Political Theory and the Crisis of the Political: Post-Althusserian Turns to Politics

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For almost 30 years, political theorists on the left have been warning of a crisis of the political. The political, we are told, is being effaced by liberal consensus and neoliberal technocracy. For many of the theorists of the crisis of the political, this crisis necessitates a move from Marxism to post-Marxism, as Marxism was held to have failed to theorize the political, and so to be incapable of understanding the contemporary forces which might resist the crisis. I want to locate some of these theorists more specifically, to show how the theme of the crisis of the political did not arise solely in response to the political situation of the past 30 years, nor in response to the weaknesses of Marxism as such, but rather in response to certain impasses faced by Althusserian Marxism in the 1970s. The purpose of this exercize is partly to effect a mild deflation of the theme of the "crisis of the political," to move from the idea that we face a post-political epoch to a more naunced characterization of the particular political challenges we face today. This in turn is, I believe, useful in considering what we can learn from the theorists of the crisis of the political in a period defined by a rather different crisis, the economic crisis we have been experiencing for the past three years. Economic crisis surely demands a political response, but it remains to be seen how useful attempts to reinvigorate the political can be in thinking about the demands placed on left-wing politics today.

In this paper, I first identify some features of Althusser's theory which would come to seem problematic to those influenced by him in the 1970s. I then turn to consider three of those who, in response to the perceived problems with Althusserian Marxism, turned to a concern with politics and the political: Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière. I conclude with some thoughts on what the path taken by these three theorists might tell us about the continuing relevance of the crisis of the political today.

1 Althusser and politics

There are two features of Althusser's Marxism (at the point when it was most fully developed as a distinct school, that is, during the period of the construction of *Reading Capital*) which are particularly significant for post-Althusserian turns to the political. The first of these is Althusser's anti-historicism and the resulting synchronic character of his theory. Althusser does not directly or explicitly argue for a synchronic approach, indeed, he believes the very distinction between synchronic and diachronic to be ideological (that is, part of the empiricist ideology of "historical time" 1970, 96). Althusser's objection is not to history as such, but to *historicism*, the attempt to subordinate philosophy to history, to explain theoretical positions in terms of historical development (1970, 132). Althusser insists, against this historicism, that theoretical practice always works on a specifically theoretical object (the object of knowledge), which is quite distinct from the real object, and is produced *by* a theoretical practice in its constitution as a science (1970, 158). Thus the theoretical object is determined solely by theory, and not at all by history (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 133). It is in this, as Althusser admits, that his theory retains a certain emphasis on synchrony. Theoretical knowledge pertains to the relationship of the theoretical object to the structure within which it is articulated, a relationship which is necessarily ahistorical (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 107).

This aspect of Althusser's critique of historicism derives from a more general feature of his theory, one which will also be important to post-Marxist responses. Historicism, according to Althusser, assumes "a continuous and homogeneous time," which applies in the same way in all sphere of existence and cognition (1970, 99). It is in opposition to historicism's homogenizing process that Althusser lays out his theory of relatively autonomous "levels," distinct structures of the economic base, political superstructure, cultural and scientific production, etc., which may be linked together in a total structure, a total structure which only determines theses separate levels in a perpetually deferred "last instance" (1970, 99). This relative autonomy of the separate levels comes to name a

certain oscillation in Althuser's work. While in principle, and in the overall theoretical architecture of the system, these levels are mutually interdependent, with their relative levels of dependence and independence itself itself dependent on the articulation of the levels themselves within the whole (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 100), the *investigation* of each level takes place independently, with the articulation of each level within the whole deferred until the independent investigation is completed (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 102).

Suspicion about this ambiguous character of relative autonomy (autonomy which is in some way not quite really autonomous) has been a continuing theme in responses to Althusser. Poulantzas focuses (as do most responses to Althusser) on the distinction between the economic and the political levels, and it is here that he locates his critique of Althusser. Poulantzas rejects the view that the totality of each mode of production is composed of varying combinations of static instances or levels, each of which exist in a relation of exteriority to one another. The varied elements of the mode of production, particularly the economic and the political level (which Poulantas tends to identify with the state) do not have a determinate structure that is conceptually prior to their integration in a mode of production; rather, they are "*from the very beginning* constituted by their mutual relation and articulation" (Poulantzas, 2000, 17).[1] Poulantzas sees the appearance of independence of the political from the economic as a particular form taken by the mutual constitution of the economic and political, a form specific to capitalism. It is this mutual relation that Poulantzas uses to propose a theory of the of the role of the political in capitalist society.

Poulantzas's critique of the static character of the strutures that form the object of Al-

[1]Poulantzas's precise target here is Balibar's contribution to *Reading Capital*, which developts the theory of the mode of production as a combination of discrete "elements" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, 225). Althusser's own account of these different levels at first seems closer to Poulantzas, as Althusser derives the particular independence of each level from the structure of the whole (1970, 100). However, Althusser still places the levels in a relation of exteriority to one another, relating to each other, if they do, only through the mediation of the whole. It is from this theory that Balibar derives his account of the combination of elements. Thus, Poulantzas's critique of Balibar in particular is also a critique of Althusser in general.

thusser's theory echoes a more widely made criticism, that the the synchronic emphasis of Althusser's theory as incapable of conceptualizing change, especially change between modes of production, which is especially felt as a weakness for a *Marxist* theory intended to change the world as well as to interpret it. This indeed is a topic tackled by Balibar in *Reading Capital*, and was one of the issues Althusser continued to grapple with in his later work. The theme of the "materialism of the encounter" focusses on the history of the Epicurean theory of the *clinamen*, the microscopic swerve which disrupts the mechanical parallel motion of atoms in Epicurus's universe, thereby founding the world on contingency and radically non-teleological change (Althusser, 2006, 167). Althusser finds this idea of the encounter in an "underground current" in Western philosophy stretching from Epicurus to Machiavelli, Rousseau, Heidegger, Derrida, and others (2006, 167). We will see this infinitesimal, aleatory introduction of contingency in post-Althusserian construals of the political, and it would be worthwhile considering whether these post-Althusserian turns to the political employ what Althusser identifies as traditional philosophy's defense mechanism against aleatory materialism, its reduction to an "idealism of freedom" (2006, 168).

2 Politics and Antagonism

Turning now to Laclau, we can begin with the essays in his *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, in which he locates himself firmly within the Althusserian tradition, although as a critical interlocuter, rather than simply accepting the parameters of this tradition wholesale. Particularly interesting is the essay on the Poulantzas-Milliband debate on the state. Here Laclau defends the broadly structuralist approach of Poulantzas against Milliband's accusation of "structuralist abstractionism" (1977, 57), while agreeing with Milliband's criticism that Poulantzas's theory is overly abstract. Laclau carries out this dual critique of Poulantzas and Milliband by endorsing, contra Milliband, the general Al-

thusserian archetacture, particularly Althusser's epistemology (and with it the emphasis on the importance of theory and the critique of empiricism, 1977, 53), and particularly the account of mutually independent "levels" or "instances" described above, while reproaching Poulantzas (and, in passing, Balibar), with failing to develop a fully theorized account of what differentiates these instances, especially the economic and political instances, and a failure to theorize how these levels are articulated within a mode of production which is held to be determinant in the last instance (1977, 76-7, 79).

Along with Mouffe, Laclau developed a critique of Marxism, including Althusserian Marxism, in the mid-1980s. I will turn to consider Mouffe in a moment, but first I want to consider Laclau's slightly later presentation in *New Reflection on the Revolution of Our Times*. Here, Laclau is continuing what he once took to be the central project the "Althusserian endeavour," the "abandonment of the Platonic cave of class reductionism" (1977, 12). In the later work, class reductionism is identified with those moments in Marx and Marxism which seek to derive class struggle from the objective economic logic of capitalism. The problem with this, for Laclau, is that this attempts to establish (or, in most cases, simply assumes as already established) a connection between two quite separate and incommensurable things: on the one hand, we have capitalism as an economic system which exhibits certain *contradictions*, while on the other we have a political relation between classes constituted by an *antagonism*. Laclau's central argument is that this contradiction does not imply antagonism, nor is the antagonism predicated on contradiction (1990, 7). Laclau canvasses various attempts to resolve this difficulty by deriving antagonism from contradiction, but in his judgement all such attempts have failed, as in fact they necessarily must do, because contradiction and antagonism are on a theoretical level quite distinct.

In Marxist theory, contradiction is an objective matter, something that exists within the material constitution of the means of production. It is this objectivity that, for Laclau, renders contradiction incompatible with any antagonism. Contradiction exists within a

particular sphere (for Marxism, the economic), and is comprehensible by relating the contradictory elements of this sphere to the sphere considered as a totality; thus, for Laclau, contradiction is only ever a moment of negativity subordinate to an ultimate positivity (1990, 16). That is to say, the two sides of a contradiction are only ever opposed when considered locally, and thus are not genuinely opposed at all. In order for the genuine opposition which Laclau considers constitutive of antagonism to exist, there can be no whole within which the antagonistic elements can be comprehended (1990, 16). Antagonism occurs when this attempt to refer elements to a totality is blocked by the dependence of this attempted totality on something outside itself (Laclau, 1990, 17). It is for this reason that Laclau describes antagonism as "the limit of all objectivity" (1990, 17): antagonism is that which disrupts the existence of a fully closed, rationally comprehensible, totality.

It is in this insistence on the constitutive outside and the impossibility of a completed totality that Laclau shows the similarity of his post-structuralist work to his earlier critical engagement with Althusser. We could see this position as being, in a sense, an answer to the challenge he earlier posed to Poulantzas and Balibar, the call to provide a more rigorous account of the articulation of the different instances of the whole social structure; Laclau maintains that no such account is possible: the only relation that exists is one of radical contingency. He now refers to the theory of separate structures as a "combinatorial game" (1990, 24) based on a failure to understand the incompleteness of each level and the nonexistance of a social totality that would stabilize each instance. Instead "we find…a field of relational semi-identities in which 'political,' 'economic' and 'ideological' elements will enter into unstable relations of imbrication without ever managing to constitute themselves as separate objects" (Laclau, 1990, 24).

There are two points worth emphasizing about Laclau's theory of constitutive antagonism. The first is its indebtedness to Althusser. While Laclau criticizes one of Althusser's fundamental principles, society as a set of instances determined by their articulation within a whole, this is an immanent critique. Laclau maintains the general structural-

ist orientation within which meaning is given by location within a structure; he accepts that *if* it were possible to explain the elements of a social totality within the whole then we would be able to produce a fully objective theory purged of contingency. It is only against the backdrop of this epistemology that Laclau's rejection of social totality requires the embrace of radical contingency. Furthermore, in accepting Althusser's epistemology, Laclau accepts a number of Althusser's presuppositions, most notably the refusal to subordinate theory to history that arises from the critique of historicism. For Laclau, as for Althusser, epistemology is ahistorical: the constitutive nature of antagonism is not itself historically contingent, but provides the synchronic ground *for* contingency.[2]

The continuity of Laclau's approach to historicism with that of Althusser is significant for his account of temporality, from which derives the second point I want to make about his theory, which concerns its relation to the "turn to the political." It might seem that Laclau's rejection of the Althusserian theory of discrete instances would entail a rejection of any claim about the specificity of the political. However, it is important to see that Laclau's objection is to the existence of a specifically political instance, and this is compatible with, in fact supports, a claim about the specificity of the political that exists outside of these instances. This newfound role for the political arises from Laclau's theory of temporality, where temporality exists in opposition to historicism. Historicism sees time as continuous and directional, a succession of developments guided by a *telos*; for Laclau, this succession is what makes historicism not temporal at all, but rather a reduction of the temporal to the spatial (1990, 41). The temporal, for Laclau, is that which does not fit into this spatial logic of succession; the temporal is the unexpected interruption or dislocation of the spatial (1990, 42). It is this that unites temporality and politics. Because politics is the name of an antagonism that cannot be reduced to the smooth development

[2]Laclau does argue that capitalism has brought about "the growing centrality of the category of 'dislocation"' (1990, 39). This does not mean that dislocation, antagonism, and contingency themselves are historically produced, however. Laclau argues that capitalism leads to "a clearer *awareness* of the constitutive contingency of…discourses" (1990, 39, my emphasis). Contingency has always been there, capitalism simply makes it more visible. Here Laclau seems to be endorsing Marx's belief in the progressive ability of capitalism to strip off illusions.

of the spetial, politics is necessarily anti-spatial (Laclau, 1990, 68). Thus the constitutive nature of antagonism and the primary of the temporal over the spatial (Laclau, 1990, 84) entail the primacy of the political over the social (Laclau, 1990, 33). The social field is constituted by antagonism, and it is these antagonisms that "constitute the field of the 'political"' (Laclau, 1990, 35). The same logic, the impossibility of a totality which renders the idea of discrete economic and political instances impossible, also renders the political, as an ontological category, constitutive of the social. And it does so through a logic of temporality in which the temporal-political is the name for that which evades the static, spatialized totality of the social.

3 Politics and the Political

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Mouffe (with Laclau) criticized Marxists up to and including Althusser for holding a totalizing and unitary account of political agency, in which any apparent diversity in the determination of the political process is reconciled through a single underlying economic logic (in the case of Althusser specifically, this appears as the displacement of the plural logic of overdetermination by the unitary logic of determination in the last instance, Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 98). Against this, they propose a democratic movement that is radical and plural. The pluralism here refers to the number of different struggles and subjectivities engaged in this movement, contrasted to the single primary agent, the working class, countenanced by traditional Marxism (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 140). Mouffe and Laclau's position retains something of Marxism's radicality, however, as it sees these varied struggles as potentially counter-hegemonic, radicaly opposed to and thus requiring a restructuring of the existing social and political order (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, *xv*). That is, while the radical democratic movement is internally heterogeneous, it can develop a certain degree of unity through its radical opposition to the equally heterogeneous forces that impede the democratic movement.

While Laclau, as we have seen, emphasizes the place of the radical break in is subsequent work, in Mouffe's later work, this element of pluralism tends to be emphasized in a way that weakens the radicality of the position. This occours through a somewhat surprising parallel movement towards Schmitt and towards liberalism, or, perhaps less paradoxically, towards a liberalism modified by a confrontation with Schmitt. While in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pluralism was a characterization of a movement that was antagonistic to the existing social and political hegemony, in Mouffe's later work, pluralism becomes an inescapable feature of modern society in general, not just of antihegemonic movements within it (Mouffe, 1993, 122). The move from seeing pluralism as antihegemonic to seeing it as an inescapable feature of society (arguably a logical development of the critique of the positivity of the social in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, ch. 3) underwrites an assertion that radical and plural democracy is also (a form of) liberal democracy. This is in part a reconsideration of liberalism, a *rapprochement* with liberal claims that liberalism is not necessarily totalizing, but contains a defense of value pluralism and institutional structures, such as the rule of law and rights, which defend this pluralism (Mouffe, 1993, 13). However, Mouffe's endoresement of liberalism also involves a modification of liberalism in the face of the challenge of antagonism, a challenge that Mouffe locates in Schmitt.

Mouffe accepts the general terms of Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy, which sees a contradiction between these two terms, between the universalism of liberalism and the "we" of the *demos* constructed by democracy (Mouffe, 1999a, 43). However, unlike Schmitt, who sees this as a fatal contradiction, Mouffe sees the tension between liberalism and democracy as potentially productive, as these two logics produce "temporary, pragmatic, unstable and precarious resolutions" of this "democratic paradox" (Mouffe, 1999a, 44). What allows this Schmittian paradox to be a productive tension rather than a destructive contradiction is the distintively pluralist twist Mouffe gives to Schmitt's theory. Mouffe begins with Schmitt's argument that the political is defined by drawing

the distinction between friend and enemy, or between "us" and "them," but attempts to understand this "us" in a way which is "compatible with certain forms of pluralism" (Mouffe, 1999a, 50). Mouffe accomplishes this by displacing the defining feature of the political, the "determination of a frontier," from the outside of the political community to its inside (Mouffe, 1999a, 51). Instead of the antagonism of a political community with its enemy, we have an agonism between different groups *within* a political community; instead of a political community facing an external threat, we have the struggle of groups within a community over their common community.

Mouffe tends to present this agonistic pluralism as a possibility dormant in Schmitt, made visible by her more patient tacking between Schmitian politics and liberalism, but it is worth noting just how large a modification she makes to Schmitt's account of the political, in order to see precisely what it is she *does* retain from Schmitt. Žižek draws on Rancière to illustrate the importance of the difference between the Schmittian external enemy and the Mouffian internal adversary (Žižek, 1999, 27). While the external friend/enemy distinction constructs the unity of "us" negatively, in response to the threatening enemy, internal agonism takes place between those who already consider themselves to have some kind of commonality, at least in embryonic form. For Schmitt, that is, politics is what takes place between those committed to *the same side* of an antagonism: the citizen's relationship to the state is political only when the state is an object of loyalty for the citizen, a loyalty predicated on the rejection of the enemy. For Mouffe, the opposite is the case: politics is what happens between those *on different sides* of agonism, and the citizens relate to the state politically when their relation to the state is a matter of dispute, not of loyalty. The difference here is profound: for Rancière, indeed, this difference is essential to the definition of politics, as politics necessarily involves, not separate communities at war, but one community which is internally divided (Rancière, 1999, 13).

What, then, *does*, Mouffe share with Schmitt? It is perhaps helpful to look here again at Žižek's characterization of Schmitt in relation to Rancière's characterization of politi-

cal philosophy. Žižek suggests that Schmitt represents an alternative to Rancière's three forms of philosophical disavowal of politics (archepolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics), which Žižek calls "ultra-politics." Ultrapolitics is "the attempt to depoliticize…conflict by bringing it to its extreme" (Žižek, 1999, 29). For Schmitt, according to Žižek, this extreme is war, and ultrapolitics is the displacement of political contestation onto military conflict. Now, this is clearly not applicable to Mouffe, indeed it is just here that she differs from Schmitt. However, it seems to me that we could employ Žižek's concept of "ultrapolitics" slightly differently, interpreting the radicalization of politics involved not as an increased intensity of conflict,[3] but as a radicalization of the esentiallity of politics, a displacement of ontic politics to the ontological. This seems a plausible interpretation of Schmitt, as it is in a search for ground or condition of politics which leads Schmitt to turn to the friend/enemy distinction and thus draw the connection between war and politics in the first place. Furthermore, Mouffe shares with Schmitt this concern for the ontological character of the political (which indeed "is inherent to every human society and…determines our very ontological condition" Mouffe, 1993, 3).

In what sense, though, is this ontologization of politics a disavowal, as Žižek argues that the militarization of politics in Schmitt is? We can follow Žižek and Rancière here too, I think, in their argument that the way in which political philosophy avoids politics is by setting up a "truth" of politics in contrast to which the phenomenal manifestations of politics can be disregarded (Žižek, 1999, 29; Rancière, 1999, 63). Ontologizing the political functions in just this way; in Mouffe's case, the ontology of the political is held to require a particular kind of agonistic contestation, which functions to delimit a particular range of appropriate political actions. It is on the basis of her political ontology (in particular, the pluralism she draws from post-structuralism) that Mouffe asserts the necessity of distinguishing between the enemy, who is a matter of external threat, and the adver-

[3]Indeed, it is not clear to me that militarization necessarily does intensify the level of conflict beyond that which is properly political, at least if one shares Žižek's Leninist sympathy for the role of terror in politics.

sary, who must be disagreed with but not destroyed (Mouffe, 1993, 4). Here, however, we see something very like the limits on political disagreement expressed in ethical terms by Rawls, but displaced and recast into ontological terms. Here we have an onological version of the kind of "rational reconstruction" of politics that Rancière calls "parapolitics."[4] It is to Rancière, furthermore, who we can now turn in order to gain an understanding of the way in which this ontologizing move undermines politics.

4 Politics Without Foundations

Rancière's own critical relationship with Althusser begins, not with ontology, but with knowledge. Rancière objects to the way in which a knowledge held by some and not others comes, whether consciously or not, to legitimize a certain power on behalf of those who have knowledge. In a sense, that is, Rancière's critique of knowledge is an extended commentary on Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach, quoted in *La Leçon d'Althusser*:

> The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.[5]

Rancière's claim against Althusser is that Althusserian philosophy arrogates a certain type of knowledge—theoretical knowledge—to itself, and so purports to direct "the masses" in their political activity on the basis of this knowledge. Althusserian philosophy is a theoretical justification of this division of labor, while also developing an intimidating linguistic and institutional edifice that in preactice excludes the masses from theory, that is,

[4]Rancière associates parapolitics with Aristotle and Hobbes (Rancière, 1999, 70-80). Žižek points out that, in this respect, Rawlsians and Habermasians are our contemporary Hobbesians (Žižek, 1999, 28).

[5]Marx (1978, 144). Quoted in Rancière (1970, 23)

"verifying" in practice what the theory justifies (Rancière, 1970, 33-4). In contrast, Rancière believes in an intelligence that exists within the masses, rather than being confined to academics.[6] Far from adding anything to this thought of the masses, all philosophy can do (and here Rancière broadens his attack from Althusser to philosophy *tout court*) is "transform the expression of a practice of the masses into a philosophical thesis," and thereby appropriate it.[7]

While the Maoist terminology of faith in the people is less strident in Rancière's later works, this theme, of the universal capacity for thought ant the authoritarian effects of the appropriation of this thought as a "knowledge" to which only a few have access, is a constant. The early concern with the relationship between knowledge and the masses as those who make history, furthermore, helps explain a duality in the critique of knowledge that becomes more pronounced in the later work. The primary target of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is the schoolmaster who controls access to knowledge to produce a pedagogy which is both premised on and reproduces the student's inferiority. The construction of the student as a potential (but never yet actual) receptacle for knowlege also constructs the student as someone who does not possess knowledge. Another target of Rancière's criticism, the knowledge of the sociologist, meanwhile, excludes the student from knowledge by constructing the student as an *object* of knowledge. The sociologist (Bourdieu is the specific example) has knowledge of the systems and stratifications in which the student is unwittingly enmeshed. The dialectical relationship between these two exclusions from knowledge becomes clearer if we connect this to revolutionary situation, which concerns the situation in which the knowledge the master keeps from the student is identical with the knowledge within which the sociologist locates the student; thus, the two processes reinforce one another, as, according to Rancière, happened in the case of the attempt by Althusser and the PCF to disarm the radicals of 1968, with the

[6] "*L'Intelligence de la guerre des classes, comme de la production, n'appartient pas aux specialistes*" Rancière (1970, 41).

[7] "*La parole d'Althusser est ici plus classiques: transformer l'expression d'une pratique de masse en thèse philosophique*" Rancière (1970, 43).

party supposedly the repository of the understanding about the proletariat which the intellectuals, Althusser in particular, were to dispense to them. In the more general case of student and master, the sociological knowledge about the students may not immediately coincide with the knowledge kept from the students by the master, but they nonetheless support one another, as knowledge about the students is fundamentally knowledge about how they relate to the knowledge held by the master (and the pace and manner in which this knowledge can be dispensed to the students), which justifies the restrictions on the students' access to knowledge.

In contrast, Rancière rejects an external knowledge that would render the mass of people objects, instead insisting on a fundamental equality in thought which rulles out any natural distinction between leaders and followers. While in *La Leçon d'Althusser*, this is expressed as an equality of *knowledge*, in Rancière's later political work this is reconfigured as an equality in understanding, a fundamental equality of linguistic capacity shared by all "speaking beings" (1999, 49). Rancière's argument is that the commonality required for one to rule and another to obey is a commonality of language, an equal capacity to understand the content required both to give and to obey orders (1999, 49). He defines politics as the assertion of this equality; the institutions and practices usually refered to as "political" (parliaments, elections, public opinion), Rancière calls "police," as they make up only a generalization of the disciplinary and ordering function carried out by the uniformed police (what Rancière calls the "petty police" 1999, 28). Politics is (and here we meet a familiar theme) what *disrupts* this police logic through the assertion of the logic of equality (Rancière, 1999, 30).

Because politics disrupts any kind of disciplinary categorization, and does so moreover through the assertion of equality that rejects any kind of hierarchy, Rancière opposes any attempt to provide intellectual foundations to support (and also thereby to restrict) politics. Indeed, this lack of foundation is itself a distinguishing feature of politics (Rancière, 1999, 62). Note the difference here between Rancière and Laclau. For Laclau, the

closing down of subjective possibility they saw in Althusser required an ontological response, that is, it required that they develop an ontology which would demonstrate the possibility of subjective novelty, for Rancière, this desire to submit politics to philosophical judgment is precisely what was wrong with the Althusserian project in the first place, not an alternative to it.

5 Crises political and economic

Rancière's rejection of the project of delimiting the political by providig it with ontological foundations is a clear critique of the approaches of Laclau and Mouffe. However, like Laclau and like Mouffe, Rancière's position issues from a critique of Althusser. Furthermore, Rancière's critique targets many of the same aspects of Althusser's thought as the critiques of Laclau and of Mouffe: Althusser's attempt to encompass politics within philosophical knowledge, his insistence (even if only in the last instance) on the determining role of the economic, and the related belief in a single site—the proletariat—of revolutionary potential. Indeed, we could see Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière as tracing a particular trajectory of post-Althusserian thought, of which Rancière marks the most extreme point. For Laclau, the ontology of antagonism is employed to locate a point, named politics, at which the closure of this ontology is seen to be impossible. For Mouffe, the Schmittian ontological schism between friend and enemy is used against both Schmitt and liberalism to show that the completion of a political community—whether ethical or rational—is impossible, and that it is this impossibility which makes the community *political* in the first place. Finally, Rancière asserts the lack of closure and completion—the lack of foundation—as an axiom which defines politics. What all three share is a desire to theorize politics in a way that would not leave politics bound to, or limited by, this theorization, and in the end, it seems to me, Rancière is right to insist that the only way in which this theoretical capture of politics can be avoided is by refusing to give politics

any theoretical foundation at all.

One of the benefits of Rancière's position here is that it renders visible a problem with this post-Althusserian trajectory: if politics is necessarily unsupported by theoretical foundations, how does politics, or the political, retain any coherence as a theoretical category at all? We might turn to Rancière's account of the basis of equality in the linguistic situation of command, but we could only do so at the cost of founding politics again in a theory about language and equality (something that Rancière refuses to do, as he does not propose an alternative theory of language to Aristotle's, but rather shows how Aristotle's theory of language functions as a—contestible—ground for a certain police procedure, Rancière, 1999, 45). It may be, then, that the attempt to rescue the concept of the political from Althusser ends up, paradoxically disolving the political.

And this may be no bad thing, indeed, the dissolution of the political may provide a way of rethinking the discussion of the crisis of the political in a way that can help us respond to economic crisis. We could look, for instance, to Wendy Brown's work on neoliberalism, in which the political changes that mark this "crisis of the political" are seen as bound up with a neoliberal discourse which takes a very particular understanding of the economic as a model for its political program. We could also look at Marx's critique of politics not, as Rancière argues, as a metapolitical attempt to evade politics, but rather as an attempt to integrate politics and economics, in opposition to the separation of politics and economics which is both an outcome of and an ideological support for capitalism.[8] Understanding the "crisis of the political" as an outcome of specific political-theoretical impasses of the past 40 years contextualizes the post-Marxist responses to it, and so allows us to rethink these theories for a new era and a new crisis.

[8]In particular *On the Jewish Question* which does not, *contra* Rancière, posit (economic) civil society as the truth of the lie of the (political) state, but rather diagnoses the separation of state and civil society as an "practical illusion" produced by modernity (Marx, 1844, 107; Rancière, 1999, 82-3).

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