how to project a formal condition so radical that it refuses to be hypostatised as content *or* the form of a content, Žižek’s answer –repeated throughout his prolific writings- marries the Hegelian notion of ‘concrete universality’ with the Lacanian notion of the ‘Real’. Antagonism punctures the very rift between form and content by simultaneously appearing at both poles of the *political difference*: the political cannot appear without the ordeal of politics exposing its radical nullity, while politics are always already penetrated by the political as the exceptionality grounding its very (im)possibility. Paradoxically, truth always emerges both as a particular ontic content –the problematic site of social definition/exclusion, the defining historical moment, etc.– and as the immanent void universal form/horizon that makes possible all those particular contents. In this peculiar double lack, antagonism challenges all ‘pictures’ of society, both one asserting that *there is One picture of society* or one name of politics and the one asserting that *there is no picture of society* (namely that all there is are hegemonic particularities usurping the

<sup>8</sup> Or as Žižek puts it, how antagonism arises immanently as the very logic of difference between Laclau’s difference and equivalence (differentiality): ‘it is not only that the difference between the field itself and its outside has to be reflected into the field itself, preventing its closure, thwarting fullness, it is also that the differential identity of every element is simultaneously constituted and thwarted by the differential network’ (2012, p. 771, n48)

universal); for it insists on re-dividing the form within the particular content that produces it.

### ***OSTINATO RIGORE INDEED***

Such a formal political ontology that is trying to capture the truth of antagonism in double negation serves the same aspiration that drives Marchart's call for 'obstinate rigour' in intellectual engagement in the conclusion of his book. The supplementary claim, however, that such a paradigm is putting forward (in the Derridean fashion of both destabilising Marchart's intellectual edifice and enabling a different, slightly displaced, outlook) is that, if Marchart is to remain faithful to his own rigorous 'ethics of intellectual engagement' (p. 210), he should be able to envisage a form of politics that undermines the ability of protest politics (with populism as its master signifier *par excellence*) to monopolise what politics is. Put differently, he should be able to also capture, and so formalise, a type of politics as affirmative passivity rendering politics open to another use by 'saving' it from the very depoliticisation that a view of populism or protest politics as the absolute incarnation of the political-qua-antagonism would risk. The stakes here are high since this means that a truly radical formalisation of an ontology of the political qua antagonism (or, rather, *political difference*) may entail keeping the realms of thought and praxis distinct (yet not separate). Otherwise, one risks compromising thought (critique) by overcommitting to a form of militant politics or a paradigm of political activation (protest politics or populism as the name or minimal condition of politics), elevated to the privileged manifestation of ontological antagonism.

Marchart, of course, stresses more than once that, due to the incomplete nature of the social, any sedimentation of the political in the form of institutionalised hegemony is fated to crumble or, as Schürmann (2003) puts it, hegemonies are destined to be broken. Yet, a possibility he does not seriously entertain is that the blind spot of every hegemonic articulation (rhetoric, or discourse) is the suppression of its own internal other, which then authorises a paradigm of political (re)activation and militancy that rests on the (often violent or oppressive) denial of its own failure. By raising this point, I am not suggesting Marchart should rather side with Agamben, Benjamin or Schürmann, as opposed to Laclau, or proclaim anarchism or messianic nihilism, rather than populism or radical democracy, as the name of politics. I am rather arguing that an 'obstinately rigorous' (p. 211) *political* articulation of antagonism, according to Marchart's own terms, should be able to accommodate *both* 'onto-logics': that of the political as constituent power or force of grounding/de-grounding the social *and* as destituent power, as a 'weak' drive, always already penetrated by the splinters of deactivation (to jointly paraphrase Benjamin and Agamben) that may open politics to a new use beyond the unending hegemony/counter-hegemony dialectic as 'a brute *factum politicum*' (p.

208). Eventually, the vision of political ontology recommended here seeks to formalise both the Bartlebian politics of detachment, civil disobedience, or passive resistance *and* the Machiavellian/Gramscian/Laclauian model of political activation as both equally nameable forms of *political* praxis without foreclosing either. It, therefore, resists an exclusionary, absolute definition of politics as a discourse of mastery, efficiency, or will-to-power without re-inscribing this resistance into an economy of determinate negation.

Despite then his promising formalisation of antagonism, the legacy of Laclau may function as more than a straight-jacket for Marchart. It runs the risk of becoming a distorting mirror that reflects Laclau's own limited or one-dimensional appropriation of the *political difference* and holds back the resources – already inherent in Marchart's project – for a truly radical political *stasiology*<sup>9</sup> faithful both to thought (imagination/critique) and to politics (or, rather, its unpredictability, indeterminacy, and frailty). It is a testament to the brilliance of *Thinking Antagonism* that it charts the way to such a task by stretching Laclau's legacy to its very limits. However, it falls short of taking the final step. Inheritance is indeed a heavy burden, yet often nothing serves its full assumption better than the symbolic act of 'killing the father'.

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<sup>9</sup> The term *stasis* holding in ontological indiscernibility both immobility and partisanship could perhaps be another suitable name for the *political difference*.

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